

NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET

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 # 289, Use of Unethical Medical Research. Good Shabbos!

The Parah Adumah and Comprehensibility: Never the Twain Shall Meet

Parshas Chukas contains the mitzvah of Parah Adumah -- the red heifer that is used in the process of purifying someone who is Tameh Mes [ritually impure as a result of contact with a dead body]. The Medrash comments on this Mitzvah, and says that the Parah Adumah symbolizes the Jewish people. This Medrash is obviously fertile ground for homiletics.

The Sefer Mikdash Mordechai offers two interpretations:

Rash"i says that the nations of the world mock the Jews and Judaism, based on the law of Parah Adumah, which is essentially incomprehensible to people. It is no accident that specifically Parah Adumah is used to mock the Jews.

Chazal [the Rabbis] teach that before G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people, He offered it to the nations of the world. Their responses were to ask "What is written therein?" In other words, they were not prepared to sign any blank check. The Jewish people, on the other hand, accepted the Torah unconditionally.

This is a fundamental difference between the Jewish nation and the other nations. The Jewish nation said "We will do and then listen" (Na'aseh and then Nishma), while the other nations said "We will first understand and only then do" (Nishma first, then Na'aseh).

If there is one mitzvah in the Torah which personifies the attitude of "We will do, and then subsequently try to understand", it is the Parah Adumah -- the ultimate 'chok' (law that seemingly makes no sense).

The Mikdash Mordechai's second interpretation of how the Parah Adumah symbolizes the Jewish people is as follows:

Shlomo HaMelech [King Solomon] commented regarding the Parah Adumah, "I thought I would be wise concerning it, but it is still distant from me" [Koheles 7:23]. The Medrash explains that this refers to the fact that Shlomo HaMelech understood the reason for every mitzvah in the Torah except for Parah Adumah.

The Mikdash Mordechai explains that just as the Parah Adumah eludes understanding, so too the Jewish people are beyond the grasp of understanding of the nations of the world. They do not understand: Why do the Jewish people still exist?

One of the biggest enigmas of world history is "Why are the Jews still around?" It does not make any sense. There were far mightier nations and far more populous nations that have ceased to exist. And yet the Jew somehow outlives them all. What is it about the Jews?

"The Parah Adumah", the Medrash commented, "this is Israel". Just like the Parah Adumah is an inexplicable phenomenon that no one can understand, so too the continued existence of the Jews is such an inexplicable phenomenon.

The following quote, from an unlikely source, says it well.

"The Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Persians rose to build the planet with sound and splendor, then faded into dream stuff and passed away. The Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise and they were gone. Other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burnt out and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew. All forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" [Mark Twain (1835-1910)]

This is what the Medrash means when it says that "Parah = Yisroel". Neither makes any sense. What is it with the Jew? What is the secret of his immortality? This is something that not only Mark Twain asked, but philosophers, historians and thinkers have asked throughout the ages.

What Was Lost By Failing To Speak To The Rock?

Parshas Chukas contains the sin of the Mei Merivah [Waters of Strife]. There is a wide disparity of opinion as to exactly what was Moshe's sin. This sin cost Moshe the privilege of entering Eretz Yisroel. According to many commentaries, the sin was that Moshe hit the rock rather than speaking to it.

The obvious problem with this explanation is that there does not seem to be much difference between bringing forth water from a rock by hitting it, or by speaking to it. Why was it so important to speak to the rock? There apparently was some specific lesson that the people were supposed to learn when Moshe spoke to the rock. What was that lesson?

Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, suggests that the lesson is that sometimes in life it is necessary to speak to

rocks. Sometimes we have to speak to people who seem unreceptive to what we have to say. Sometimes we have to speak to a congregation or a community or a class and we feel that we are speaking -- if not to a rock, then at least -- to a wall. Rabbis have been doing this from time immemorial. This goes back to the days of the prophets. They speak, they speak, they speak and it is as if they are talking to a wall.

Even those people who do not have the opportunity to speak to a community or a congregation, may have the opportunity to speak to children. Sometimes talking to children can also feel like talking to a wall. The intended message was that it is necessary to speak to others, even if it seems like you are speaking to a rock. The Chofetz Chaim often said, "It is necessary to speak to the people, whether one thinks it helps or not. At least seeds are planted."

That is the nature of the business. Sometimes we speak to our children and we think that they are not listening, but we need to keep speaking. We need to keep the dialog open. The lesson of Mei Merivah was so important to the Jewish People because it taught that even when a person speaks to a rock -- there sometimes are results. This is a life-long lesson that we must always remember.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#289). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Use of Unethical Medical Research. The other halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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