

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 cow used to purify a person had to be completely red and must never have worn a yoke. R' Dovid Feinstein says that people sin because they don't 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.

The Chozeh of Lublin connects the idea of the requirement that the cow have no imperfections and the requirement that it must never have borne a yoke. He writes that it is a lesson to us that if a person feels that he has no blemish, he certainly has no yoke of Heaven. Nobody is perfect. If a person feels that he cannot improve, then he is clearly not conscious of what he is doing. There is always room to improve and always new heights to strive for. We need to be truthful with ourselves and admit where we can improve our behavior.

The Gemara in Brochos 64a says that when a guest departs, one says “go to peace,” but when a dead person is taken to his final resting place, one says “go in peace.” The Maharal explains that a living person should always be striving to become complete. He is therefore given a blessing upon his departure to continue reaching toward his goal.

Upon the departure of one who has passed on, we do not want to seem that he has not reached the level of completion in his lifetime. We therefore say “go in peace,” go now in the state of completion that you have attained.

זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל כל הבא אל האהל וכל אשר באהל יטמא שבעת ימים

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in the tent shall be impure for a seven-day period” (19:14)

Why does the posuk preface the law about "if a man dies in a tent" with the phrase "this is the Torah?" Chazal explain the connection by saying that "Torah only lasts within a person who dies for it." What does it mean that Torah only lasts when a person dies for it? We know that there are only three sins for which one has to give up his life.

The Chofetz Chaim answers this with a story. There was once a merchant who had a popular store and did quite well. As he got older, he recognized that his remaining years were limited and he had accomplished very little spiritually. He decided to focus more on his spiritual side in what little time he had left in this world. The next morning, he made sure to daven with a minyan and then spent a few hours learning after davening. When he finally arrived at the store around noon, he found many angry customers waiting for the store to open. His wife got very upset that he had abandoned the store all morning. The next day, when he failed to arrive at the store at the usual time early in the morning, his wife followed him and saw that he was spending his morning learning Torah. She confronted him and asked what would happen to the store if he planned on neglecting it every morning. They would lose customers and they would not be as successful anymore. He replied that if the angel of death would come right then, he would not wait to take his soul until the customers in the store were taken care of. He, too, had to take care of himself and his spiritual matters immediately before his time came. His spiritual pursuits were more important than the few extra dollars they would make in the morning.

The storekeeper made himself unavailable to his customers in order to learn Torah. One has to isolate himself and designate certain times for davening and learning. At those times, it should be as if he is not available to anyone. This is the meaning of Chazal. The Torah learning will stay with a person if he focuses on it for an uninterrupted period of time and does not allow anything to disturb him. Sometimes a person has to realize that he only has a finite amount of time in this world to learn, daven and do mitzvos. He can exchange a small profit for the long-term investment of Torah, which is actually both a short-term and long-term investment at the same time because one is rewarded in this world and the next. People do not generally think along these lines. When one recognizes the true value of Torah and how devoted he must be to it, then his Torah learning will be complete.

ויבאו בני ישראל כל העדה מדבר צן בחדש הראשון וישב העם בקדש ותמת שם מרים ותקבר שם

“The Children of Israel, the entire assembly, arrived at the Wilderness of Tzin in the first month and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and she was buried there” (20:1)

Why does the Torah say that Miriam died "there?" The answer is that a tzadik only dies "there," in the physical world. When a tzadik dies, he is still considered alive. His deeds live on and his lessons are still remembered and followed. A person's material possessions can only help him in this world. Spiritual achievements, on the other hand, last more than just a lifetime. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (6:7) states: "Torah is great because it provides a person with life in this world and the next world."

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)

Why was there no water? Rashi says that the well provided water in Miriam's merit and when she died, the well dried up. The Kli Yakar says that the people did not eulogize Miriam properly or grieve sufficiently. When Aharon and Moshe died, the people held a thirty-day mourning period. When Miriam died, the posuk does not mention any big commemoration. Since they did not cry, they were punished with the loss of water.

Chazal say that just as sacrifices are an atonement, the death of a tzadik is also an atonement. What does this mean? The death of a tzadik is a great tragedy. The loss of a tzadik in our midst is such a big punishment that it is an atonement for sins. In fact, the Baal HaTurim points out that the word "sham," "there," used in reference to Miriam's death, is the same numerical value as "mechapeir," "atonement." We need to recognize what a tragedy the death of a tzadik is, as well as what a blessing it is to have a tzadik among us. It is the great people that support those around them. We should try to find tzadikim and connect with them to learn from them.

This concept of the death of tzadikim as an atonement explains a puzzling occurrence later in the parsha. When Aharon ascended Hor Hahar prior to his death, he was instructed to wear the special priestly garments worn during the service in the Mishkan. However, the halacha is that a kohen may not wear these special garments outside of the Mishkan when he is not serving. How could Aharon wear them outside the Mishkan? The Shaar Bas Rabim answers that the purpose of the service in the Mishkan was to bring an atonement for the Jewish people. Similarly, Aharon's death would achieve an atonement as well. Thus, it was permitted for Aharon to wear the special garments as he was going to his death because they were serving their intended purpose, to be worn as one was bringing an atonement for the Jewish people.

R' Michel Berenbaum said that there is an important lesson to be learned from this loss of the water. They lost water because they failed to show hakaras hatov, gratitude, to Miriam for what her presence had meant to the Jewish people. This loss of water led to the episode when Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Moshe was punished for

his actions by not being allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. Chazal tell us that if Moshe had entered Eretz Yisrael, they would have immediately built the Bais HaMikdash and it would never have been destroyed. We see what terrible consequences resulted, all because the people failed to show proper appreciation for the good that someone else did for them. Without proper recognition and hakaras hatov, destruction follows. We find elsewhere that when the people failed to eulogize Shaul properly, a catastrophic famine resulted. It is important to express our gratitude for that which others do for us.

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