



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Reading the Footnotes

I often find myself disagreeing with the phrase, “It’s just a footnote in history”. I have found some of the most interesting and important facts buried, unseen by most people, in the footnotes of the books I read.

Recently, I have begun to use a pocket-sized edition of the Talmud in my daily study. I have been doing a lot of traveling lately, and this miniature edition suits me well.

I find that the print of the main text and major commentaries in this edition is in sharp focus and, although quite small, is perfectly legible. However, this edition, known as *Oz V’Hadar*, contains an innovative feature. In the margins of every page are footnotes in very fine print, indicating variant readings of the traditional text. These footnotes supply minor corrections based upon ancient manuscripts or early print editions of the Talmud.

These footnotes are so small that I can hardly make them out, even with my glasses. I resort to the use of a magnifying glass, which enlarges the size of the letters by four or five times. In one corner of the glass is a small circle with an even more powerful magnifier, which enlarges the size of the letters to ten or perhaps twelve times their size.

I find these footnotes extremely useful in my study. Invariably, they suggest changes to the text that seem minor but are not at all trivial. Passages in the Talmud that I previously found vague or puzzling are elucidated with the change of a word, or sometimes even the addition of one single letter.

Often, I am tempted to ignore these footnotes, passing up the opportunity to use the magnifier. But when I do so, I forfeit the opportunity of gaining surprising and edifying insights.

These marginal footnotes, together with this magnifier, have literally opened my eyes to the authentic meaning of the text and have given me a fresh understanding of passages that I had previously found challenging.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Shemot* (*Exodus* 1:1-6:1), we encounter a phrase in Rashi’s commentary that my experience with the footnotes and the magnifying glass has helped me appreciate.

The Bible has just concluded the account of baby Moses’ rescue by Pharaoh’s daughter. It is about to proceed to narrate the story of the mature Moses. It begins, “Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brethren and he saw their labors” (*Exodus* 2:11).

Rashi comments, “He saw their labors: He directed [literally, ‘gave’] his eyes and heart, to feel troubled for them.” Rashi’s comment is prompted by the words “he saw.” Of course, if he went out to his

brethren, he “saw” their labors.

Rashi, therefore, suggests an alternative and deeper interpretation of the words “he saw.” He is telling us that he didn’t merely see visually. He saw deeply. He took notice. Metaphorically, he used his “magnifying glass” to discover every footnote, to absorb every detail of his brethren’s toil. What he saw troubled him, and he suffered along with them.

The Midrash, serving as our “magnifying glass,” provides an expanded picture of every “footnote” in the scene that Moses saw:

He saw their labors, and he wept, saying, “Woe is me, I am willing to die for them.” He extended his shoulders to help carry the burden of each and every one of them. He saw the weak carrying heavy burdens, and the strong carrying lighter ones. He saw manly burdens being carried by women, and feminine burdens carried by men. He saw tasks appropriate for the elderly assigned to the young, and tasks befitting the young passed along to the elderly. He put aside his royal equipage and eased their labors... So that the Holy One Blessed be He said to him, “You left behind your concerns, went to observe Israel’s pain, and reacted like a good brother. So too will I, God, leave behind My upper and lower celestial spheres and speak to you...”

The Midrash’s implication that the Almighty, so to speak, took his cue from Moses is a daring one. But even more daring from a theological perspective is Rashi’s comment on a later phrase in the *parsha*: “God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.”

What can “and God knew” possibly mean? After all, He is all-knowing, omniscient.



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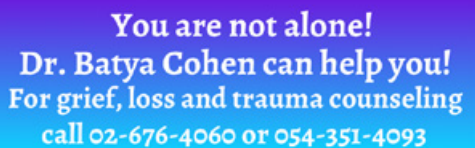
Targum Onkeles, troubled by this question, renders the phrase “God knew” into Aramaic as, “and God gave His word that He would redeem them.”

A widely-used English translation renders the phrase, “and God took notice of them.”

Rashi offers a theologically daring comment: “He directed [literally, ‘gave’] His heart toward them and did not hide His eyes.”

Returning to the metaphor I introduced above, God, so to speak, used His divine magnifying glass to scrutinize every footnote, to attend to every detail, of Israel’s enslavement.

Rashi dares to apply the same terms that he used to describe Moses’ empathic



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response, “eyes” and “heart,” to the Almighty Himself. Rashi leaves his readers with an image of a God who demonstrates human-like sympathy for His suffering people.

There is much more to these two passages in Rashi’s commentary than an account of Moses’ compassion. There is more to them than just a glimpse of God’s merciful ways. There is a lesson here for all of us.

We often “see” our brothers in difficulties of one sort or another. Typically, matters stop right there. We “see” them, but we do not extend ourselves in the ways that Moses did. Quite the contrary: we tend to look away.

But there is another, much more worthy option. We can utilize our magnifying glass to look at the footnotes. We can pay careful attention to the plight of our brothers, noting all the details of their plight. We can direct our eyes to the scene that is before us and can then open our hearts so that they feel the pain of others who suffer.

Finally, like Moses, we can shed our inhibitions and plunge right into the fray, extending our shoulders to help bear our brother’s burden.

Moses is called *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our Teacher. As we read the weekly portions for the next many months, we will learn many things from him. But this week, we can learn from his very first lesson, one that he modeled by his own conduct: Direct your eyes and your heart to your brother’s suffering. ■



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