

## God of Peace, God of War?

Michael Kurin

In our focus on preparing for the *sedarim*, it is easy to overlook the themes of the last days of Pesach, when we recount *kriyat yam suf* and the celebratory *Shirat Hayam* that followed. As a peaceful nation, celebrating the violent downfall of our enemies is not a simple matter. I would like to share some thoughts on just one piece of this complex issue, regarding one *pasuk* in the *Shirat Hayam* that has bothered me for decades.

The Jews sing “ה' איש מלחמה ה' שמו” – “Hashem is a ‘man’ of war; Hashem is his name” (Shemot 15:3), which raises multiple issues:

1. Calling God a “man of” anything is anthropomorphism. While anthropomorphism is an issue that arises throughout Tanach, calling God an “*ish*” is rare and more blatant than most other instances. The Abarbanel was so bothered by this issue that he suggested two radical re-interpretations of the *pasuk*. First, he suggests reading it rhetorically: “Is God a man of war? No; Hashem is his name!” In his second suggestion, the words “man of war” actually refer to Pharaoh rather than God. Pharaoh had earlier claimed to lack knowledge of Hashem (Shemot 5:2). Now, in *Shirat Hayam*, Moshe directs this line to him: “Hashem (the God I told you about, Pharaoh, you) man of war, His name is Hashem (and you are currently experiencing His wrath).” While creative, these readings are generally not accepted, and they are certainly not the most straightforward way to read the *pasuk*. Presumably, most accept an interpretation similar to Rashi’s, translating not as “man of war” but rather “Master of war” or “Master warrior.”
2. Even if we ignore the anthropomorphism, calling God a “master of war” is still theologically troublesome. As mentioned above, referring to God as “man of \_\_\_\_” is not common. However, the Torah does sometimes refer to a *person* as a “man of” something, apparently indicating that the “something” is the essence of their character. For example, the Torah refers to Esav as “a skilled hunter and a man of the field” (Bereishit 25:17), describing the essence of Esav’s being. Similarly, then, we might presume that “איש מלחמה” describes someone whose essence is being a great warrior. Or perhaps a sharper translation is “warmonger.”

This reading is of course difficult, as it would be grossly inappropriate to refer to God as a warmonger, or even suggest His identity is tied to His prowess on the battlefield. Quite the contrary, God is much more often referred to in Tanach (despite a few notable exceptions) as the God of mercy, Who cares for the poor and downtrodden, Who according to Chazal carries the name Shalom, and Who gave us the Torah about which Mishlei says “its ways are pleasant and all its paths are peace” (3:17). So how are we to understand describing Hashem as “איש מלחמה”?

I’d like to offer a suggestion based on a surprising Gemara passage. The beginning of Avoda Zara (2b) relates that at the end of days, God will take all the nations of the world to trial and question them. When it

comes to the Persians, he asks them “what did you accomplish?” They respond, “We built bridges, we conquered cities, and we fought many wars, and we did it all for the sake of the Jewish people.” God responds, “Liars! The bridges and the cities you did for yourselves, and the wars? I made those wars, as it says, “ה' איש מלחמה, ה' שמו.”

Why is God interested in taking credit for the wars of the Persians, and what does that have to do with the *pasuk* in *Shirat Hayam*?

It is unlikely God means He directly slayed the Persians’ enemies on the battlefield, like he did to the Egyptians at the sea. The Persians did not claim Hashem as their god, so what benefit would come from the performance of such open miracles on their behalf? A more compelling explanation (and in line with how many Jewish philosophers understand world history) is that God guides world powers towards war or away from war, and influences the outcomes of these wars, for the purpose of leading world history in the direction He desires. This explanation fits well with the Gemara text, where God doesn’t say “I fought these wars,” but rather “I made these wars.”

According to this Gemara, ה' איש מלחמה does not mean Man of War or even Master of War, but rather Master Orchestrator of War.

Unlike a warmonger, an orchestrator of war may not celebrate personal proficiency at destroying the enemy. While a warmonger is unlikely to claim peace and mercy are essential components of his character, a master orchestrator uses war purely as a tool, only when necessary and perhaps even with a heavy heart, and can be peaceful and merciful at his core. The Master Orchestrator of War uses war as a tool towards a certain purpose, a purpose only He has the right to determine is worth the destructive consequences. This descriptor feels much more befitting. There is no paradox between God as peaceful and God as Master Orchestrator of War.

This interpretation is supported by an additional curiosity regarding the phrase “ה' איש מלחמה”: The name of God used here is ה', which usually denotes God’s merciful attribute, as opposed to אלקים. Several commentators (see Rashi, Or Hachayim, and Seforno) write that we can somehow recognize God’s attribute of mercy within the destruction of the Egyptians. Seforno, for example, explains that God perpetuates the world by ridding it of those who try to destroy it, like pruning thorns from a vineyard. Being peaceful and merciful does not necessarily mean one has to be a pacifist, and God exclusively has the calculus to determine when orchestration of war ultimately promotes peace.

The world is a complicated place, and God is a complex being Whose ways we don’t pretend to understand. As we re-experience the redemption that is inextricably tied to the destruction of the Egyptian people and culminates with the reading of *Shirat Hayam*, we have the opportunity to consider the interplay between war and peace, mercy and destruction, through a Torah lens.

## Acceptance of Bad News as Fulfillment of *Ahavat Hashem*

Ira Taub

Based on remarks made commemorating the *shloshim* of  
אבי מורי, פסח בן ישראל צבי היירש ז"ל

The last *mishna* in Berachot (9:5) lists the different blessings to be said on good news and on bad news, and elaborates with an interpretation of the familiar verse from Shema:

חייב לברך על הרעה כשם שהוא מברך על הטובה, שנאמר "ואהבת את ה' אלוקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך" (דברים ו,ה): "בכל לבבך" – בשני יצריך, ביצר טוב וביצר רע. "ובכל נפשך" – אפילו הוא נוטל את נפשך. "ובכל מאודך" – בכל ממונך. דבר אחר, "ובכל מאודך" – בכל מידה ומידה שהוא מודד לך, הווי מודה לו מאוד מאוד.

*A person is obligated to bless (Hashem) over bad news just as he is obligated to bless over good news, as the verse says, "And you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." "With all your heart" – with your two inclinations, good and bad. "And with all your soul" – even if He takes your soul away. "And with all your might" – with all your money. Another interpretation: you are obligated to acknowledge him for whatever He measures out to you.*

The *mishna's* second interpretation of the Hebrew word מאורך connects it to three words with similar letters:

- 1) *middah* (מידה), in its simplest meaning (as opposed to its use to refer to character traits or personality), refers to dimensions or measurements – hence "whatever He measures out to you"; in other words, whatever events He chooses to bring about in your life.
- 2) *modeh* (מודה) means to acknowledge or thank.
- 3) The word מאוד (*me'od*) connotes a greater quantity or intensity of a substance or action.

Behind the wordplay is a startling take-home message: that both happy and sad events seem to call for an identical religious response. A financial windfall or a personal tragedy may warrant different *brachos*, but one's mindset while saying those blessings must be essentially the same. This idea is buttressed by a story in the Gemara (Berachot 60) in which Rabbi Akiva repeatedly declares that "כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד" – everything that [Hashem] does is for the good," despite a series of misfortunes that leave him bereft of shelter, property, and light. One may question, however, whether the exceptional faith of a martyred Tanna is an appropriate standard for the rest of us. We are not all Rabbi Akiva.

The Rambam, in his commentary to this *mishna*, frames the issue by emphasizing the paucity of human knowledge and our profoundly limited understanding of what is actually good for us. Only an omniscient Being, with all of eternity to sort things out, can make an accurate judgement about ultimate good and bad. With this in mind, says the Rambam, the enlightened *ben Torah* will react to circumstances with a sense of calm and equanimity, so that neither good nor bad events trigger emotional extremes.

While the above touches on familiar themes in the Rambam's thought, in his halachic writings he reformulates the *mishna's* ideas in a surprising way:

וחייב אדם לברך על הרעה בטובת נפש, כדרך שמברך על הטובה בשמחה, שנאמר "ואהבת את ה' אלוקיך... ובכל מאודך." ובכל אהבה זו היתה שנצטוונו בה, שאפילו בעת שיצר לו, יודה וישבח בשמחה. (הל" ברכות יג.)

*A person is obligated to bless over bad events with a good spirit, in the same way that he blesses over good events with joy, as it says, "And you shall love etc." Included in the commandment of overwhelming love which we were commanded is that, even at a time that He causes one pain, one should acknowledge and praise Him with joy. (Laws of Blessings 10:3)*

The Rambam's subtle departure from the language of the *mishna* offers several new perspectives on its meaning:

- 1) Rambam unapologetically acknowledges the reality of human suffering. The appropriate emotion for tragedy is not pure joy, as we feel when we hear good news, but טובת נפש, "goodness of spirit." A person ought neither turn his back on his own emotions nor give way to uncontrolled despair. He must work toward an honest acceptance of the role that Hashem's מידת הדין /justice plays in the world He created.
- 2) Unlike most other *brachos*, which are rabbinic obligations designed for specific circumstances, the blessing of דיין האמת belongs to the mitzva of אהבת ה', love of God – a fundamental Torah obligation. As the Rambam explains at the end of הלכות תשובה, a person cannot fulfill the *mitzvah* of אהבת ה' in a tepid, limited fashion; rather, *That a person's soul should be bound up in love of Hashem, and he should be perpetually absorbed by it.* A crucial index of the depth of this commitment is, apparently, its resilience in the face of pain. This *bracha* allows one to demonstrate his continued determination to love Hashem even under difficult circumstances.
- 3) Finally, the Rambam introduces a new obligation. A time of sadness demands not silent and passive acceptance, but acknowledgement and praise: להודות ולשבח. These terms should be familiar from, among other places, the blessings that frame the *Pesukei D'zimra* of our daily morning prayers. The excerpts from Tanach included in *Pesukei D'zimra* contain not short, generic praises but extended narratives which include both the good and bad of human experience. (For example, Psalm 146 describes Hashem's merciful attention to the sick, blind, orphaned, and hungry – all of whom have passed through situations that would likely demand the *bracha* of דיין האמת.) Acknowledging Hashem's role as the True Judge allows us to view the narrative of our own lives with greater awareness of His love and concern for each of us, and Rambam suggests we have an obligation to articulate that awareness.

[Hebrew sources from Mechon Mamre; translation is my own]

*Sponsoring Clilei HaChodesh is an opportunity to support the cultivation and spread of Torah while honoring a loved one.*

**May Hashem continue to guide and protect us through these uncertain times**

Anonymous

Rabbi Moshe Berger

Scholar in Residence

(216) 533-5233

moshe@mmberger.com

Sarah Rudolph

Editor

(216) 291-8918

scdrudolph@gmail.com

Ronnie Shulman

Sponsorships

(614) 507-3855

rshulman1@gmail.com

YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREATER CLEVELAND

Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein, Rabbi

Rabbi Aharon Lebovics, Associate Rabbi (Hebrew Academy)

Jeffrey Belkin, President

Beachwood Branch

2463 S. Green Road

Beachwood, Ohio 44122



Hebrew Academy Branch

1860 S. Taylor Road

Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118