

ARE WE BETTER THAN A GNAT?

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Today's Learning:

Pesachim 3:2-3

Orach Chaim 272:9-273:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Ketubot 9

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Nazir 5

Rashi introduces this parashah with the statement that just as man was created after all of the animals, so the laws pertaining to man are discussed (in this and future parashot) after the laws of the animals (which were discussed in last week's parashah and those preceding it.)

R' Shlomo Yosef Zevin z"l (1890-1978; editor of the Encyclopedia Talmudit) notes that there are two possible reasons for why the last element in a list might hold that place. The last thing may be the "end," and everything preceding it, the means to that end. Alternatively, a thing may be the last on a list because it is incomplete without what came before.

Chazal give two reasons why man was created last in the order of creation. If man acts properly, we say to him, "The entire world was created before you so that everything would be ready for you

when you arrived on the scene." In this case, man is the "end" and all other creations are the tools which serve man.

On the other hand, if a person is not worthy, we say to him, "Even the puny gnat was created before you." In such a case we may say that man is incomplete; only if he learns humility from the gnat that came before him does he redeem and "complete" himself. (Latorah U'lemoadim)

"She shall bring a sheep within its first year for an olah- offering, and a young dove or a turtledove for a sin- offering . . ." (12:6)

"But if she cannot afford a sheep, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young doves, one for an olah-offering and one for a sin-offering[.]" (12:8)

R' Yaakov "Ba'al Ha'turim" (14th century) observes that the Torah ordinarily mentions turtledoves before doves (as in the second verse quoted above). Why is the first verse quoted above an exception?

In most cases (again, as in the second verse) a bird sacrifice consists of two birds. However, when a person brings only one bird (as in the first verse), one should preferably not bring a turtledove because that species of bird mates for life and mourns for its mate when it dies. Therefore, the turtledove is mentioned last in that verse. (On the other hand, when one brings two and this concern does not exist, one should bring turtledoves because they are bigger than doves.) (Ba'al Ha'turim, as elaborated upon in Shai La'Torah)

"Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; Your judgments are like the vast deep waters." (Tehilim 36:7)

The gemara (Erachin 8b) states that the first part of this verse refers to tzara'at which afflicts a human, while the second part refers to tzara'at which afflicts houses. Rashi (in his commentary there) explains that G-d's kindness is more evident in the former type of tzara'at than in the latter. The reason is that the period of "hesger" (the initial quarantine before a final "diagnosis" is made and a full quarantine begins) is only one week for a human but is three weeks for a house.

Is it then good that the hesger period ends and the full quarantine begins? asks R' Isaac Sher z"l (Slobodka rosh yeshiva; died 1952). Furthermore, of all the acts of kindness that Hashem does for us, why is tzara'at singled out as evidence of G-d's "righteousness [which] is like the mighty mountains"?

R' Sher answers: when a person speaks lashon hara and is stricken with tzara'at, this demonstrates two things. On the one hand, it demonstrates that Hashem loves every Jew and defends his honor. Indeed, this is why lashon hara is prohibited. Every individual is beloved to Hashem like a child, and just as a father does not approve when someone speaks ill of his child, so G-d does not approve

when someone speaks ill of His "child."

On the other hand, the fact that a person is stricken with tzara'at demonstrates Hashem's closeness to that person himself. Today, no one gets tzara'at because we no longer are close enough to Hashem that we can expect such a clear sign of His displeasure with us. It is in this sense that tzara'at is a sign of G-d's greatness and His kindness, for He lets us now when we have fallen so that we can repent. This is also why a shorter period of hesger is a greater kindness; the person to whom Hashem shows His displeasure sooner is presumably closer to Hashem. (Lekket Sichot Mussar I p. 246)

Pesach

"In every generation, one is obliged to regard himself as though he himself had actually gone out from Egypt." (From the Pesach Haggadah)

R' Avraham Shaag z"l (1801-1876; Hungary and Yerushalayim; rebbe of R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld z"l) explained in his Shabbat Hagadol derashah in 5622/1862:

One must regard himself as if he is on a continual journey out of Egypt. After all, the Exodus was supposed to be the Final Redemption, except that our ancestor's "rebelled under the chuppah," i.e., they sinned in the desert. Thus, as long as the Final Redemption has not taken place, the Exodus is not over.

In this light, says R' Shaag, we can obtain a new understanding of the wise son's question and the haggadah's answer to him. The wise son asks: "What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that Hashem our G-d has commanded you?" What do we answer him? "One may not eat anything after eating the Pesach sacrifice."

The wise son's question is as follows: Certainly the mitzvot are eternal. They will be performed even after the Final Redemption occurs and they must be relevant to that time as well. Yet, presumably, we will no longer remember the Exodus after the Final Redemption because the miracles of the Final Redemption will far surpass the miracles of the Exodus. (Precisely this issue is discussed earlier in the haggadah in the paragraph beginning "Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said . . .") What role does the Korban Pesach play in the future?

We answer him: One may not eat anything after eating the Pesach sacrifice. Rather, halachah requires us to eat the Korban Pesach after the meal, when we are satiated. This symbolizes that the Exodus, which the Pesach sacrifice represents, will not be complete until we are satiated with the miracles of the Final Redemption. (Derashot Ha'rash)

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim Ch. 2) states that the ideal maror is the vegetable known as

"chazeret." Just as the chazeret starts out sweet but becomes bitter as it grows, so it was for our ancestors in Egypt. First it says (Bereishit 47:6), "In the best part of Egypt settle your father and your brothers." Later it says (Shemot 1:14), "They embittered their lives . . ."

Why is it important to recall this aspect of our stay in Egypt? asks R' Eliyahu Hakohen z"l (the "Shevet Mussar"; Izmir, Turkey; died 1729). He answers that one's gratitude at being rescued from suffering is significantly greater if he once knew wealth and happiness than if he had suffered all his life. To remind ourselves of what we once had, we use chazeret for maror.

With this in mind, we can understand a perplexing verse in Eichah (1:11): "Look, Hashem, and behold what a glutton I was." Is this a reason why Hashem should redeem us? Yes, answers R' Eliyahu, for it makes our suffering in exile that much more painful. (Aggadat Eliyahu: Pesachim)

A Pesach Parable

We say in the Haggadah: "If He had drowned our oppressors in [the Sea], but had not provided for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years, it would have sufficed for us." Nevertheless, says R' Abdallah Somech z"l (1813-1889; Baghdad; teacher of the "Ben Ish Chai"), the fact that Hashem did provide for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years demonstrates His intentions in redeeming us from Egypt. He explains:

Once a nobleman's son was kidnapped by a duke and held hostage in the dungeon of the latter's manor. The king sent the duke a warning to release the boy, but the duke refused. Moreover, the duke sent a belligerent message back to the king.

The king was incensed and he sent a battalion of troops to destroy the duke's home and free the nobleman's son. And so it was. People wondered, however, "Did the king do this because he was concerned about his friend's son or because he was angry at the duke?" How could they tell? If the king's troops destroyed the duke's house and left the former prisoner on his own, then it would be apparent that the king's primary concern was the duke's disrespect. On the other hand, if the king's soldiers carried the boy home triumphantly and also brought him to the king's palace, then all would know that the king was interested in the boy's welfare.

When Hashem first sent Moshe to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded, "Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice?" As Chazal understand it, Pharaoh was asking, "Why hasn't Hashem sent me gifts like other foreign kings do?"

Later, when Hashem brought about the ten plagues, one could legitimately wonder whether Hashem's true motivation was Pharaoh's disrespect or the welfare of the Jewish people. However, the fact that Hashem did provide for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years demonstrates that His real interest was Bnei Yisrael. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Sha'arei Armon p. 129)

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