Assembly Notes
PARSHAS SHEMOS 5786
Assembly Theme: Questions Are Welcome

Dvar Torah

This week's Parsha (Shemos) talks about our descent into Egyptian slavery, and Moshe being sent to Pharaoh to demand our release. Pharaoh doubles down and intensifies the pressure.

Towards the end of the Parsha Moshe approaches Hashem and asks "Why have You mistreated this people? Why did You send me? Since I have come to Pharaoh in Your name, he has mistreated this people and You have not saved Your people".
The end of the Parsha (and the beginning of next week's) have Hashem admonish Moshe: Now you will see....the mighty Hand...I appeared to (and made promises to) the Patriarchs and they never complained!

Moshe was the most perfect human ever to exist, as the Rambam writes. Why indeed did he not emulate the Patriarchs and instead asked the question "Why..."?

The Rebbe explains that our forefathers represented Divine service with our emotion attributes. This entails a commitment and trust without any question. Moshe, on the other hand, had just been given the task to lead the people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai in order to receive the Torah.

Learning Torah requires intellectual engagement, to understand what one learns. That is why Moshe had to ask; in order to learn Torah. Why was he admonished? Some say that it was not for the question, but for his complaint (out of anguish for his people) that things had worsened since he began his mission.

Here are a few stories about the Rebbe's attitude towards questions.
In a letter the Rebbe strongly advises someone to agree to give shiurim to a group of women who had survived life a a Jew in the USSR. He emphasises that in the Soviet Union it was less complicated: you chose either to be "in" or "out" of Jewish life. In the West, less self sacrifice is required, but the daily choices of life are more nuanced. So it is important to teach them and to welcome questions, even if they concern very basic principles.

In the late 1960s i worked with Jewish university students. A girl who became observant had a Yechidus (private audience m) with the Rebbe. She confessed that she had a weakness for asking searching questions about Judaism. The Rebbe told her that this was not a weakness, because that is how one learns. The Rebbe then smiled and said: "But don't overdo it".

The late Professor Velvel Greene became observant in the middle 60s. He was a charismatic, creative speaker. The Rebbe encouraged him to speak at campuses and not to worry about questions he would get, despite his limited knowledge at that time. The Rebbe said: You don't have to have an immediate answer to every question. The greatest teacher was Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher), and he didn't always have the answer on the spot. As in the Torah stories about Pesach Sheni (the second Passover) etc. Moshe had to contact Hashem in order to give the accurate answer; it is normal that finding answers can take time and consultation with experts.

גוט שבת!

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Story of the Rebbe

A young boy in New Jersey was taught Braishis (about creation). He asked his mother "but who created G-d"? His mother said that she didn't know the answer; ask your teacher tomorrow.
His teacher (unfortunately) told him off for asking such questions. His mother knew about the Rebbe, and told her son to ask the Rebbe.
A short while later he received a letter addressed to Chaim Elchonon HaKohen, dated 22nd of Sivan 5741 (1941). I will include the entire letter:

Greeting and Blessing,
I received your (undated) letter, in which you write that you want to know more about HaShem etc.
The desire for such knowledge is, of course, commendable, and so King David instructed his son Shlomo: "Know the G-d of your father and serve Him wholeheartedly and eagerly" (Chron 28:9).
However, there is a time for everything, and at this time the most important thing for you is to concentrate of the Mitzvoth and your Torah studies, and in due course you will speak to your Hebrew teacher or Rabbi in your community in connection with the questions you may have.
There is surely no need to point out to you that in matters of Torah and Mitzvoth Naaseh (we will do)comes before v'Nishma (we will understand), and it is through Naaseh that a Jew attains v'Nishma in the fullest possible measure.

So, the Rebbe is saying: 1) Asking questions is commendable
2) Even the trickiest question ms have answers, but it takes time and working on it
3) The best way to reach a full understanding is to focus on action: doing Hashem's will).

Good Shabbos!