

Parshas Toldos – R. Sholom Segal *(reprinted)*

ג כסלו תשע"ז – 3rd December 2016 – שבת פרשת תולדות

'So Yitzchak sent away Ya'acov and he went toward Paddan-aram, to Lavan the son of Besuel the Aramean, brother of Rivka, mother of Ya'acov and Esav.' (Genesis 28:5)

Rashi, at a loss as to why the Torah included the last fact in the above genealogy, concedes 'I do not know what this comes to teach us.' The commentators are, understandably, perplexed as to why Rashi seemingly wastes the ink to inform us that he does not know.

The truth is that these few words are equally, if not more significant than the rest of his commentary on this week's sedra. The Gemara in Brochos (4a), citing a Derech Eretz Zuta, warns each and every one of us, 'Teach your tongue to say 'I do not know' ...'

To admit that one does not have an answer does not come naturally; one must train oneself to do so. It is easy to justify that one is 99 percent sure of the facts. Moshe Rabbeinu teaches us that sometimes, even 100 percent is not sufficient grounds on which to make a statement. Hashem declared that the mass killing of the first-born would come at midnight; not a second earlier and not a second later. However, since Moshe was unable to verify this, he chose not to be so precise. He warned Pharaoh of the impending epidemic which would happen at about midnight. Though it meant playing down the supremacy of Hashem, though he knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the plague would arrive at the prescribed time, still, he would not utter words that he could not prove.

In a similar vein, his student, Eliyahu, notified Achav that the rain would be withheld. The Gemara in Ta'anis (3b) adds that the dew of blessing would also not descend. Nonetheless, he made no mention of this, for he would be unable to verify the threat. Who could distinguish between the different types of dew? Once again, he knew the truth in Hashem's words. However, his inability to prove the words spoken, stopped him from verbalising them.

R' Hanoch Teller, in his biography of Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l, (page 75) recounts that in 1949, he began delivering his shiurim in Kol Torah. His very first shiur was graced by all the yeshiva's rabbanim, according him the rightful honour. Midway through the shiur, Reb Yonah Martzbach zt"l, a senior rosh yeshiva, posed a difficult question. Reb Shlomo Zalman paused for a moment, before confessing, "I have erred," and continued to develop a second approach. He later conceded that his blunder had been exceedingly embarrassing. Moreover, he had three distinct replies to the question. Still though, he felt that the question was stronger than any of the answers. Reb Yonah Martzbach subsequently commented, "I actually had an answer myself, but I wanted to see how Reb Shlomo Zalman would deal with the question. His admission was, for me, the greatest shiur of all."

In a similar vein, my own teacher, Harav Zvi Kushelevsky shlit"a, always stressed the importance of seeing that one's understanding conforms with that of the early commentators. He once commented that he was unwilling to tackle a certain question, since the terminology of the early commentator was unclear. In response to a student's suggestion, he countered, "If you want, I can give you ten different approaches, but not one can I prove to be the intent of the commentator. Thus, it is preferable to leave the question unresolved."

We are a people of truth. It is a basic tenet in the very essence of a Jew. It is for that reason that it is so hard to attain. To fool others into thinking that one has the answer, whether by simply keeping quiet, or by making a vague uncommitted statement which could be interpreted in many ways, is a deviation from the absolute truth. Do you think that Rashi, one of the greatest commentators of all time, was unable to suggest an answer to his question? How many later students have put forth solutions? However, his uncompromising search for Emes would not allow him to transcribe anything which he, at his level, felt he could not back up beyond question. Moreover, it demanded that he write down, for all to see, that he does not know. It can only serve to add to the credibility of the rest of his commentary. If one ever finds Rashi's words difficult to understand, the first thing to remember is that Rashi for one, was 100 percent sure of his interpretation. Otherwise, it would mean entering the worlds of the unknown.