

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת חקת

זאת חקת התורה אשר צוה ה' לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל ויקחו אליך פרה אדמה תמימה אשר אין בה מום אשר לא עלה עליה על
“This is the statute of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a perfectly red cow, which has no blemish, upon which a yoke has not come” (19:2)

The requirements for the red cow seem to be self-contradictory. It must be red, which represents sin, but it must have no blemish, which represents purity. What does this mean? R' Nissan Alpert answers that it represents a person who focuses on perfecting himself but does not bear the yoke of helping others. Such a person, although he may be free from character flaws, is still sinning because they easily become prideful. This is the symbolism of the seemingly opposite qualities of the red cow.

Why does this cow serve as a purification for someone who came into contact with a corpse? A dead person has been separated from the world of the living. He no longer has associations with any others. When a person comes into contact with a corpse, he may be overtaken by feelings that a person is ultimately only responsible for himself. When a person dies, he is judged based solely on his own merits and faults. This leads him to think that he should focus on his own spiritual welfare and not be distracted by the needs of others. Therefore, this person must be purified by the red cow, which illustrates that such a way of life, while outwardly seeming very pious, is the wrong way to go.

The idea of responsibility for others is the underlying idea of the red cow. Chazal tell us that the cow serves as an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. Since the calf led to a terrible sin, its mother, the cow, must clean up its mess. What is the connection between the sin of the Golden Calf and the red cow used in the purification process? One problem with the sin of the Golden Calf is that people committed idolatry unchecked, without anyone taking responsibility to stop them until Moshe rallied the tribe of Levi to defend Hashem's honor. The very essence of the red cow is to stress the responsibility that each individual has toward others. It is noteworthy that this connection is made with regard to a mother's duty to rectify her child's mistakes. Parents are especially responsible to make sure that their children do not get into trouble and to look after their welfare.

R' Dovid Feinstein, following this line of thought, points out that the cow used to purify a person had to be completely red and must never have worn a yoke. He writes that the reason why people sin is because they do not have a yoke, they have no responsibility. When a person has something that he accepts upon himself, he cannot be laid back. The fact that others are relying on him will lead him to conduct himself in a certain manner. When a person does not have any responsibilities, he has no impetus to use his time wisely. This usually leads to wasting time or worse. A person should force himself to live up to the expectations of others so that he will be able to live up to his own expectations.

The posuk in Eicha (3:27) says: "It is good for a young man to bear a yoke in his

youth." When a person is young, it is a good time to accept responsibility because he has the strength to accomplish a great deal. Also, when one begins to tackle big projects in his youth, it will become second nature. This will make it easier for him to continue along that path as he grows older. Chazal tell us that all beginnings are difficult. It is important to make the effort in one's youth, at the beginning of life, to develop good habits that will accompany him in the years to come.

This does not mean that when a person becomes older, he need not bother with responsibility. Every elderly person lives for a purpose. If there was nothing left for a person to accomplish, there would be no purpose for him in this world. There is always work to be done. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (2:21) states: "The work is not for you to complete, but you are not free to remain uninvolved in it." We can never finish everything that we could possibly do in this world. As long as we are here, though, we have to try to do as much as we can.

וירם משה את ידו ויך את הסלע במטהו פעמים ויצאו מים רבים ותשת העדה ובעירם

“Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank” (20:11)

Why was it so terrible that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it? The people saw water miraculously coming forth from the rock despite the way in which it happened. What difference did it make?

R' Moshe Feinstein answers that Hashem wanted to convey an important lesson when Moshe spoke to the rock. Even though the rock does not hear or understand, it would have listened to Moshe's words and produced water. This would have served as a lesson that one should try to explain words of Torah even if the person who is listening will not understand because eventually he will arrive at an understanding of what he has learned, just as the rock would have heard Moshe's words. When Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, the people lost out on this valuable lesson. This is why Moshe was deserving of punishment.

The Mincha Belula answers that speaking to the rock would have been a tremendous display of Hashem's awesome power. The people had already seen Moshe hit a rock and miraculously produce water. This was not a new wonder to them. Speaking to the rock was completely unheard of and would have had an even greater impact on the people. It would have shown that Hashem has many ways through which to create miracles and that He can truly do whatever He wants. Moshe failed to impress this on the people when he hit the rock.

The Mincha Belula provides a second answer. When Moshe hit the rock, it gave people the opportunity to believe that the miracle came from the special staff that had now produced many miracles. Hashem wanted it to be clear that the miracle came directly from Hashem and not through any intermediary such as the staff. This is why it was important that Moshe speak to the rock this time and he erred by not doing so.

המה מי מריבה אשר רבו בני ישראל את ה' ויקדש בם

“They are the waters of strife, where the Children of Israel contended with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them” (20:13)

The gemara in Sanhedrin states that fighting against one's teacher is like fighting against Hashem. We see this from the posuk which says that they fought with Hashem, even though the Torah originally says that they fought with Moshe. This is because their complaint against Moshe was that he was making up commands on his own. They fought with Moshe because they thought he was misrepresenting Hashem. Thus, their quarrel with Moshe was really in essence a quarrel with Hashem who had sent Moshe and had indeed commanded that which Moshe relayed to the nation. People are sometimes critical of their rabbis and things that they say. One has to be very careful before treading down this path. We see that the Torah goes out of its way to show how serious such allegations really are. The parshiyos that contain the stories of Korach and other complaints against Moshe teach us how important it is that we respect our teachers and rabbis. We must recognize that our rabbis are representatives of Torah and that when we speak inappropriately about such important leaders, we actually speak badly of Hashem.

ונצעק אל ה' וישמע קלנו וישלח מלאך ויצאנו ממצרים והנה אנחנו בקדש עיר קצה גבולך

“We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice; He sent an emissary and took us from Egypt; now behold we are in Kadesh, a city at the edge of your border” (20:16)

Who is the "malach" that Moshe said had taken the people out of Egypt? Rashi says that the "malach" refers to Moshe himself and cites this as a proof that a prophet can also be called a "malach." The question can be asked: How could it be that Moshe, the most humble person who ever lived, called himself a malach? This question can be answered through a story. There was once a rabbi who came across a villager leading his wagon with an ox and a donkey together. The rabbi approached the man and informed him that such a practice is forbidden by the Torah. However, the man paid him no heed and continued to lead his wagon. The rabbi then informed the man that he was actually the biggest rabbi in the town. When he heard this, the villager listened to the rabbi and unharnessed his animals. Sometimes a person needs to use his status for an important purpose. As long as it is truly done for the sake of Heaven, as the rabbi in the story did, one may use his status in order to influence someone else. Moshe felt that it was important to show how powerful he was so that the king of Edom should let the Jewish people pass through his land. This is why he spoke of himself in such grand terms despite his extreme humility. He really only meant it for the sake of Heaven and did not want to take any glory for himself.

וישלח ה' בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את העם וימת עם רב מישראל

“Hashem sent the fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people and a large multitude of Israel died” (21:6)

Why were the people punished with venomous snakes for their complaint against

Hashem? Rashi says that the snakes were meant to remind them of the original snake in Gan Eden. That snake spoke loshon hara and was punished for it. Therefore, the punishment for their evil speech was an attack by snakes. Rashi gives a second reason for this unique punishment. The people had complained about the manna that Hashem gave them but they did not appreciate this special gift from Hashem. They complained that they were disgusted by the manna, even though it had many different tastes and adapted itself to the taste that each individual desired. As a punishment, Hashem sent snakes to whom everything tastes like dirt. Hashem wanted to show them how well off they were and that they should have been grateful for the miracles that Hashem did for them.

The Mincha Belula suggests a third answer. Most animals only attack for a constructive purpose, usually because they need food. However, snakes are different in that they will often bite people just for spite, even if they do not feel threatened and there is no reason to attack. Similarly, the people had no good reason to complain. Therefore, Hashem punished the people with snakes in order to send them this message and show them how their complaints were completely unjustified.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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