

IT IS ALL IN GOD'S HANDS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the statute of the law which God has commanded, saying: "Speak to the Children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer ... (Bamidbar 19:1-2)

This is not the place of the Parah Adumah. Historically, the Jewish people were required to be sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer before even preparing and eating their Pesach offerings, back in Egypt. And, the Torah didn't push off this parshah until now because it simply had better things to discuss. It is here because this is where it belongs, conceptually-speaking.

The first explanation offered by the Talmud is that it was placed in close proximity to the death of the Miriam. This way we learn that just as sacrifices atone for the sins of the generation, so too do the deaths of righteous people atone for the generation, as they themselves were offered before God on behalf of the nation. But, that could have been taught by speaking of any other sacrifice here, or by speaking about it in close proximity to the death of another righteous person instead, such as Aharon HaKohen or even Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

So why the Red Heifer, and the death of Miriam specifically?

The Parah Adumah is the one mitzvah that best represents the idea of chok—statute—mitzvos that defy human reason. Also, there was something about the death of the righteous Miriam that was very chok-like. Hence, aside from the atonement-like quality of the death of Miriam, there is another very profound message to be learned as well, once we recall just who Miriam was, historically.

The redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt was inevitable. Nevertheless, Miriam played a major role in it. For some reason, she had the merit to be the redeemer of the redeemer. For, as the Talmud cites, it was Miriam who convinced her father, Amram, to remarry his wife, Yocheved, and take the chance of having a baby boy born in hostile Egypt.

When the baby Moshe was born, and panic ensued, it was Miriam's voice of calm that prevailed, when she predicted that Amram's new son would eventually lead the people out of Egyptian bondage (Sotah 13a). And, even when it looked that Moshe might be thrown into the river to drown like the other Jewish male babies, and Amram despaired, it was Miriam who kept the faith and knew that somehow, even against great odds, Moshe would survive and prevail to fulfill his destiny as the redeemer of the Jewish people.

Hence, it was Miriam, at great risk, who spied on Baby Moshe as he floated on the Nile river in a waterproof basket, waiting to see, with perfect faith, how God would arrange his salvation and rise to greatness. That is why she was there, at exactly the right moment when Basya found Moshe in the reeds, something that had not been necessarily simple or wise to do while in Egypt at that time as a Jewish slave.

But, because she was, she was able to arrange for the reunification of mother and baby in safer circumstances, in the very palace of the enemy. Because of Miriam's belief in God and His promise of redemption, she merited to become an integral part of it, and eventually, identified with the very well of water that was miraculously keeping the Jewish nation alive in the desert. She was a true heroine of the Jewish people.

If so, then why did she die in the desert? Being the super hero that she was of the Jewish people, why did she not merit to enter Eretz Yisroel with the rest of the women, including Basya, Pharaoh's daughter who became Moshe Rabbeinu's surrogate mother? If anyone deserved to witness the settling of Eretz Canaan by the Jewish people, it was Miriam.

So why didn't she? Miriam certainly had not participated in the sin of the golden calf, and you can be sure that when the Spies called for a return to Egypt, Miriam was at the forefront fighting for pushing forward towards the Promised Land. Her biggest sin seems to have been that she had been overly concerned about Tzipporah, Moshe's wife, and that certainly was no reason to die in the desert instead.

The answer to the question? It's a chok, a Divine decree. Yes, according to human logic, Miriam should have been from those who walked and lived on the land of our Forefathers. However, by Divine calculation, it was better for Miriam, and the future of the Jewish people, that she die there, in the desert, at that time, allowing her to atone for the sins of her people, just as the deaths of all righteous people do.

In essence, it is the issue of tzaddik v'rah lo—righteous people to whom bad things occur, the classic all-time question (until our generation, which has now been replaced with a more pressing question, "How do you get this gadget to work properly?"). It is the question that Moshe Rabbeinu himself asked as of God when he thought he found a favorable moment on top of Mt. Sinai (Brochos 7a). And, of course, it is the basis of the story of Iyov—the Book of Job.

However, is such an issue really a chok? In everyday life, yes, perhaps, but not in the realm of Sod, or Kabbalah. For example, in the work Sha'ar HaGilgulim—the Gate of Reincarnation—it explains in many places various difference reasons that determine the length of one's life, depending upon the source of one's soul, regardless of sin or circumstance. Judgment is always very specific, and quite precise, and there is no such thing as an accident.

But what about tragedy? From our perspective, there certainly seems to be something called tragedy, because, unfortunately, we use the word often. Indeed, just last week, a young man of 23

suddenly died in his home as he prepared to enter his second son into the Covenant of Avraham Avinu. As a result, the Bris had to be postponed a couple of hours as the young father was buried instead, after which the Bris took place and the name of the father was given to the new born son.

And, that is but one of many stories that seem to be happening all around the world. Good people suffering. Good people taken from the world with little or no warning. Even if the medical reasons can be found and the death physically explained, the questions remain: Why this person? Why now? Why this way?

The Talmud says that one of the things that are denied to human beings is the time of one's death, for obvious reasons. So, not knowing the day of our death, we assume that, just as most people live a relatively long life, we will too. And, until illness hits, God forbid, we assume that we are immune, at least to the more serious forms of sickness.

But, a man's day of death is certainly known to God, and if everything is a function of Hashgochah Pratis, then so is the illness that does or does not affect him. And, a fundamental of Torah thought is that our free-will choices, or lack of them, can certainly have an impact on both, creating what seems to be a philosophical contradiction.

It's like this. When times are good, spiritually-speaking, and man deserves a close relationship with God, then we become more privy to God's plans for Creation. Not only that, but when people die, they do so in a way that may not be easy for us, but at least in a way that our minds can accept. The randomness in death seems to disappear.

However, when times are not spiritually good, and man acts towards God as if He really isn't involved in the affairs of men, then He will act in the affairs of men in a way that makes it look as if He is not acting in the affairs of men, making natural death seem untimely and random. That's when tragedy becomes a familiar term.

For example, it may be time for 50 people to die at or around a particular moment. In better times when God does not hide His hand so much, each person may die far away from each other, and their deaths will never be connected. It will be sad, death usually is, but tolerable, because the death of a single person in relatively normal circumstances is something our minds can usually handle.

However, during times of hester panim, when God hides His providence more, those 50 people may find themselves on a freeway, one they might not normally travel, or not normally travel at that time, when some driver causes a 100-car collision, God forbid, causing each of those 50 people to die in what seems like a reckless, random, and tragic occurrence. It will seem as if had they only not taken the freeway that day, they would have lived another one.

Which, of course, is not true. There is no cheating death, and if a person seems to have done so, it's only because he was meant to come close to death but not to die. You can be sure that when a person's precise moment to leave this world comes, he will not be able to circumvent it, no matter

how many fail-safe systems he has created to protect himself from doing so.

What we can affect is how we die, and therefore, perhaps, how our deaths will affect the world around us. We want to be missed, but we do not want people to grieve too much, nor be shocked by our passing. We are obviously not talking about Neshikah, the Divine Kiss by which Miriam's soul was taken in this week's parshah, but at least as less a tragic a death as possible, hopefully after a long life, but at least in as logical a way as possible.

It is true, the death of 23-year old Charedi man who died suddenly before the Bris of his new son was shocking, and seemingly tragic. But, had he died in a car accident, God forbid, that would have been far worse. Instead, because he died preparing for such a holy act, the grieving family could at least see his death as a very special event, even calling him a Korban Tzibbur—a public sacrifice brought on behalf of the community.

It has to be true. But, regardless, whatever the case may be, this week's parshah reminds us that death is in the hands of God, Whose calculations go way beyond our understanding of reality and history, and that, no matter how people are taken from this world, or when, it is never random, and always, ultimately, for the good of the person, and the world.

Text

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