

Parshat Mishpatim which follows directly after the revelation at Sinai, presents us with a litany of laws which will govern our society once we have conquered and settled in the land of Israel. Hashem describes the upcoming journey of Bnei Yisrael in the following way: 'Behold, I am sending an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Beware of him, and listen to his voice, and do not disobey him, for he will not pardon your sins, for My name is in his midst. But if you will obey his voice, and do all that I shall speak, then I shall be the enemy of your enemies and the adversary of your adversaries. (Shemot 24,20-22).

Hashem explicitly states that while the Exodus from Egypt and our wilderness experience up until that point has been under the direct guidance of Hashem, it will actually be an angel who will bring us up to the land of Israel. This fact is puzzling in and of itself. Why the need to send us under the guidance of an angel? If the purpose of taking us out of Egypt was to give us the Torah and then bring us to our land, why would Hashem not 'personally' deliver us there? To make this question more perplexing, later on in the Torah when we sin with the golden calf, Moshe argues against the idea of an angel accompanying us. Hashem, after relenting and agreeing not to destroy us, presents the caveat that post sin, He will not directly lead us. We will be under the hand of an angel. Moshe refuses this plan and demands that Hashem Himself lead us. But from our Parsha it seems that angelic guidance was the original plan anyway! Why did Moshe later reject that proposal if here he does not argue at all?

To answer these questions, it would be helpful to try to understand the role of angels. While there are many different understandings of angels, I would like to concentrate on the approach of the Rambam. In his Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides establishes that angels are nonphysical entities which are employed by God in His maintenance of the universe. Plainly stated, angels are the agents which carry out God's natural will. When God acts in the world in conformity to our expectations, we call it nature. That, according to the Rambam, is the domain of the angels. If we extend this to the laws of morality as well, we could say that when God acts in the world in direct proportion to the action of man, we refer to that as justice- again, the realm of angels. But when we sense a deviation from nature, that is then evidence of Hashem acting 'alone', with no messenger or angel. When punishment or reward is meted out disproportionately to the actions of man, that too is under God's direct providence.

We can now return and answer our questions. Why did Moshe react so negatively when, later, Hashem informed him that we would be led by an angel? Moshe knew that we needed a to be under the direct leadership of Hashem. Only through His Divine compassion were we forgiven in the first place. Had we been placed under the care of an angel, strict justice would have mandated that we be destroyed for our sin.

That situation was different than the one in our Parsha. Moshe does not reject the plan of an angel bringing us into the land of Israel at this point because he understood that it was in our best interest. As mentioned before, up until this point all of our experiences have been directly divine. The plagues, the Exodus, the splitting of the sea, the revelation at Sinai- all have been miraculous and, as we will say in 2 months at the seder "I, and not an angel; I, and not a seraph; I, and not a messenger". But that is not the goal of the Exodus. The goal is to reach the land of Israel and to form a society based around our newly formed covenant with Hashem- the Torah. For us to be successful in that way, we need to view the Torah as the natural order of things,. If our existence continued to be miraculous and 'above nature' we would never relate to the Torah or the land of Israel as natural. Hashem was not abandoning us- on the contrary He was preparing us for our new lives as free people in the land of Israel. Hashem assures us that if we listen to the words of the Torah, then there is no limit to the natural reward which will follow. The purpose of the giving of the Torah was not for it to remain in the realm of the Divine, but for it to become synonymous with nature.

Shabbat Shalom,

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