A LIGHT ONTO THE NATIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Golden Calf vs. the Red Heifer

This week is a double portion, and even though Pekudai is written in smaller print above, it is not to indicate that it is less important than any of the other parshios. It was a Graphics decision.

These are also the last two parshios of Sefer Shemos, so, Chazak! It is hard to believe, but we have already finished two books of the Torah, and are about to begin Sefer Vayikra, which means Pesach is not too far behind, b"H. But I'm sure you were already well aware of that, especially now that Purim is behind us.

The Mishkan is a good lead-in to Pesach, just as is the mitzvah of Shabbos, both of which are discussed in this week's parshios. They come to help us achieve the same thing that we make on the first night of Pesach: seder, or order. There is very little that is more orderly than the Mishkan was, both with respect to its construction and to the service that performed in it. Shabbos is all about creating and maintaining order in Creation.

History is the ongoing movement between two points of a very specific continuum. At one end is tohu—chaos, and all the destruction to which it leads, and at the other end is seder, and all of the positive realities in which it results. With free-will, we can choose the direction we wish to take, towards chaos or towards order, and with Divine help, we achieve the latter.

Creation began at the tohu end of the continuum, as the Torah states:

The earth was tohu—null—and void, and there was darkness upon the face of the deep. (Bereishis 1:2)

Though the English translation of tohu is usually null, it refers to pre-Creation chaos out of which God made everything in Creation. First God created light, which dispelled much of the darkness, and therefore, the chaos. And, with each subsequent act of Divine creating, more chaos was banished from Creation until a small amount remained for man to finish off.

As history testifies, however, Adam HaRishon not rid Creation of the remaining tohu (which would ushered in the Messianic Era). Rather, instead, by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil without permission, he undid much of what God had already rectified.

Since then, we have been doing whatever we can to remove the chaos from Creation, but clearly it has been an uphill battle. Given all the wars, destruction, and evil perpetrated over the millennia, it would appear that man has never gotten a handle on the situation, but instead, has been a victim of it.

This is why a nation had to be created that could be a light unto the nations, and the Torah had to be given for them to fight back tohu, as the Talmud states:

And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day—HEH-Shin-Shin-Yud. (Bereishis 1:31)

The letter Heh (preceding the word shishi—sixth) is extra . . . to say that God made a condition with them (Creation): "If the Jewish people accept the Five Books of the Torah, then it is good; if not, then you will resort back to null and void." (Shabbos 88a)

This is the role of the Jewish people in history, to be a light unto the nations of the world and to dispel the darkness and chaos from Creation. And, if we don't live up to our responsibility, then no one will do it for us. As much as the Western world considers the Greeks to be a source of light, in the end, their way of life has often resulted in just the opposite. Indeed, some of the worst wars have been waged by their descendants.

To yearly remind us of our God-given mission, and that the Jewish people were miraculously redeemed from Egypt specifically for this purpose, we make a seder every Pesach. As if to emphasize the need for seder, we go so far as to sing the table of contents of the Haggadah.

The rest of the year, though, to create and maintain seder, we learn Torah and perform mitzvos. But how does this help accomplish this holy goal?

It's like driving a car. Each car is made a certain way, and the more expensive the car, the better designed it will be. As a result, part of maintaining the car is not just taking it in for regular service checks, but also driving it as per the manufacturer's instructions. There are rules of the road for each car, worked out by the manufacturer, which should be followed to ensure a longer life and higher level of performance for the car.

Likewise, Creation was made a certain way, according to certain rules and principles. It is relatively user-friendly, but if it is not used according to the Manufacturer's Manual—Torah—then Creation, like any "vehicle" that is abused, starts to break down and can even become dangerous to "drive." Learning Torah and keeping the mitzvos make that we have a smooth ride through history.

Shabbos itself is built-in Creation appreciation time. It is an opportunity to reflect on what God created and has given to man. It is the day when we abstain from certain creative activities, derived from the building of the Mishkan, and take stock of where we are holding with respect to banishing the tohu from Creation. Without Shabbos, man loses touch with Creation, becomes desensitized to its needs, and eventually, destroys it.

The Mishkan was a special opportunity to experience, on some level, Divine order. For, as the Nazis, ysv"z, proved with the Holocaust, not all order is good for man or Creation. Some order can have the exact opposite impact, as was the case with the Holocaust that eliminated 6,000,000 "lights" from the universe of man.

Thus we start our Seder with Kiddush, and then move on to Urchatz, the ritual washing of our hands. This is to remind us that, unless seder results in holiness and purity, it is not Divine seder. Seder should facilitate holiness and spiritual purity, as was the case in the Mishkan, and make it possible for the Divine Presence to dwell amongst us.

This is also another way to look at the fundamental difference between the golden calf and the red heifer, both of which were the subject of last week's parshah and maftir. The first thing the Erev Rav did after making the golden calf was act licentiously, or more accurately, chaotically. The golden calf represented the worship of tohu, because it makes life random and man, free of moral responsibility.

The red heifer, on the other hand, represented the exact opposite. It was a sobering look at life, being red like blood and grown up and mature. It symbolized a commitment to moral behavior, and the responsibility of banishing chaos and restoring order.

We no longer have a red heifer today, but unfortunately, we do have plenty of golden calves, in various different forms. And, as society continues to break through boundaries set by the Torah, even the most sacred of boundaries, chaos leaks back into Creation and wreaks havoc. Destruction? We haven't even seen the half of it yet.

Never before has history needed a light amongst the nations. As we sit down to make a seder, we should renew our commitments to make seder. Hopefully there is still enough time to turn the tide on chaos, before it turns the tide on us.

Text

Copyright © by Rabbi Pinchas Winston and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's online book store for more details! www.thirtysix.org