

ELIEZER -- THE SON OF MOSHE RABBEINU

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 # 448, Lo Sachmod (Thou Shall Not Covet) Good Shabbos!

Eliezer -- The Son of Moshe Rabbeinu

The Medrash Rabbah teaches that when Moshe ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, he heard G-d expounding on the laws of the Parah Adumah [Red Heifer]. G-d was quoting a Mishna, and was citing the teacher mentioned in the Mishna by name. "Rabbi Eliezer says the decapitated calf (Eglah Arufah) needs to be within its first year of life (bas sh'nasah) and the Parah Adumah needs to come from a calf that has already entered its second year of life (at which time it may be considered a 'Parah')" [Parah 1:1].

Upon hearing this, Moshe entreated G-d "May it be Your Will that this Rabbi Eliezer be one of my descendants." G-d swore to Moshe that this wish would be granted. This is alluded to by the verse, "And the name of one of them was Eliezer" [by the birth of Moshe's son in this week's parsha - Shemos 18:4].

This Medrash begs for an explanation.

Another Medrash teaches that when Moshe asked Yisro to marry Yisro's daughter Tzipporah, Yisro stipulated the following condition: Your first born son from her will be dedicated to Avodah Zarah -- idol worship. All subsequent children may be raised for the sake of Heaven. Moshe accepted the condition and took an oath to abide by it.

This too is a mind-boggling teaching of our Sages. It is not only mind-boggling that Moshe agreed to the condition, but even the fact that Yisro asked for such a condition is mind-boggling! Even though Yisro's career had been serving as a priest to Avodah Zarah, other Medrashim indicate that by this stage in Yisro's life, he had already "seen the light." He no longer believed in Avodah Zarah as a 'true religion'. Why then would he want his first grandson to follow in the ways of his original folly? It is incomprehensible that Yisro should have made such a request, and it is incomprehensible that Moshe Rabbeinu should have acquiesced to it.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz and Rav Shimon Schwab both explain this latter Medrash as shedding light on an important dispute in terms of the best way to raise children. Yisro did not want his first grandson to be an idolater. Heaven Forbid. Yisro had seen the light, but Yisro was a person who came to the Truth through experimentation. He did not just accept revelation of the Torah on a silver platter. He was a searcher and a seeker. He tried out other alternatives first. Our Sages say he had tried out all the religions in the world and concluded that they were all fraudulent.

Yisro's philosophy was "I found the truth on my own, and I feel that this is the best way to raise children." Yisro felt that it is best for children have to see for themselves, make their own mistakes, and come to the proper conclusion on their own.

Moshe Rabbeinu did not favor this approach. He argued that it is only necessary to learn through experience when one is still searching to find out what the truth is. However, if one already knows the truth for certain, there is no point in experimenting any further. Moshe knew that the truth was "Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad" [our G-d is the One and only G-d]. But to win Yisro's agreement to marry Tzipporah, Moshe compromised and cut a deal with Yisro. His first-born son would follow Yisro's approach of searching for truth and experimentation with other religious beliefs. All subsequent children would follow Moshe's approach of unquestioning faith and certainty that Hashem is One and His Name is One. Both Yisro and Moshe fully contemplated and expected that even the first son would conclude his religious search with the same realization that Hashem is the only true G-d.

This explains the verses "And the name of the one (shem ha'echad) was Gershom ... and the name of the one (v'shem ha'echad) Eliezer" [Shemos 18:3-4]. This is not the normal way to write a sentence. It should say, the name of the one was Gershom and the name of the *second* was Eliezer. Why is Eliezer called "ha'Echad", as if he were the first son?

The answer is they were both 'firsts'. Gershom was the first to follow Yisro's curriculum, so to speak, and Eliezer was the first to follow Moshe's curriculum.

If Yisro's approach of logically searching and coming to understand the basis of a true religion makes sense at all, it only makes sense when one is approaching mitzvos that themselves have logic and rationale behind them. But what will such a searcher do about a 'chok'? What will the seeker do when he approaches a mitzvah that makes no sense? He will not accept it!

We can find some rationale or reason for virtually all the mitzvos in the Torah, even those categorized as 'chok'. Parah Adumah is the exception to this rule. It is the quintessential 'chok'. Shlomo Hamelech [King Solomon] said, "I will be wise, but it is distant yet from me" [Koheles 7:23]. What will happen when the searcher and experimenter encounters the Parah Adumah?

The answer is that here too, the Rabbis do attempt to find some type of rationale. They explain that the Parah Adumah is an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. "Let the mother come and clean up the mess of the child."

Rav Shimon Schwab makes the following brilliant insight which sheds light on the first Medrash quoted above. The rationale given for Parah Adumah only makes sense according to the opinion that a Parah Adumah must be three years old. If it is three years old, then it can have a child. (A cow cannot give birth until it is three years old.) The reasoning that a Parah Adumah is the mother of the calf that cleans up for her child does not make sense according to the opinion that a Parah Adumah can be made from a "two year old" calf, because a two year old calf cannot be a mother. But that is exactly is the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer in the Mishna. So according to Rabbi Eliezer, Parah Adumah is a chok through and through -- there is absolutely no rationale for it!

Clearly, then, it was necessary for Rabbi Eliezer's philosophy to be that the way to accept Torah is through Emunah -- pure belief, not through experimentation and finding rationales and reasons that appeal to us logically.

When Moshe Rabbeinu heard G-d quoting the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer, he said "I want this individual to be from my children" -- meaning, may he follow my philosophy of education in life, namely that one accepts based on belief rather than on experimentation and understanding." G-d assured Moshe that this was the case and brought the fact that the name of Moshe's son was in fact Eliezer as a supporting allusion.

An Antidote for Coveting -- You Wouldn't Want To Trade Places

I once heard the following homiletic insight (drush) on the tenth of the Ten Commandments.

There are differences in the vocabulary used in the Torah's two enumerations of the Ten Commandments regarding the prohibition of coveting (Lo Sachmod). However, both versions end with the same expression: "nor all that belongs to your fellow man" (v'chol asher l'rei-echa).

One may ask, after the Torah spells out that the prohibition of coveting applies to a neighbor's wife, and house, and male servants and female servants, his oxen, his cows, his donkeys -- what is the summation "and all that belongs to your fellow-man" really adding?

I once heard that it is coming to teach us how to prevent jealousy towards a friend. One might look at a neighbor's wife and see how wonderful she is. One might look at his house and see how well he lives. One can look at his job and his children and think "boy -- he has it so good!"

The Torah is telling us to consider "kol asher l'rei-echa" -- look at the whole picture. Everyone has their own pack of problems in life. No one's life is perfect. As apparent as it may seem that this person has it 'made', we do not know the whole story. What happens in the privacy of our neighbor's innermost chambers? We can never know for certain. It is always necessary to take into account "kol asher l'rei-echa" [all that is doing with your neighbor].

Many times, if not most times, if not all the time, when we learn about "all that is doing with our neighbor," we will not want to trade places.

I recently heard an insightful reality. If everyone were to place everything on the table -- all the good and all the bad -- (and they are asked to pick any person's complete package) everybody would wind up

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Yisro are provided below:

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