

SPECULATIONS ON THE RED COW

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape 152, Halachic Considerations of Transplanted Organs. Good Shabbos!

Why Not Speculate on The Reason for Para Adumah?

In this week's Parsha we have the quintessential "chok," the law of the Red Heifer, whose reason is totally beyond our comprehension. The wise King Solomon said about this law "... I thought I would understand it (after penetrating analysis); but I see that it (grasp of its inner meaning) is far removed from me". [Koheles 7:23]

It is the style of the Sefer HaChinuch (and indeed one of the major purposes of the work) to explain the reason behind each of the 613 commandments. In this week's Parsha, when he reaches the law of Para Adumah, he writes, "I am afraid to explain the reason for this command..." If King Solomon concluded that the command was beyond his comprehension, the author of the Sefer HaChinuch feels he has no right to attempt to offer an explanation of his own.

Rav Yakov Kaminetzky makes a very interesting point. We know very well that whenever we attempt to give a reason for a command, we are not offering **the** definitive reason. We do not change practical halacha based on any reasons offered to explain a command.

In other words, if we would say the reason for a certain Mitzvah is such and such, and if in a given set of circumstances this reason does not apply, we would not in any way, shape or form, change our practice of the Mitzvah. Ultimately, if the Torah says to do a Mitzvah, we do it regardless of the reason.

This in fact, Rav Yakov says, is the point at issue in the Talmudic dispute of whether we expound on the reason behind a verse (darshinan ta'ama dikra) or not. Rav Shimon holds we do think about the reason behind a mitzvah (in defining its scope and parameters) and the Sages hold that we do not think about the reason behind a mitzvah. We rule like the Sages in this dispute.

Even the Sages agree that it is permitted and advisable to try to understand the theory behind

various commandments. The whole point at issue between them is whether we draw practical conclusions based on those reasons.

For example the Torah tells us not to take (as a pledge of security on a loan) an article of clothing from a widow [Devarim 24:17]. Rav Shimon argues that the reason for this is that we can assume that the widow is poor and desperately needs this article of clothing. Since he holds "darshinan ta'ama dikra," he rules that in the case of a rich widow, that this law would not apply. [Sanhedrin 21a]

We follow the Sages' opinion that even though we can speculate about the reason for a command, we will never change any practice based on the applicability or inapplicability of the apparent underlying reason for the command.

Based on this, Rav Yakov can not understand why the Sefer HaChinuch would shy away from attempting to give an explanation for Para Adumah. Why not speculate about the reason? Practically, nothing will change, regardless of the explanation. What would the Sefer HaChinuch lose by trying to give us an insight into the reason for this Mitzvah?

Speculation on Reasons Would Undermine the Reason for Para Aduma

Rav Yakov answers that to do this would defeat the whole purpose of Para Aduma. The whole purpose of this Mitzvah is to educate us that we must keep the Mitzvos even though we **don't** understand them. Ultimately, all Mitzvos have to be 'Chukim.'

When push comes to shove, we keep the Mitzvos for only one reason: Because G-d tells us to keep them. Whether we understand them or not, whether we think they make sense or not, is all academic. The Mitzvah of Parah Aduma is the paradigm (the Binyan Av) -- the classic case which tells us about all other mitzvos.

Even though it makes no sense to us, and even though there is such an inherent paradox in the intricacies of its laws (e.g. -- it makes pure the impure and makes impure the pure), that itself is the whole point of the Mitzvah -- to teach us that we must keep the commandments, no matter what.

Many of the Torah commentaries take note of the expression, "This is the Law of the Torah" (Zos Chukas HaTorah). They ask, would it not be more appropriate to begin "This is the Law of Impurity" (Zos Chukas HaTumah) or "This is the Law of Purity" (Zos Chukas HaTahara). Why the more general "Zos Chuakas HaTorah?"

The answer is that this is precisely the point. We are dealing with a reflection on the essential nature of all the laws of the Torah. We have to be able and willing to do the Mitzvos, simply because G-d commands it, even though we may not understand.

Therefore, Rav Yakov says that for the Sefer HaChinuch to delve into and speculate the reason

behind Para Adumah, would be defeating its very purpose.

Rav Yosef Shaul Natanson has a different interpretation than all other commentaries, regarding the statement of our Sages that refers the previously quoted verse from Koheles to Para Aduma.

Every one learns that in the expression "v'hi rechoka mimeni" (and It is distant from me) the word "v'hi" (and It) refers to the Para Aduma. The Shoel U'Meishiv however interprets that the word "v'hi" refers to the entire Torah.

He learns the interpretation as follows: After I saw that I could not comprehend the reason for Para Adumah, I saw that the reason of **everything in the Torah** was entirely beyond me. One may think he understands Torah, but Para Adumah shows him, to the contrary, that he does not.

"How Great Are the Words of Our Rabbis"

The Vilna Gaon says a beautiful insight. The Mishnah states that on Friday night, a person should not read by candlelight [Shabbos 1:3]. In a subsequent Braisa in the Gemara, we find the reason for the Mishnaic prohibition "lest he come to tip the candle (to adjust the light emanating from the wick) and come to extinguish it." The Talmud says that when Rav Yishmael heard the reason of the Braita he said, "I can learn by the light of a candle Friday night and will be careful not to touch it."

The Talmud then records an incident that Rav Yishmael read by the light of a candle Friday night. He forgot it was Shabbos. He began fooling around with the wick and extinguished the candle. He then concluded, "How great are the words of our Sages, who taught that one should not read by candle light" [Shabbos 12b].

The simple reading of this Gemara is that Rav Yishmael is saying, "How wise were the Rabbis to anticipate that someone might absent-mindedly extinguish a candle when reading by candlelight. I didn't think this would happen so I read by candlelight, and I came to sin."

The Vilna Gaon, however, understands that when Rav Yishmael said, "How great are the words of our Sages, who taught that one should not read by candlelight," he is referring to the Mishnah. He was specifically praising the Rabbis of the Mishnah for making a blanket statement that one should not read by candlelight without giving a reason (as opposed to the Rabbis of the Braisa who did give a reason). He was praising the insight of the Rabbis who knew that one should not tell people not to do something **because**... Once one says **because**, half the battle is already lost. All the reasons in the world will emerge, why the '**because**' does not apply to specific people or specific cases. According to the Gaon, the reference (How great...) is to the language of the Mishnah, not to the decree itself.

When reasons are given, the door to excuses is opened. This is the lesson of Para Adumah. "This is the Law of the Torah." It is a Law that relates not only to purity and impurity, and not only to the Para Aduma. This is what it means to be a Jew. Ultimately, I must keep the Torah whether I understand it

or not.

Para Aduma Was Needed In Marah

Rav Yakov concludes by quoting the teaching of our Rabbis that the Jewish people were commanded 10 laws at Marah, even prior to receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai. One of the Mitzvos (according to some opinions) was Para Aduma.

It is easy to understand G-d commanding Mitzvos such as Shabbos and respect for parents at Marah. These are such basic commands that they could not wait the seven weeks until Mt. Sinai and had to be given immediately at Marah.

But why would they need Para Aduma in Mara? They didn't even have a Mishkan yet. One can not make a Para Aduma without the Ohel Moed. So why would Para Aduma need to be taught so prematurely?

Rav Yakov explains, beautifully: Marah was the prelude to Kabbalas HaTorah. He gave them the Mitzvah of Para Aduma because this is what it is all about. Even though they could not yet physically make a Para Aduma, they had to have the concept of "This is the Chok of the Torah" before it all started, because that is what Torah is all about.

A Southern Bubbe is 'Mechaven' to a Steipler

Later in the Parsha, the verse says, "This is the law (Torah), when a person dies in a tent..." [Bamidbar 19:14]. There is a famous teaching of our Sages regarding this verse: "Torah does not become established within a person, unless he is prepared to die for the Torah" [Berachos 63b]. In order to become accomplished in Torah learning, a person must make sacrifices for Torah.

Even though it is important and is something we should all be aware of, I am not going to elaborate on how the great people of previous generations, who endured great personal sacrifice (mesiras nefesh) to learn Torah, knew what it means to "kill oneself for Torah." However, I do want to read an excerpt from a volume entitled "Peninei Rabbeinu HaKehillas Yakov." This is a book published by someone who was close to the Steipler Rav, and who recorded incidents that he personally witnessed involving the Steipler.

As we all know, if there was anyone in our generation who fulfilled the idea of "killing oneself for the opportunity to learn Torah," it was the Steipler Rav. Not only was the Steipler a great Gaon, a genius, he was an amazing Masmid, one who studied constantly.

The author quotes a letter written by the Steipler to a Yeshiva student, who asked him for advice as to which Yeshiva to attend and for a blessing that he be successful in learning:

"I give you a blessing that you should be successful in your learning. However you must know that becoming a Gadol B'Torah does not come from blessings. There is only one way (eitzah achas) to accomplish success in learning -- is to distance oneself from wasting time (batalah) and to save every moment (for Torah learning). Also, there is no difference which Yeshiva you attend. The Yeshiva does not determine the success of the student; only his diligence determines the success. If you learn with intensity, you will succeed in Torah, wherever you are. If you waste your time, the great fame of the Yeshiva you choose will not help you become a Talmid Chochom."

There are no shortcuts. The only way to achieve greatness in learning is not to waste time. It is not the place that makes the difference; it is the person himself. One does not become a bigger Lamdan because of the "name brand recognition" of the Yeshiva he attends.

I was recently in Memphis. An elderly woman came over to me and asked, "What can you do with the Yeshiva guys today? My grandson tells me, 'I cannot learn over here because the Rebbe is no good and the chavrusa is not good, and that is not good...' Why are they always making up excuses? Why do we try to hand Torah to everyone on a silver platter? If it is not a silver platter, but only a bronze platter, it is 'no good.' Everything has to be easy today. If it is not easy then it becomes 'the Rebbe's fault, the Yeshiva's fault, the chavrusa's fault, it's everybody else's fault!' What can we do about this attitude?"

I was amazed that here this 'Southern Bubbe,' complete with a Southern accent, is hitting the nail right on the head! As the Steipler said, "It is not the Yeshiva that determines success, it is the student." To be successful in learning there is only one simple way -- sit down and do it. Plug away - hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month -- without wasting time. Put in the time and get somewhere. If one does not put in the time, neither the Yeshiva nor the Rebbe will matter.

"Ain Hadavar talui ela bi" (The matter is dependant only upon myself) [Yevamos 78b; Avodah Zarah 17a].

Personalities & Sources:

Sefer HaChinuch -- The Book of Education, a catalog of the 613 commandments, organized in the order of the weekly Torah portions. Published by Rav Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona in 13th century Spain.

Rav Yakov Kaminetzky -- (1891-1986), Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Torah V'Daas; New York City.

R. Yosef Shaul Natanson -- (1810-1875); author of classic responsa Sho'el U'Maishiv; Av Beis Din of Levov (Lemberg).

Vilna Gaon -- Rav Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman of Vilna (1720-1797), Vilna; Torah Genius; author of numerous scholarly works and commentaries.

Steipler Gaon -- Rav Yaakov Yisroel Kaniefsky (1899-1985); author of Chidushei Torah on numerous tractates called Kehillas Ya'akov; Bnei Brak.

Glossary

chok -- a command whose reason is not apparent to us.

Para Adumah -- Red Heifer

Kibbud Av V'Em -- Honoring Father and Mother

Mishkan -- Tabernacle (in which the laws of the Red Heifer were first made relevant)

Ohel Moed -- Tent of Meeting

Kabbalas HaTorah -- Receipt of the Torah

Mechaven -- comes up with the same idea as an earlier source (without having seen or heard of the original source)

Gaon -- Genius

Masmid -- Dilligent Student (always engaged in study)

Gadol B'Torah -- Great in Torah

Bachur -- (unmarried) Yeshiva student

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