

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 decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red heifer, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come” (19:2)

Why is the law of the Parah Aduma introduced as the “decree of the Torah” rather than the “decree of the red heifer?” R’ Dovid Feinstein answers that there are parts of the Torah that do not seem to focus on the growth of the person. Despite this, studying any part of the Torah makes a person better and changes him. The Parah Aduma is the “decree of the Torah” because it cleansed people and made them pure, even though the workings behind all of its laws were unclear to them. 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 Aduma, the epitome of a mitzvah whose reasons are beyond our comprehension.

One of the requirements of the Parah Aduma is that it must never have borne a yoke. Rashi comments that the reason for this is to atone for the Jewish nation who threw off their yoke of mitzvos when they made the golden calf. R’ Dovid Feinstein elaborates that a person sins when he does not bear a yoke and has no responsibilities. If a person keeps himself busy with good things and takes responsibilities upon himself, he will have a much easier time avoiding sin because he will constantly be occupied. Being active in one’s community and getting involved in good causes is an excellent way to take responsibility upon oneself. This will not only help others but help the person himself.

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The Gemara in Kiddushin 31a relates the story of Dama ben Nesina, a gentile who owned a precious stone that was needed for the Ephod of the Kohen Gadol in the Beis HaMikdash. When the Jewish messengers came to him to purchase the stone, he found that the key to the box in which the stone was contained was under the pillow on which his father was sleeping. He told the messengers that he could not wake his father, and therefore could not sell them the stone. When they raised their purchase price, he persisted in his refusal. As a reward, a Parah Aduma was born among his cattle. When the Jewish messengers came to purchase the cow for an even larger sum of money, as it was quite valuable to them, he told them that he would only accept the same purchase price that they would have paid him for the precious stone. From this story, we can learn the importance of honoring one’s parents.

Many commentators ask: Why, of all possible rewards, did Hashem give Dama ben Nesina a Parah Aduma? The Chidushei HaRim answers that Dama’s good deed reflected badly on the Jewish people because even a non-Jew was willing to go to great lengths to do a mitzvah. Therefore, Dama ben Nesina was paid back with a Parah Aduma so that the Jews should be willing to spend a large sum of money on a mitzvah that they did not understand, while Dama’s mitzvah was something that is logical. This enabled the Jews to counteract any possible prosecution in Heaven caused by Dama ben Nesina’s good deed.

ולקח הכהן עץ ארז ואזוב ושני תולעת והשליך אל תוך שרפת הפרה

“The Kohen shall take cedar wood, hyssop and crimson thread, and he shall throw them into the burning of the cow” (19:6)

Why was the cedar combined with the hyssop in the purification process? R’ Simcha Bunim of Peshischa explains that the cedar, a tall tree, represents haughtiness while the hyssop, a low bush, represents humility. One must keep a little bit of both traits at all times, while not allowing either

one to become too forceful. One must appreciate his own importance and greatness and understand that the world was created for every one of us. However, this feeling must not evolve into arrogance, which is a very evil trait. On the other hand, one must feel humble and recognize his weaknesses, but a person should not feel that he is insignificant and should have some sense of self-worth. It is important to have a little bit of pride while balancing it with humility.

ויקהלו משה ואהרן את הקהל אל פני הסלע ויאמר להם שמעו נא המרים המן
הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים

“Moshe and Aharon gathered to congregation before the rock and he said to them, ‘Listen now, O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock” (20:10)

Rashi in Sanhedrin says that Moshe was punished because he spoke too strongly to the people when he said “Listen now, O rebels.” Maharsha points out that this seems to contradict Rashi’s explanation in this week’s parsha, where he writes that Moshe was punished for hitting the rock rather than speaking to it. He resolves the contradiction by explaining that if one is patient and forgiving of things that people do against him, Hashem is also forgiving when he sins against Hashem. Since Moshe was upset at the people for complaining and held it against them, Hashem was not forgiving toward Moshe and punished him for hitting the rock instead of speaking to it.

Hashem forgives those who forgive others. With Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur only a few months away, now is the time to work on forgiving others. If we can improve ourselves in this area now, it will be a big merit for us during the Yemei HaDin.

ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל לכן
לא תביאו את הקהל הזה אל הארץ אשר נתתי להם

“Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, ‘Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them”
(20:12)

What did Moshe and Aharon do wrong that deserved punishment? The Rashbam answers that they were unsure what Hashem meant by his command to speak to the rock. They did not know whether He actually meant to talk to it or perhaps He meant that Moshe should hit it like the last time in Refidim. They decided that Hashem meant that Moshe should hit the rock. Ultimately, they were punished for reading into Hashem's words instead of just doing what Hashem told him to do, which would have been a greater Kiddush Hashem.

Many times people read between the lines of someone's words when there is really nothing there to be read. This often leads to statements being taken out of context, which in turn causes arguments and misunderstandings that should never have begun. One should try not to look too deeply into what other people are saying and doing. By taking things more literally, we can avoid controversy and problems. This is the lesson to be learned from the punishment of Moshe and Aharon.

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Written by Michael Gutmann