BS"D

*Moshe is disappointed; he would have wanted the Jews to hear all of the Torah straight from G-d. Yet Hashem says that it's alright.*

Parshas Va’es’chanan

Hearing G-d’s Words, Opening Our Hearts

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

This week’s Torah portion recounts the event that took place immediately after G-d's revelation to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai:  The Jews acknowledged that they had seen that man could survive an encounter with G-d. "We have seen this day that man may live, though G-d has spoken to them."  Nevertheless, they did not want to continue hearing G-d's words for the entire Torah. "If we hear the voice of the L-rd, our G-d, any longer, we shall die."  Instead they asked that Moshe alone approach G-d, and that he convey to them everything that G-d said.

In our portion, Moshe's response is not given, but in the telling of the story in an earlier book (Shemos 20:20) Moshe tells the Jews not to be afraid. G-d was testing them and imparting to them the fear of G-d. G-d's response is not mentioned in Shemos, but in our portion the Torah (Deuteronomy 5:25, 26) says:  "I have heard the voice of these people, and they did well in all they spoke. May they always have such a heart to revere (fear) Me and keep all of My commandments."

When we combine the two stories, we see that Moshe is disappointed. He would have wanted the Jews to hear all of the Torah straight from G-d. Yet Hashem says that it's alright. He hopes that the sentiment of fear and reverence for G-d displayed by the Jewish people in their request will carry over forever.

Rashi explains Moshe's disappointment. When the Jews say to him "You speak to us instead of G-d," the word for you "Atah" is written in the feminine "At."  Moshe says, You made me feel like a female (“the weaker sex”) because I saw that you weren't serving G-d out of love. As the Kli Yakar explains, one who loves G-d seeks to become closer, one who fears G-d draws back. The Nesivos Shalom adds that if they loved G-d, the Bnai Yisrael wouldn't be afraid of dying. They would just seek to cleave to G-d no matter what. According to Kli Yakar's explanation of Rashi, G-d's reply to Moshe was sort of a compromise. G-d was telling Moshe, true, they are not serving Me with love, but fear of G-d is also a great thing, and I'd be happy with that.

The Ramban holds that G-d was not disappointed with the Jewish people. He had never intended to say the entire Torah for them. Serving G-d with reverence and fear was perfectly acceptable, and so G-d was pleased with their response. The Ramban adds that when the Jews said that they would accept hearing G-d's words through Moshe and that they would obey them, they also accepted to heed and obey G-d's words through the prophets for all future generations.

The Kli Yakar puts a positive turn on the Jews using the feminine "At" to describe Moshe. Moshe had weakened his physical aspect. He had been purged and purified in the cloud on Mt. Sinai for six days before the Torah was given. His physical body did not interfere with his spirituality. *He* could hear all of G-d's words for he was pure and radiant. But the ordinary Jews were not nearly as pure. Their physicality hadn't been weakened. They could not hear the rest of G-d's words directly, so they asked Moshe to convey G-d's words to them.

There is an interesting Ohr HaChaim who says that when Hashem said, "May they have such a heart always" (which literally means who can make them have such a heart always?), Moshe should have said "Who can? You, Hashem can." Then G-d would have purified the hearts of the Jewish people. Moshe would have then not had a problem with the incident of the spies or of Korach.

Actually, the source of this interpretation is in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 5a). However, there the Talmud says that not Moshe, but the Jewish people should have said to G-d, “*You* can make our hearts always have the awe of G-d.”

G-d says "Who can?"  In fact, G-d *can* purify the heart. Only He *doesn't*. He grants man free Will. He does not impose His fear or his love upon us. We have to choose it. Nevertheless, the Talmud says we could have chosen to ask G-d to purify our hearts. The original choice would have still been ours, but the consequences of asking G-d to put his fear upon us would have been that our fear of G-d would have been permanently affixed in our hearts.

This Shabbos, the Shabbos after Tisha B'Av, is known as Shabbos Nachamu. The Haftorah begins with the words of the prophet:  "’Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your G-d."  (Isaiah 40:1). But how are we comforted from our long exile and our suffering?  True, the future is good: the ingathering of the exile, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the Messianic Era. But how does that comfort us for our *past* suffering?

The Pri Zadik says that the comfort lies in the words:  "Her iniquity is expiated."  (40:2). The process of the exile is a process of *teshuva*, of repentance. Our sins, our iniquities, are transformed into goodness through our return to G-d. Thus, all of our suffering contributes to who we really are. The suffering is not forgotten, but transformed into making us greater and better and closer to G-d. When that transformation takes place, we are comforted, for we will see how the painful events in our history contributed to the ideal state that we and the world will arrive at in the Messianic world.

At that point, indeed, instead of "Who can?" purify our hearts, G-d will indeed do so. For we will be ready, by virtue of all that befell us, to open up our hearts to Him, to His awe, and to His love.