

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת חקת-בלק

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)

Why is the law of the Parah Adumah introduced as the “statute of the Torah” rather than the “statute of the red heifer?” R' Dovid Feinstein answers that there are parts of the Torah that do not seem to be applicable in daily life or focused on how a person can grow spiritually. Despite this, studying any part of the Torah makes a person better and changes him. The Parah Adumah is the “statute of the Torah” because it cleansed people and made them pure, even though the workings behind all of its laws are, for the most part, inscrutable. So, too, Torah study will improve our character and refine us, regardless of whether it is practical learning with an obvious application to our daily lives or not. This is a basic principle of the Torah that is embodied in the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, the epitome of a mitzvah whose reasons are beyond our comprehension.

ולא היה מים לעדה ויקהלו על משה ועל אהרן

“There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon” (20:2)

The well which provided the Jewish people with water throughout their time in the wilderness was given to them by Hashem in the merit of Miriam. When she died and her merit no longer protected her nation, the well was taken away and the people lacked water.

R' Moshe Sternbach, in his sefer Taam VaDaas, asks: Why was water provided in Miriam's merit as opposed to some other form of protection? He answers that water, which is the most basic requirement for human survival, was given in the merit of Miriam to show the importance of women in the Jewish home. The way in which a woman runs a house is the foundation of Am Yisrael. She makes sure that the house continues to exist and function in the Torah way through her emphasis on modesty, kashrus and kindness. Everyone in the house looks toward the wife to ensure that things go well. She guards the purity of the house and prevents any bad influences from entering. The water, the most important element of survival, came in the merit of Miriam, the paradigm of the righteous women in every generation who are the cornerstone of Jewish society. When Miriam died, the well which provided water disappeared to underscore this message.

ויראו כל העדה כי גוע אהרן ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום כל בית ישראל

“When the entire assembly saw that Aharon had perished, the entire House of Israel wept for Aharon thirty days” (20:29)

The posuk tells us that the entire nation, both men and women, cried when Aharon died. However, when Moshe died, the Torah only mentions that the men cried. What caused this difference?

The answer is that Moshe and Aharon adopted different approaches in their dealings with the people. Moshe frequently rebuked the nation in his speeches and was very tough on them.

On the other hand, Aharon never openly told a person that he sinned. He would talk to people in a way through which they would come to that realization on their own. The Midrash says that Aharon even greeted wicked people, which kept them from sinning because they would feel guilty after having been greeted by Aharon. By having a positive attitude, he showed that he cared and this stopped them in their tracks. This was a completely different attitude than Moshe. The men and women appreciated this attitude and were saddened to tears by his death. Moshe, who took a harsher approach, really only appealed to the men and only they cried when he died.

Aharon never ignored a person because he was a sinner. We can learn a lesson for his actions. Just saying hello to people creates a certain feeling of respect and perhaps helps them refrain from doing certain sins that they might have done otherwise. It is always important to greet everyone that we see warmly.

**וישלח ה' בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את העם וימת עם רב מישראל
"Hashem sent the fiery serpents against the people and the bit the people and a large
multitude of Israel died" (21:6)**

Why did Hashem send poisonous snakes as a punishment for the people's complaint about the man? The Akeidas Yitzchak writes that by repudiating the gift of the man, they showed that they did not appreciate the special protection that Hashem was providing for them. Upon hearing this, Hashem removed His protection from a different area in which he was protecting them. The special clouds that protected the people prevented snakes from attacking them. Now, Hashem gave the snakes back their ability to attack and kill. The only reason that they did not bite before was because Hashem stopped them. When the people were no longer appreciative of this, the protection from the snakes vanished.

Rabbi Friedman suggests that this could explain why looking at the copper snake which Hashem commanded Moshe to make would heal those who had been bitten. This cure was completely supernatural. In order to be healed, they had to submit to a supernatural protection from Hashem and understand that they were unable to survive without Him. This is why Chazal say that staring at the copper snake is not what helped them recuperate. They would look up at the snake and the gaze would be directed heavenward. They would pray to Hashem to save them. These tefillos were particularly necessary in this situation because it undid their earlier mistake which brought about the punishment.

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch proves this point based on the grammar of the posuk. The Torah uses the word "vayeshalach" rather than the more common form of "vayishlach." Rav Hirsch comments that while "vayishlach" means to send, "vayeshalach" occurs when something that was being held back is released and let it go back to its natural state (see Bereishis 8:7-8, 43:14, Shemos 13:17, 22:4). By using this word, the posuk indicates that the whole point of this punishment was that the snakes which were previously restrained by Hashem were now being let loose.

**וירא בלעם כי טוב בעיני ה' לברך את ישראל ולא הלך כפעם בפעם לקראת נחשים
וישת אל המדבר פניו**

**"Bilam saw that it was good in Hashem's eyes to bless Israel, so he did not go as every other
time toward divinations, but he set his face toward the wilderness" (24:1)**

The Midrash tells a story about a restaurant owner who served both kosher meat and pork during a time when it was forbidden by the government to sell kosher meat. In order to determine whether the customer was Jewish or not, he served bread first and would watch if the person

washed his hands and made a bracha. If a customer did so, he would serve kosher meat. If he did not, he would serve pork. Once, a Jewish customer entered and neglected to wash his hands. The owner thought that he was not a Jew and so he served him pork. When it came time to pay the bill, the customer asked why the bill was for ten when he had paid eight the previous day. The owner responded that pork cost ten. The customer was shocked and became angry at the owner and told him that he was Jewish. The owner responded that he had no way of knowing this because the customer had neglected to wash his hands.

The Midrash tells this story to illustrate the importance of every single mitzvah, no matter how unimportant we think it may be. In fact, the Midrash writes, it is this emphasis on even the smallest mitzvos that motivated Bilam to change his curses into blessings. When Bilam saw how the Jews were meticulous regarding the lesser mitzvos, he said "How can I curse this nation?" It is the care that we give to all mitzvos equally which earns us respect in the eyes of the nations. We do not only worry about the big things and ignore the mitzvos that might seem less important. We must be careful regarding every single opportunity to do a mitzvah that come our way and avoid even the smallest aveiros.

מה טבו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל

“How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your tents, O Israel” (24:5)

Why did Bilam first say Yaakov and then Yisrael? Rabbi Friedman suggests that Yaakov is the name that refers to Klal Yisrael in exile while Yisrael is the name used for the Jewish nation when it flourishes in its homeland. Bilam was saying that not only is modesty important to the people when they dwell in tents in the exile of the wilderness, but even when they are Yisrael and they live in permanent dwellings in their own land, they will still emphasize modesty and an important part of life.

כנחלים נטיו כגנת עלי נהר כאהלים נטע ה' כארזים עלי מים

“Stretching out like brooks, like gardens by a river, like aloes planted by Hashem, like cedars by water” (24:6)

Tanna Devei Eliyahu explains the comparison of the Jewish tents to a brook in the following manner: Just as people go into a body of water serving as a mikveh when they are impure and come out pure, so too, though a person may enter a shul or bais medrash full of aveiros, he exits full of mitzvos. This teaches us the importance of spending time in a shul or a bais medrash. Sitting in Hashem's house has the same ability to transform a person as mitzvos. The more time a person spends, the more mitzvos one receives. The Vilna Gaon asked: Why do we say that learning Torah is equivalent to all other mitzvos? He answers that every word of Torah that one learns or hears is a mitzva in itself. One can accomplish so many mitzvos every time he learns and that makes it equal to all other mitzvos. Learning Torah also purifies a person's mouth and power of speech. If a person feels that he has used his speech wrongly, he should learn Torah and use his power of speech for a holy purpose. Thus, the Jewish tents, a reference to their houses of study (just like Yaakov was called a "tent dweller"), have the ability to change a person just like a mikveh.

ויצמד ישראל לבעל פעור ויחר אף ה' בישראל

“Israel became attached to Baal Peor and the wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel” (25:3)

R' Chaim Shmuelevitz asks: How was it possible for the people to become so attached to a form of idolatry that was so disgraceful? The idea of Baal Peor was the break down moral boundaries. Generally, people act respectfully and in normal ways. The idea of Baal Peor was to make everything free and liberated and to take away all restrictions on human behavior. This idea was attractive because it tempts a person to believe that a life without restrictions is a life of happiness and pleasure. Serving this idol was done in a disgraceful manner, but the ideology that it represented was alluring.

Despite the fact that the desire for idolatry no longer exists today, the ideology of idolatry is still prevalent today. The concept of no limits and unrestrained hedonism is still rather popular. Baal Peor is mentioned in Parshas Va'eschanan in connection with the prohibition against adding or detracting from the mitzvos of the Torah because lesson the people learned for the tragedy with Baal Peor was that boundaries must remain intact. Once a breach is made in the fence of morality, the entire way of Jewish life becomes vulnerable. It is important to maintain appropriate restrictions and to understand that limitations are a part of leading a life of joyful service of Hashem.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
Shiur given by Rabbi Mayer Friedman
Written by Michael Gutmann