

# A TASTE OF THE OCEAN

by Rabbi Label Lam

- *"And G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying, this is the decree of the Torah which Hashem has commanded saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them take to you a completely red cow which is without blemish and upon which a yoke has not been placed..." (Bamidbar 19:1-2)*
- 2. *"...that which is far off and very deep, who can find it out?" (Koheles 7:23)*
- 3. *"As heaven is high from earth so are my ways from yours, and my thoughts are not your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8)*
- 4. *"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophies, Horatio." (Shakespeare-Macbeth)*

Why does the Torah enjoin us to keep Kosher? Is there a rational explanation? The answer is "yes and no"!

In this week's portion the Red Cow is exemplified as the "decree of the Torah". By definition it is riddled with contradictions and paradoxes, so much so that it was incomprehensible even to Solomon, the reputed "wisest of all men". There is in every Torah commandment and in all dimensions of life this aspect of "chok" - decrees that cannot fully be grasped. How do we deal intelligently with that which cannot be intelligently dealt with?

A few years ago, I left an evening prayer service feeling a little less fulfilled than I thought I ought to be. Instead of being intensely focused on the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, my mind was swimming with the G-d of Rush, Howard, and Dan. In a moment of zealous fervor, I decided to do a little quick surgery on my car. There, underneath the radio that had been "giving me the world" moments ago were a few exposed wires waiting to be disconnected. I gathered courage, grabbed the handful of wires and pulled with all my might, successfully disconnecting me from temptation. Then I started the car, and the radio shouted, "and now for the news" but the lights on my dashboard were blacked out. I guess fools rush in where angels dare to tread. There are things that look obvious to us but perhaps our assumptions are wrong.

Does that mean that we give up on reason? No! Many commandments have taamim- reasons, or literally-"a taste". But that's all that it is!

If we would lead a blind man to the ocean and ask him to taste it, he would give us a report based

upon that singular dimension of his experience. He would say, "wet and salty!" Would he know about the ocean what Jaques Cousteau or Lloyd Bridges knows about the ocean depths? We are as blind people in trying to fathom divine wisdom. Sometimes all we have is a taste.

What is the benefit of only tasting? Sometime we are drawn into a relationship with something or someone initially for the taste. An apple has an alluring taste and yet the Almighty we understand has brilliantly designed that experience to trick us into getting those vitamins that will keep the doctor away. Like a candy coated -pill, the child enjoys the taking of it, although the parent and doctor conspire for other reasons.

If we delay the taking of critical medicine till we have complete and total knowledge of the prescription, then by the time we finish all the required chemistry courses the medicine would have become in the meantime unnecessary and the knowledge will be too late of an acquisition.

Tasting mitzvos and trying to understand life has another benefit. If we want to know whether or not to deliver a giant refrigerator of milk to hundreds of waiting customers, do we have to test every jar of milk? No! How do we rationally and responsibly determine that we are not distributing poison milk? If there are 1000 bottles and we test 50 at random and they are deemed positive samples, would you then feel assured to distribute the other 950? I think so!

We are never celebrating the absurd by deferring to a higher mind. Once a standard of credibility has been established then we are glad not to take a risk but to leave some part of the driving of life to an intelligence beyond our own. I have a hard enough time balancing my check- book, no less to keep a tally on and run the universe.

A child's mind which is not able to extrapolate to abstract principles is limited by the immature bug of "out of sight out of mind" - "If I can't experience it then it doesn't exist." As the child gains confidence in the workings of the world he has fewer and less intense anxiety attacks when his mother goes away for a few hours. He doesn't know what she is doing or why but he knows that she always comes back and there's usually something good to eat at dinner time.

A chok is a statute like gravity. It's a spiritual reality. It doesn't matter whether you like physics or not or whether you prefer the arts, when stepping off of the balcony of the 22nd floor of the building, the sidewalk will appear to be moving at an ever increasing velocity. You don't have to try it to believe me. It's true.

Even the things in life that give us the greatest taste are like that apple or that ocean. I'm grateful that the Divine mind has given me a small degree of arithmetic logic to perceive some patterns in the tapestry of existence. As I grow in taste and reason to understand the ways of the universe, as more of the bottles of life are sampled with positive results, the more times the mother successfully returns, the more the gap of credibility is closed. More yet to be tested bottles are tolerated, and mother can stay away for even longer without the world crumbling.

If you ask me, "is there a reason why to keep kosher?" the answer is "Yes and No." There is a world of difference between irrational and trans-rational logic, between celebrating the absurd and understanding more is hidden then revealed. Not only are we not deterred we are more compelled to do and to learn to taste and to trust to taste some more.

Good Shabbos.

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