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PARSHAS BEHAALOSCHA

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Be Careful What You Wish For!

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Behaaloscha

Be Careful What You Wish For!

Good Shabbos!

So a Jewish college student from Cleveland spending a year studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem posted a picture of himself on Facebook putting on tefillin at the Kotel, the famous Western Wall.

This same Jewish college student had been a guest at the Friday-night Shabbos meal at the local campus shliach when he suddenly got up and ran out—it was too much for him. The Shabbos songs, the Kiddush—it was “too Jewish” for him.

But on the Sunday before the Cleveland Cavaliers were set to play in the NBA finals, he went to the Kotel to put on tefillin and pray that his beloved home team win. And after they did win, he posted on his Facebook page, “The Kotel Never Fails.”

Indeed, the week that the Cavs won the NBA championships, he wasn't the only one who believed in miracles. The entire population of Cleveland became believers. After all, when the hopes of an entire city are realized, it's no wonder that over one million people poured out into the streets. Cleveland became Believeland.

So, speaking of words you may have not heard before, here's a question for you: What's the word in Hebrew for a hope that virtually unattainable? Like the Cleveland Cavaliers winning?

Well, in Modern Hebrew, the standard phrase for such a hope is “halevai!” It translates basically to “if only!” It's a phrase from the Talmud Yerushalmi (Tractate Chagigah 80:1:5-6): Haleivai oisi azvu v'Torasi shamaru! “If only they abandoned Me and kept My Torah!”

But in the Holy Tongue (or “Old Hebrew”), what is the word that expresses hope? It's a word that appears three times throughout the Five Books of the Torah—and one of those three is in our Torah portion this week. The phrase is: Mi yitain. It translates literally to, “Who shall give,” but it translates essentially to the same thing as “Halevai”: if only! (“Mi Yitain” was even made into a popular song in Israel.)

So the first time “mi yitain” appears, the Jewish Nation as a whole says it. The second time, Moshe Rabbeinu himself says it. And the third time, G-d Himself in His Glory says it. Let's take a look at all three.

The first time “mi yitain” appears in the Torah is in the Torah portion of Beshalach. It was a month after the Jewish Nation left Egypt, and for the course of an entire month, they survived off the same matzos that they had baked in a rush before they left Egypt. But ultimately, even that ran out, and the Jewish Nation was left without food.

So the Torah (Shmos 16:2-3) tells us, “And the entire community of the Children of Israel complained... and they said... [mi yitain musainu!] if only we had died by the hand of G-d in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pot, when we ate bread to our fill! For you have brought us out into this desert, to starve this entire congregation to death!” And Rashi interprets that “mi yitain” as follows: “Halevai v’hayinu maysim!” If only we had died!

In other words, the Jewish Nation was complaining and saying: It would have been better to die in Egypt satisfied than to die in the desert starved—as if they were better-fed in Egypt.

So that’s the first “mi yitain” in the Torah.

The second “mi yitain” is right here in this week’s Parshah (Bamidbar 11:5). Here again, it’s in connection with the Jewish Nation’s complaints. But this time, they weren’t complaining about bread but rather, they wanted meat: “Mi yoch’lainu basar?” Who’s going to feed us meat? And, the Torah, continues, they didn’t stop with that: “We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt for free!” So this time, the “meat pot” is now “fish”—and even Rashi asks about that, commenting: “If they didn’t give them free straw, they did give them free fish?!”

But you can always complain... and so Moshe Rabbeinu turns to G-d and says, “I can’t carry this nation alone because it is too heavy for me!” I can’t do it anymore—I don’t have the strength to fulfill all the needs and wishes of his nation alone.

And indeed, G-d accepted Moshe’s words and said to him, “Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel... and I shall emanate from the spirit which is upon you and place it upon them, and they shall bear with you in the burden of the nation, and you shall not carry by yourself.”

In other words, Moshe claimed that he was not suited to carry the nation alone—so G-d told him, “No problem! You’ll be joined by 70 leaders who will help you lead the nation.”

Now, two of those 70 chosen elders stayed in the camp. Their names were Eldad and Midad, and they really didn’t want to become leaders. According to Rashi, they said, “We are not fitting for this greatness!” But then, “the spirit rested upon them... and they prophesized in the camp”—against their will, the spirit of prophecy descended upon them, and they proclaimed things that the Jewish Nation had not heard until then.

Today, we’d call it “breaking news!” But then, Rashi tells us, “they prophesized that Moshe would die and that Yehoshua [his top student and right-hand man] would lead the Jewish Nation into the Land.”

Now, until then, the entire Jewish Nation was sure that the same Moshe who had taking them out of Egypt would also be ushering them into the Land—but now, Eldad and Midad were suddenly prophesizing that their beloved leader would be dying and that Yehoshua would be the one who would be bringing them into the Land of Israel.

So when Yehoshua heard what Eldad and Midad were saying, he really didn’t like it.

As a true Chasid, a student, of Moshe Rabbeinu, he also had wanted his Rebbe, his master, to remain alive and to bring them all into Eretz Yisroel. But here, these two come along and prophesize that Moshe Rabbeinu is going to die! True, it was a prophecy from G-d, and therefore factual, but the Talmud tells us that as long as a Navi (a Prophet) doesn’t verbally

express the prophecy, it can still change—which is not the case if he goes ahead and speaks it. It then becomes a reality in this universe—and at that point, it's harder to change.

So Yehoshua turns to Moshe and says to him: Adoni Moshe, k'la'eim! My master Moshe, shut them down! Toss 'em in the slammer (or however you say it nowadays)!

But Moshe Rabbeinu, the father of all the Nevi'im, gave Yehoshua an amazing response. The Torah tells us: “And Moshe said to him, ‘Are you zealous for me? U'mi yitain, if only, the entire nation of G-d were Prophets, that G-d place his Spirit upon them!’”

In other words, Moshe's rebuttal was, “You're feeling so patriotic about my honor because they are prophesizing?! On the contrary! If only every Jew was a Prophet!”

So there you have the second time the Torah contains the words “mi yitain”—and that time uttered by Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

The third time we find “mi yitain” in the Torah is in the Book of Devarim, in the Parshah of Va'eschanan (Devarim 4:5), when Moshe is reviewing and retelling the Giving of the Torah. And on that specific event, the foundation of the eternity of the Jewish Nation, Moshe says, “I am standing between G-d and you... at that time, to relate to you the Word of G-d, for you were afraid of the fire and you did not go up on the mountain.”

And then, “And it was when you heard the voice... and you said, ‘Why should we die when this great fire consumes us? If we continue to hear the Voice of the L-rd our G-d any more, we shall die! You draw close and hear, and you speak to us... and we shall hear and we shall do.’” The Jewish Nation was afraid to hear G-d's Voice again, so they turned to Moshe and asked Him to be the intermediary between G-d and themselves.

But Moshe didn't like that approach. He had hoped that the Jewish Nation would want to hear the Torah specifically from G-d Himself, and not hide behind his back. As Rashi says, “Was it not good for you to learn from G-d and not from me?”

But it was G-d Himself Who accepted the Jewish Nation's approach. He said to Moshe, “I have heard the sound of the nation's words... it is good what they said.”

And then G-d continues: “Mi yitain! Would that their hearts be like this, to fear Me and to keep all My commandments all the days! So there, G-d Himself is saying, “If only their fear of Me that they now have would continue and remain among them forever!”

There's an expression in English, “Be careful what you wish for!” In other words, watch what you hope and pray for—because sometimes, your hopes will become real, and if not fully, then at least partially.

And that is what happened at the three times the Torah tells us, “mi yitain!”

When the Jewish Nation said, “If only we had died in Egypt,” that did indeed materialize. True, that generation did not actually die in Egypt, but they did die in the desert—not in the Land of Israel.

Regarding when Moshe Rabbeinu said, “If only the entire Nation of G-d were Prophets!” the Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 66a) tells us a telling story about Hillel HaZakein, Hillel the Elder, one of the great Sages of Jewish history. Hillel was once presiding over a case of halachah (Jewish law) in which there was a technical question regarding the Korbon Pesach, the Passover Sacrifice. And Hillel issued a very interesting ruling. He said: Go see what the people are doing, and that will tell you what the right thing to do is. His reasoning was, “If there are no Prophets, they are sons of prophets.” What Hillel meant was that when the entire Jewish Nation as a whole does the same thing, it’s like a small prophecy that manifests itself in them—meaning, some sort of spiritual telepathy or extra-sensory perception (ESP) that allows them to sense what G-d wants and thus naturally do it. And so, Moshe Rabbeinu’s “mi yitain!” was at least partially fulfilled.

And finally, what G-d said in the Book of Devarim, “Mi yitain, would that their hearts be like this, to fear Me... all the days!” also was fulfilled, if not fully than at least partially. And as the Rebbe would always repeatedly quote from the famous words of the Rambam, the real and true wish of every Jew is to be connected to G-d and to do the mitzvos—it’s just that his yetzer (inclination) misleads him.

And so our mission is to discover that pintele Yid, that tiny “Jewish dot” instead every Jew—the “mi yitain” of G-d Himself that every Jew indeed find deep inside his or her heart the desire to be connected to G-d.

Good Shabbos!