

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת שופטים

לא ימצא בכך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונן ומנחש ומכשף
“There shall not be found among you one who causes his son or daughter to pass through the fire, one who practices divinations, an astrologer, one who reads omens, a sorcerer” (18:10)

Kishuf is not one of the mitzvos that applies to a Ben Noach (gentile). How is this so? The Torah later says that Hashem sent the Canaanite nations out of the land for doing witchcraft. If they are not prohibited from engaging in witchcraft, how can they be punished for it?

R' Dovid Feinstein explains that it was not the kishuf itself that was their sin. It was that they used the kishuf as a stepping stone to many other terrible things such as denial of Hashem and immorality. Witchcraft gives a person a feeling of empowerment and plants the idea in his head that he can do whatever he wants. This is how it leads a person to worse sins. We see this idea from that fact that, in Parshas Acharei Mos, the Torah says that Hashem drove out the Canaanite nations because of immorality. These two reasons are not contradictory. The witchcraft led to immorality. It was because of the sins that followed as a result of the kishuf, serious sins that they were prohibited as part of their seven commandments, that they deserved to be evicted from their land.

One should recognize that there are many things in life that are not prohibited outright but easily lead a person in the wrong direction. We should be aware of where actions will take us. This is why our Sages enacted many decrees to protect the mitzvos. They forbade many activities which are actually permissible in and of themselves for fear that they would lead to worse violations. This idea is not based on a desire to be stringent, but on the very real concern that even permissible actions can lead to egregious sins, as is seen from the witchcraft of the Canaanite nations.

לא תסיג גבול רעך אשר גבלו ראשנים בנחלתך אשר תנחל בארץ אשר ה' אלקיך
נתן לך לרשתה

“You shall not move back the boundary of your fellow, which the early ones marked out, in your inheritance that you shall not inherit, in the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you to possess it” (19:14)

What is the connection between the laws regarding murder and the prohibition to infringe upon the boundaries of a neighbor? The Baal HaTurim explains that even though we the life of a murderer is forfeit, we have no right to take his money. His possessions still pass to his descendants and nobody has the right to overstep this boundary.

Rabbi Friedman suggests another answer. One of the interpretations of this commandment is that one is not allowed to interfere with another person's livelihood. The Torah instructs us to have the same concern for a person's property as we would for his life. When one causes financial harm to another person, he decreases his fellow's quality of life. This prohibition should not be treated lightly. In fact, Chazal say that a pauper is considered as if he is dead. One needs a livelihood to survive and one may not infringe upon this necessity. By juxtaposing these two sets of laws, the Torah teaches us the attitude that one should have toward other people's property.

והיה ככלת השטרים לדבר אל העם ופקדו שרי צבאות בראש העם
“When the officers have finished speaking to the people, the leaders of the legions shall take command at the head of the people” (20:9)

Ramban asks: If victory in battle is dependent only on mitzvah observance and a small but worthy army can miraculously defeat a much larger force, why do is it necessary to appoint generals if there will be a miraculous victory? He writes that Hashem generally wants to let nature run its course and not perform open miracles. The miracles will happen, but it is better that they be done disguised as regular operations. We must do what we need to do according to the natural order of the world so that we will merit these hidden blessings from Hashem. One should not be concerned because he does not see the hand of Hashem in an open fashion. Hashem is orchestrating everything that happens in this world in a natural way, behind the guise of a natural order. The world runs on a certain normalcy, even though Hashem can alter it at any moment. Understanding this idea is an important part of emunah. We believe in Hashem and that He is guiding

everything that happens around us even though we cannot see Him and are not able to clearly understand how He is behind every aspect of this world.

והורדו זקני העיר ההוא את העגלה אל נחל איתן אשר לא יעבד בו ולא יזרע וערפו
שם את העגלה בנחל

“The elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a harsh valley, which cannot be worked and cannot be sown, and they shall axe the back of its neck in the valley” (21:4)

Rashi quotes the Gemara in Sotah 46a that the procedure of beheading the calf was done in a land that had never been planted because a calf that has not produced should be killed in a location that has not produced fruits to atone for the death of a man who was not allowed the opportunity to produce fruits. The Sifsei Chachamim explains that this means that the person was unable to perform mitzvos.

Not only must the location of the procedure be one that was never planted, but it is forbidden to plant in that area ever again, even after the ceremony. This is because this tragedy is so severe that it must be remembered forever. This shows us the value that the Torah places on human life. According to the explanation of the Sifsei Chachamim, we see the value of mitzvos. The mitzvos that a person does are everlasting. If someone was robbed of the chance to do mitzvos, an everlasting remembrance must be instituted to replace them.

From this, we can learn how important every mitzvah is. We should never let the opportunity to do a mitzvah go by. We must also realize the tragedy of all the Jewish people today who do not observe the mitzvos. This sad fact should bother us to the point where we should want to help them. If being robbed of the chance to do mitzvos through death is so terrible, how much worse it must be to consciously make this choice! Many people do not know better and we should feel the desire and the responsibility to help them recognize the beauty of Torah and mitzvos and show them the path to a productive and meaningful life.

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