

THE POINT OF NO DISCERN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Contradiction: a condition in which things tend to be contrary to each other;

Paradox: a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may actually be true in fact. (Webster's Dictionary)

We live in world full of both, contradictions and paradoxes, and sometimes, it can be hard to tell the difference between the two. Take the age of the world, for example. Science and Carbon-Dating places the age of the universe at billions of years old. Torah, on the other hand, states explicitly that the creation of the physical universe as we know it began five days prior to the day Adam was first created, 5,757 (and a half) years ago.

A contradiction?

Perhaps, for many, it is. However, for many of those many who have since checked into the contradiction, it has since been upgraded to the level of paradox. In other words, yes, Carbon-Dating may be accurate in its measure of the age of the earth ... But the Torah is also accurate in its description of creation, and its accounting of the years. If that is the case, then how can the world, which is billions of years old **also** be 5,757 plus years old?

The Talmud supplies the missing fact (long before Carbon-Dating was discovered): creation did not evolve over a long period of time, but after the first five days it already existed as if it had. Like in the case with many paradoxes, one simple (but often previously unknown) piece of information can resolve the seemingly contradictory ideas. (In the book, **Genesis and the Big Bang**, Professor Gerald Schroeder offers his own scientific theory to resolve this paradox).

Another example of a paradox: right now, it is both day and night. "How can that be?" you may be thinking to yourself. Allow me to explain myself. Right now, as I write this, it is daytime in Eretz Yisroel, and nighttime in North America!

What makes a paradox a paradox is usually an incorrect assumption. For example, in the case of the age of the world, the assumption was that creation could only take its form after an extremely long period of time. Tree rings since creation have grown over generations. Continental drift has gradually been changing the shape of the world, very, **very** slowly. Rock formations have resulted from

glaciers that have **long** since receded. And fossil fuels result over millennia, from creatures long since dead.

Has it not always been this way?

According to the Talmud, **No!** The first five days of creation were different, which is one of the reasons why the Jewish calendar begins from the sixth day of creation, the day on which man was created. It is not possible or accurate to apply the same rules of Day Six to the first five days of creation. (The truth is, even for Adam and Chava, at least before the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the natural world had been far more miraculous than it is today.)

Of all the paradoxes in the history of creation, perhaps one of the greatest is the paradox of the Red Heifer discussed in this week's parsha. Without going into all the details of the process (which are spoken about in the parsha itself), the waters of the Red Heifer were used as part of a spiritual purification process for those who had been in close contact with the dead. The paradox: the kohen who sprinkled the waters on the impure person himself became spiritually defiled in the process! It was like two people washing from the same basin, one of whom became cleansed while the other one became dirty. How can that be? Even Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest man in all of history had to admit,

"The wisdom is distant from me (Hebrew: hi rechoka)." (Koheles 7:23)

'The wisdom is distant from me (hi rechoka)' ... In gematria it is equal to para aduma (Red Heifer).' (Rabbeinu Bachaye)

This type of mitzvah is called a "chok," or, a "statute." And, as Rashi states at the beginning of the parsha, chukim are mitzvos whose logic the non-Jews, and even our own yetzer haras question. We human beings like to know **what** we're doing, and **why** were doing it, and what effect it is supposed to have. If we can't know that, then the mitzvos makes no sense to us, and we lose our motivation to perform them. How much more so is this the case when it seems like mitzvos contradict what we consider to be logical.

However, what the para aduma teaches us is that today's contradiction is tomorrow's paradox (could it be that the word "paradox" is a latinized version of para-aduma?). And who knows, the day after that, we may discover the faulty assumption that prevented us from seeing the Divine logic in the mitzvah, which, in time, is always revealed. The truth is, what is often contradiction and paradox to many is quite understandable in the world of Kabbalah, the esoteric aspect of Torah learning. The name of the game is patience in researching the idea to its ultimate conclusion. This is what Shlomo HaMelech also wrote:

If you want it like money and pursue it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d-G-d's wisdom you will find. (Mishlei 2:4)

You have to be willing to go the distance in search of truth, knowing and believing that:

"The people who walk in darkness see the Great Light." (Yishiyahu 9:1)

That doesn't mean it will all make sense today. It doesn't mean that the **inner truth** of every aspect of Torah can be discerned now. However, one day it will, and when it does, the ecstasy of knowing such a high level of Divine logic will make getting there more than worthwhile. In the meantime, we Jews have taken such "loose threads" as a matter of faith, which, perhaps, is one of the very reasons why some of that Divine logic will remain elusive for some time to come.

Shabbos Day:

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people again demand water. The special well that had followed them throughout their forty years in the desert, miraculously supplying delicious water on demand, dried up. But why here? Why now?

Rashi answers this question by pointing out that just before the incident with the well, Miriam the prophetess died. Hence, the well had dried up then to indicate that the water had been in her merit. Just as the munn fell from heaven in the merit of Moshe, and the Clouds of Glory enveloped the Jewish people in the merit of Aharon, the life-giving water came in Miriam's merit. The only question is, what had been her merit?

It is amazing how at every major turning point in Jewish history, there has been a woman who helped us make that turn successfully. Sarah forced the issue of turning Yishmael out, saving Yitzchak's life, and the future of the Jewish people. It was Rivkah who guided Ya'akov to take the all-important blessings from his father Yitzchak, who had wanted to bless Eisav instead. Rachel and Leah were the ones responsible for whom Ya'akov married first. There are countless others like these women.

What did Miriam do?

Had it not been for Miriam, it seems from the midrash, we would never have left Egypt. It was the young Miriam, the Talmud explains, who convinced her father to have more children, in spite of Paroah's evil to decree to kill the firstborn. Because of her advice, Amram and Yocheved gave birth to their third and last child: Moshe.

It was Miriam who watched from the bulrushes as the baby Moshe sailed in the Nile river to escape

the decree of Paroah, watching to see what would happen to her special brother. And it was Miriam who had suggested, after Moshe refused to nurse from an Egyptian wet-nurse, that a Jewish woman be brought (Moshe's mother) to nurse him.

So what? Wouldn't any sister do the same for her baby brother? Why would this be the merit to be the source of life-saving water in the desert.

The answer is, Miriam had acted not as a sister only, but on behalf of the **entire** Jewish people. She knew that a redeemer was imminent, and saw in Moshe the future hope of the Jewish people. She had not merely looked out after the welfare of her brother; she had been looking out after the future redeemer of the Jewish people. And for being this concerned about the **entire** nation, she earned the merit to supply that people with life-saving water.

Seudos Shlishi:

If the Torah had not said anything, we would have barely raised an eyebrow. So Moshe hit the rock! Did water burst forth? **Yes!** Had it not been a great miracle? **Yes!** Had the people not been duly impressed! **For sure!** So why did G-d see fit to punish Moshe and Aharon his brother so severely, denying them the chance to enter the land of their love?

Rashi says that this is an example of how strict G-d can be with those whom He relies upon to act on His behalf. Knowing what they do, being as important in the eyes of others as they usually are, tzadikim are held up to a different measuring stick.

However, there is another angle to the discussion. As the Torah points out, and the Talmud echoes, Eretz Yisroel is a unique land, where even the air makes one wise (if they're look for wisdom!). Whereas, in every other land of the world the rain falls for "natural" reasons, in Eretz Yisroel, it falls as a matter of Divine Providence. Eretz Yisroel is like G-d's special garden, which He personally tends to daily with love and concern.

Anyone who lives here knows of the countless miracles that occur, some more obvious than others. Sometimes, even the disbelieving have little choice but to say, "It was the hand of G-d!" Natural methods don't work here so well, but not necessarily because Israelis don't know how to apply American acumen, but because, most the time, it is not relevant to do so!

It was true that hitting the rock and bringing forth water was a great miracle. However, it is a miracle that pales compared to bringing forth water from merely **speaking** to the rock-the level of spiritual existence expected of the Jewish people once they entered the land. However, the people could have asked themselves, "If Moshe had to **physically** bring about miracles, how could **we** be expected to act differently after settle on the land?"

To nip that philosophy in the bud, Moshe and Aharon were denied access to the land. It was if to say: just as this miracle was supposed to have been achieved through purely **spiritual** means (speaking), so too must you, when you settle on the land, try to live a purely spiritual existences, minimizing your dependence on natural means to maintain physical survival. The grave punishment of the two greatest leaders mankind has ever known certainly left a very lasting impression on the Jewish national psyche-then and **now** as well.

Have a great Shabbos,

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