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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ELIJAHU IN OZ

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

"I am Oz, the great and terrible". L. Frank Baum presumably drew "great and terrible" from Bible translations of *gadol venora*. Devarim 1:19 describes the wilderness that we traversed after the Exodus as *gadol venora*; Devarim 7:21 describes Hashem Elokekha as *E-l gadol venora*; and Yoel 3:4 and Malakhi 3:23 each describe a future "day of Hashem *bagadol vebanora*." (Despite Devarim 7:21, all commentaries I've seen understand *bagadol vebanora* in Yoel and Malakhi as modifying the day rather than modifying Hashem.)

The word "terror" has a deeply negative valence in contemporary society. It's hard to imagine a contemporary liturgist choosing to praise G-d by describing Him as evoking terror. This may reflect a purely linguistic shift, or we may no longer understand why the capacity to evoke the emotion of terror in others would ever be praiseworthy.

Yoel points strongly to the latter option. The "Day of Hashem" is introduced in 1:15 as the day of a massive locust invasion, causing destruction, famine, and depression. In Chapter 2 the locusts are like heavy smog in the air and a ravenous army on the ground, turning Eden into desolation. In Chapter 3 the spirit of prophecy pours onto the population while the sky fills with bleak omens of blood, fire, and smoke. *The sun transforms to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the day of Hashem, the great and terrible.* All these apparently associate the day of Hashem with an emotion we still recognize as terror.

But this picture of Yoel is not complete. 3:5 promises that *all who call in the name of Hashem will escape, because in Har Tziyon and Yerushalayim there will be a pleitah = refuge, and in the remnants who call Hashem.* Chapter 4 warns the righteous to prepare for war – *beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears!* – and ends with a vision of Yehudah triumphant and eternal, with its enemies punished and desolated. Assuming this is all part of the Day of Hashem, it turns out that terror is followed by relief and probably joy. More precisely, the terror is of justice, grounded in fear that one deserves punishment.

My question is whether the terror itself is just, and perhaps in some cases obviates the need for other

punishments. Those correctly certain of their own rectitude will not experience this terror. That kind of certainty might itself reflect a moral flaw, or not.

The end of Malakhi might suggest another possibility. G-d sends Elijah the Prophet *before the coming of the day of Hashem, the great and terrible . . . lest I come and smite the land cherem.* Eliezer of Beaugency implicitly contrasts this vision with Yoel: "*Cherem = with no pleitah*". Eliyahu HaNavi is tasked with preventing a nightmare scenario that Yoel never considers. My question is whether Eliyahu's goal is to transform Malakhi into Yoel, in other words to ensure the survival of a refuge. Or might he have the more ambitious goal of saving the majority, or everyone. In which case there might be no need for terror at all.

I am tempted by a more ambitious version of this thesis. Raavad in his commentary to Mishnah Eduyot reads the verses this way:

Remember the Torah of Mosheh my servant etc.;
if you do – *Behold I am sending you Elijah the prophet etc.*
but if you don't – *I will come and smite the land utterly.*

According to this reading, Eliyahu's task is to **prevent** the Day of Hashem from coming. My question then would be whether Eliyahu's task is enabled by the terror of judgment, or is instead to prevent the terror as well.

To address this question, we must ask: what does Eliyahu actually do?

Textually, the answer is straightforward: *vebeshiv lev avot al banim, velev banim al avotam.* The meaning of that text is a four-way dispute in the last mishnah of Masekhet Eduyot:

- 1) Rabbi Yehoshua – Eliyahu will undo all genealogical rulings (about eligibility to marry, or to serve as kohanim) that emerged from concessions to force, however long ago.
- 2) Rabbi Yehudah – Eliyahu will undo only such rulings distorted toward strictness (*lerachek = to distance*) but not those distorted toward leniency (*lekarev = to bring closer*)
- 3) Rabbi Shimon – Eliyahu comes *lehashvot machlokot = to turn disputes into consensus.* (This is not the same as settling disputes by deciding for one side or the other.)

- 4) The Sages – Eliyahu comes neither *lerachek* nor *lekarev*, but rather to make peace in the world (*laasot shalom baolam*)

Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Yehudah take *avot* and *banim* literally and specifically as fathers and sons, whereas the Sages somehow generalize them. (I'm unclear whether Rabbi Shimon's position is a variant of the first two, on its own axis, or a narrower version of the Sages'.)

The clear advantage of the Sages' position is that it gives Eliyahu's task a scope worthy of its massive purpose of preventing total annihilation. Why would clarifying families' halakhic status serve that purpose?

Keter Hamelekh (Rabbi Catriel Aharon Nathan, 1846-1922, Lithuania) to Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Nezirut 4:11 accidentally provides a possible solution. In the context of a classic technical halakhic conversation about whether traveling from Heaven to Earth on Shabbat can violate the *tehum*, and assuming that the day of Hashem is the day on which the King Messiah is revealed, he notes that the verse makes no commitment as to how much before that day Eliyahu will arrive. He then constructs a dispute within Chazal as to whether it will be the day before, or rather three days before.

Keter HaMelekh explains this dispute as follows: If the Jewish people have achieved righteousness on their own, then Eliyahu need come only one day before. But if we have failed to achieve righteousness on our own, and the clock is running out on the world, or we will otherwise become permanently irredeemable then Eliyahu must come earlier, in order to compel our repentance.

Now *Keter HaMelekh* contends that the positions in Mishnah Eduyot all relate to Eliyahu's task on the penultimate day. I suggest instead that Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Shimon assume that Eliyahu is coming to a people who already deserve redemption, while the Sages understand Eliyahu's task as making us worthy of redemption. How could we be worthy of redemption if there is no peace between fathers and sons? (Note: Raavad and others argue that the Sages have Eliyahu making peace between Jews and

Gentiles. But this seems a very difficult read of the verse in Malakhi.)

If one sees compelled repentance as a reasonable end to history, then perhaps terror of judgment is necessary and justified as a means to that end.

This is the position taken by a key protagonist's mother in H. G. Wells' socialist allegory *In The Days of the Comet*. Before the comet's passing, the mother had often harangued her son about the tortures of Hell. After the comet transforms the atmosphere, and thereby human behavior, making clear that human sins were a consequence of environment and not of an intrinsic *yetzer hora*, the son asks how she could ever have felt such tortures were justified. Her defense is that while she had indeed described Hell in loving detail, she had never said that any souls were actually sent there.

In other words, inspiring terror of judgment is justified, even if the terrifying judgement will never happen because a comet or prophet will regardless come in time to prevent us from deserving it.

But maybe the mother was still wrong, because repentance inspired by terror is psychologically compelled. If that is the only hope for repentance, we might as well wait for Eliyahu to compel us, or conversely, G-d might as well send Eliyahu now, since nothing better will ever happen.

I understand that many people focus more on shortening the exile than on how redemption happens. I also understand why the fact that the pains of an unredeemed world have lessened for most Jews in the world – even as we recognize the incredible suffering of our hostages and the absurdly constant genocidal threats faced by all Israelis, and even as we live still in the shadow of the Shoah – make us less tolerant of their continuation. But I cannot agree.

I am confident that G-d would rather we knocked over His screen and related to Him as much more great than terrible. Moreover, I suspect that all such screens eventually get knocked over, because at some point a situation comes in which we are convinced that a truly terrible G-d would destroy us.

I suspect this is true of human and national relationships as well. Deterrence via threats of extreme consequences is always a delaying strategy at best. That doesn't mean that it's a bad strategy, or a short-term strategy – for example, it worked long enough to get us through the Cold War. But I hope and believe that when Eliyahu comes, it will be because we can find ways to bring peace to the world that are not motivated by the constant threat of G-d arriving to annihilate us.

Shabbat shalom!

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