

Parshat Bo
Probing the Heart and the Soul – Hasidic Insights into the Torah Portion
Melton Geshet at the JCC – January 25, 2012
JSI at Beth Torah – January 26, 2012

Sefat Emet by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, volume II, page 48, opening phrase
בפסוק

-The Hebrew word אות means signs in the sense of ‘signs and wonders’ and it means as well signs in the sense of indications or hints, and furthermore it also means letters of the alphabet.

-Our rabbis taught in Ethics of the Fathers that the world was created with ‘Ten Statements’.

-God’s hidden fingerprints in the universe. They are there, but not obvious to the naked eye. They must be discovered, uncovered, revealed. This depends hard work.

-The Torah according to our tradition was revealed in stages: First six mitzvot of the seven mitzvot of the Noahides, and then the prohibition against eating meat from a living animal, and later at Sinai the rest of the 613.

-The word ‘but’ in the third paragraph may better be rendered as ‘in the same way’.

-The hints of God embedded in the universe are also called Torah. They are parallel to the universal Seven Mitzvot Bnei Noach. And discovering them is a prerequisite for the rest of the Torah.

-דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה - The way of the world is prior to Torah. This refers in context to menshlikite, basic human ethical behavior. So the author develops a concept of basic human spirituality which is prior to the particular elements of Torah.

-These hints of God are even ‘within Pharaoh’, that is, even within what appears to be the heart and the center of evil.

-Why did God put them there such that they are so hard to ‘take out’, why are they so hidden? Because only that which is arrived at through hard work has real significance, and has a degree of permanence.

-Putting the point of the whole piece together: God is going through the whole process of the plagues and the Exodus because he had put the signs there in the natural world – within Pharaoh – and he wants those signs ‘taken out’; that is, the Jewish People are being created in order to discover godliness within the mundane.

-Let’s contrast this approach to the opening of Psalm 19 – the heavens declare the glory of God. The Sefat Emet holds that they don’t actually declare anything publicly, but they are in a sense mute, and we must go in and do the work ourselves. God’s presence in the universe is not explicit in the world, but only latent.

-Let’s contrast the end of this piece of the Sefat Emet with the very beginning of Sichot haRan of Rebbi Nachman of Breslav.

-Franz Rosenzweig (in his essay Renaissance) also talks about the incommunicability of the religious experience. Bilaam’s talking donkey once a year, when the parsha is read in synagogue, becomes a religious reality, but you risk making yourself ridiculous in trying to communicate the religious experience to another.

-Reading this week’s Sefat Emet in light of what we saw last week from the Sefat Emet...

"[For I have hardened Pharaoh's heart and the heart of his servants] so that I might show these, My signs, in his midst" (Ex. 10:1). RaSHI notes that "might show" seems to indicate the future, though it could refer to the past as well.

All these deeds that were done in Egypt took place because God had already placed in Egypt hidden treasures that Israel still had to take out. "My signs" (*otot*) refers to the letters (*otiyot*) through which heaven and earth had been created. The children of Israel, who were ready to receive the Torah, first had to bring forth words and letters that already existed in the world.

Thus the Midrashim say that originally there were just seven *mitsvot*. Only when Israel came along did they merit receiving the entire Torah. But first they had to clarify the light of Torah that already existed within the natural order. This is "the way of the world" that preceded Torah; it is something impressed within nature itself. Always one must first set right the physical and the natural, and only afterwards can we come to new insights.

Now Scripture explains why God did it this way, placing "My signs in his [Pharaoh's] midst." When they clarified the lights that came out of such a place, they would go on to live [and shine] throughout the generations. Therefore the verse goes on to say: "so that you will tell it in the ears of your children and your children's children." This made it into something that would last.

THE WISDOM OF RABBI NACHMAN

Sichos HaRan

1. "For I know that G-d is great, our G-d above all others."

Psalms 135:5

These are King David's words; I know. I alone—for the vision of G-d's greatness cannot be shared.¹

You may have a vision, but even with yourself you cannot share it. Today you may be inspired and see a new light. But tomorrow, you will no longer be able to communicate it, even to yourself. "I know." I—as I am now. For the vision cannot be brought back.

The Rebbe said: Look at the next verse, "All that G-d wants, He does, in heaven and on earth." It is a different thought, speaking of something else entirely, King David says, "I know," and can go no further, for words are no longer adequate.

A perception of G-d cannot be communicated. It is so lofty—higher than high,² that words cannot express it.

It is written (Prov. 31:23), "Her husband is known by the gates." The holy *Zohar*³ states that the husband is the vision of G-d which each man perceives through

1. Cf. *Alim LeTerufah* 135.

2. *Ecd.* 5:7.

3. *Zohar* 1:103b.

the gates of his own heart. The heart is hidden and the gates do not open to another'.