

BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

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 # 510 - Pidyon Habein and Vending Machines. Good Shabbos!

The Choice of Ketores To Counter-Act The Plague

Following the incident of Korach and the complaints of the Children of Israel in its aftermath, the Almighty was prepared to unleash a plague that would, Heaven Forbid, wipe out the Jewish people:

"Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, 'Separate yourselves from the midst of this assembly and I shall destroy them in an instant!' They fell on their faces. Moses said to Aaron, 'Take the fire-pan and put on it fire from upon the Altar and place incense (ketores) and take it quickly to the assembly and provide atonement for them, for the wrath has gone out from the presence of Hashem; the plague has begun!'" [Bamidbar 17:9-11].

Given the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu apparently took this initiative on his own, Rashi asks how it was that he specifically chose ketores as the antidote for the plague. Rashi answers that this was a secret Moshe learned from the Angel of Death himself during Moshe's sojourn on Mt. Sinai. Namely, Moshe heard that ketores is effective in stopping plagues. Rashi adds that when a plague is unleashed, anyone is liable to be wiped out - whether righteous or wicked.

A plague is like a spiritual hurricane or tornado. Once it is unleashed, anything in its path is vulnerable. Once the destroyer has been given permission to destroy, no distinction is made between a tzaddik and a rasha.

What is so special about ketores that it serves as an effective antidote to a plague? I saw a very beautiful insight to this question from Rav Nissan Alpert.

Ketores is the antidote to a plague that does not distinguish between righteous and wicked because it is the one item in the Temple Service into which they placed a foul smelling scent. The chelbanah had a foul odor. Why on earth would a foul smelling ingredient be added to a compound striving to create a "pleasant aroma" before the Almighty?

The symbolism is that both the righteous and the wicked need to be taken care of. We specifically put in a foul smelling odor so as to include the wicked in our prayers. They need atonement as well.

This is akin to the symbolism of the Four Species on Succoth. The Esrog has flavor and aroma (representing both Torah knowledge and good deeds). The willow on the other hand has neither flavor nor aroma. It represents Jews who possess neither Torah nor good deeds. But even such people must be included in our prayers and so the four species representing the four categories of Jews are taken together on the holiday.

So too, the symbolism of the ketores in the Beis HaMikdash is that we must worry about the wicked as well. Let the righteous carry the wicked on their backs, so to speak.

Therefore, the antidote to the plague where both the righteous and the wicked suffer together is to bring the ketores compound that proclaims: When the wicked and righteous are bound together, the righteous will protect the wicked.

Beyond A Shadow of A Doubt

"Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel and each of their princes gave him a staff for each prince, a staff for each prince, according to their fathers' house, twelve staffs; and Aharon's staff was in the middle of the other staffs." [Bamidbar 17:21]

Rashi comments on the words "and Aharon's staff was placed in the middle of the other staffs" that Moshe placed the staff in the middle so that people would not say that the reason why it blossomed was because it was placed at the end - closer to the side of the Shechina (Divine Presence).

Rav Yeruchem writes that he was always amazed by the words of the Droshos haRan. The Droshos haRan writes that Moshe Rabbeinu was speech impaired (kevad peh) because had he been a great orator, people would say that he was able to sell Torah and Judaism to the Jewish people because he was a smooth talker. Therefore, despite the fact that all other physical ailments that anyone suffered were healed at Sinai, Moshe's speech impediment remained with him his entire life.

Rav Yeruchem writes: How could it be after all that Moshe Rabbeinu did in terms of the plagues and the Exodus and the splitting of the sea and all the miracles that we witnessed in the Wilderness - how could one imagine that anyone would claim that he sold us a bill of goods simply by virtue of his gift of gab? Would anyone be able to deny that Moshe is true and his Torah is true?

Rav Yeruchem answers: In fact, when G-d wants to prove something, he proves it in a way that even the greatest skeptic and the biggest cynic will not be able to deny. The same applies to the staffs. When Aharon's staff blossomed and gave forth fruit, it was clearly an open miracle that changed the course of nature. No one could rationally argue that a 3 centimeter distance made the slightest difference between Aharon's staff and the next one. And yet, G-d gives it to us on a silver platter so that no one with even the most ridiculous claims will be able to deny the truth.

The truth is that Aharon, representing the tribe of Priesthood, was the leader and the tribe chosen by the Almighty to serve Him in the Temple.

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 (# 334). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Leaving a Chasunah Before Benching. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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