

HILEL'S "I" - AN EYE OPENER

Parshas Bamidbor

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

We find the prestigious sage Hilel pronouncing a statement that, cursorily read, seems unbecoming for a man of his stature. It was during experiencing high spirit on Simchas Bais Hashoaivo (Sucoth) that Hilel proclaimed "If I am here (Im ani kahn) everyone else is here" (Sucah 53a). How can this be reconciled with the teaching that Hilel reached the apex of humility? "One should always strive to be humble as Hilel" (Shabos 30b - the Gemoro elaborates on his extreme patience with people because of his extra humility).

It is told of a Tzadik, a visitor knocking on his door. "Who is there?" the Tzadik asked. "It is I", the visitor replied. The Tzadik responded, "I know only of one "I"; there is no other. That is Hashem, "I am Hashem your G-d..." (Shemos 19:2). How, then, can Hilel, the prototype of meekness, speak of himself in such grand terms?

Two approaches, unlike one another, seek to resolve the above: Rashi (a) and Tosfos (b):

a) Rashi expounds the word "Ani" (if "ani" is here...) not referring to himself but to Hashem, the only One, the real "I". Indeed as the Tzadik responded to the one knocking on the door. "There is only One 'Anochi'".

Rashi's interpretation is substantiated by the Zohar Beraishis (daf 561). "When Hilel said if "I" am here he referred to the Shechina which is called "Ani". An interesting parallel to the above is found in the Hoshano on Hoshana Raba (when Hilel's declaration took place). Ani Veho Hoshio Noh. Both Rashi and Tosfos expound the ANI a reference to Hashem (Succa 45a).

The concluding part of the statement, "all else are here" is an admonishment. Only if Israel conducts a life of sanctity, conscious of the presence of the SHECHINA, everyone is here. But if I am provoked to leave this MIKDASH, your presence here will cease (so elucidates Rashi).

Taking a clue from the Yom Tov Shvuos, one is perhaps permitted to interpret Hilel's concluding comment differently. At the time the Torah was given, the Torah reads VAYICHAN (in the singular) and he, Israel, encamped (Shemos 19:2). Rashi (ibid.) comments "there dwelt among all Israel complete

harmony, as one person, with one heart". This was apparently the great achievement that merited the closeness to Hashem, "And Hashem descended upon Mount Sinai..." (19:20).

This, then, may be the meaning of the completion of Hilel's assertion. "If "I" (The Shechina) am here, it is BECAUSE "HAKOL KAHN", because you are all here in complete harmony.

b) Tosfos differs. From the Jerusalem Talmud it seems, says Tosfos, that Hilel's "I" (if I am here...) was a reference to himself. Precisely because Hilel was the humblest of the humble, it is he who finds reason to raise his self-image. And if there is an "I" here, then "Hakol kahn", everyone else too should feel a certain pride in who we are, a sense of special dignity, self-esteem and majesty that we are servants of Hashem. And each individual must feel uplifted by the fact that he is a part of this great people. There is no contradiction (in Tosfos view). The same authority that espouses the principle of meekness and humbleness, also advocates the advantage of being a personality with a respectable portrait.

Chronicles II (chapter 17) in recording the admirable deeds of King Jehoshaphat, includes the passage "and his heart raised itself up ("vayigba") in the ways of Hashem" (17:6). This concept of the raised heart is an indispensable asset in the need to speak out on what is right.

This brings us to our Sidra. The Code of Law (428) registers the arrangement of the Sidros, what Parsha to read when. It rules that "Parshas Bamidbor is always read right before Shvuos" (428:4). "And sometimes", adds Beur Halacha, "also Parshas Nasso is read before Shvuos". The reason for this arrangement, according to Levush, is to avoid the reading of the Tochacha tightly before Shvuos. The Minchas Elazar of Munkatch, however, offers a profound, unique, reason for this arrangement. The Midrash teaches, when the Messiah will come, the nations will complain to the Al-mighty, why were they left out, while the Jewish people alone were chosen to be given the Torah. Hashem will reply "Can you bring Me your lineage, the way My children, the Jewish people, did?" as we read in Parshas Bamidbor, "and they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers' household" (1:18). Each Jewish family was able to establish the tribe they belonged to. They knew who they are, how, through which tribe, they are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Obviously they took pride in the fact that they descend from these great Tzadikim and so they use this lineage to their advantage in case of war (see Sforno).

The knowledge of who we are, the pride in who we are, is a fundamental acknowledgement in both the daily reading of Shema, and Shemona Esra. In Ahava Rabba before reciting the Shema, we pray to be given enlightenment to understand Torah, in the merit of our ancestors, "Baavur Avosainu". We also begin our Shemona Esra beseeching Hashem Who remembers our ancestors and brings redemption to their descendants.

This is, thus, the meaning, according to Tosfos, of Hilel's proud assertion "if 'I' am here...". "Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the heaven," says Koheles (3:1). There is a time to feel humble; there is a time to feel proud.

The Kiviyashder Rav z.l. observed an interesting expression on Shabos, different than that of the weekdays: On weekdays, the Shulchan Aruch begins, "I have placed Hashem opposite myself. The greatness of Hashem and the insignificance of myself." On Shabos, to the contrary, we recite (in the prayer before Aishes Chayil) I shall place Hashem BEFORE me" (not against me). On Shabos and Yom Tov we feel elevated to "high level of closeness to Hashem, proud and appreciative for having been chosen for Shabos observance, "to Yisroel whom thou hast chosen" (Shabos Shachris). For Yom Tov fulfilling "Ato Bechartonu". The individual sings out his pride, his "Ani", his "I", in his Kol Mekadaish, proud to be part of the sainted people. "Every man at his own camp, every man at his own banner" (First Friday night Zemer).

On Saturday night, following Havdala, we recite (in Veyiten Lecho) Reb Yochanon's teaching "wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility." This teaching seems timely on Saturday night, when a change takes place among Jews, from pride to humility, from mentioning Hashem "Before me", to "opposite me". Until Friday evening when a change will again take place to "before me".

The same Hilel who advocates "if I am for myself WHAT am I?" (Avoth 1:14), the same Hilel proclaims, "if I am here, everyone else is here". The strength of "I" is used to strengthen everyone else's "I", Then it is not what am I? but 'I am here'.

