

This week's *Parashah* begins with the laws of the *Parah Adumah* / red heifer, the classic "*Chukah*" / decree, *i.e.*, a *Mitzvah* whose reason we cannot understand. Regarding our understanding of the reasons for the *Mitzvot*, R' Chaim Friedlander *z"l* (1923-1986; *Mashgiach Ruchani* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) writes:

In the *Pesach Haggadah*, the "Wise Son" asks, "What are the *Edot* / testimonies and the *Chukim* / decrees and the *Mishpatim* / ordinances that *Hashem*, our *Elokim*, commanded you?" The *Haggadah* instructs us how to answer the Wise Son: "Also, you should tell him the laws of the *Pesach* offering: One may not eat desert after the final taste of the *Pesach* offering." Commentaries ask: Why do we not give the Wise Son the answer that the Torah gives to his question (see *Devarim* 6:20-25), "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt . . ." And, what is meant by "Also"?

R' Friedlander explains that these questions answer each other. We should give the Wise Son the answer that the Torah gives, but we also should tell him: Even though we accept the yoke of Heaven upon ourselves as "slaves" to *Hashem*, we are meant to do so with love, and the *Mitzvot* are meant to leave a good *Ta'am* / "taste" in our mouths.

R' Friedlander continues: The Hebrew word "*Ta'am*" means both "taste" and "reason," because understanding the reason for a *Mitzvah* gives it a good "taste." But what of *Chukim* / *Mitzvot* whose reasons we do not understand? R' Friedlander answers: When we have a proper appreciation for *Mitzvot* in general, then the mere fact that we are able to serve *Hashem*, even in ways we do not understand, will give us a good feeling and leave a good "taste." (*Siftei Chaim: Mo'adim II* p.379)

Shemittah

Midrash Mechilta considers--and ultimately rejects--the possibility that *Shabbat*--the Sabbath Day--need not be observed during the *Shemittah*--the Sabbath Year. Though the *Midrash* rejects this idea, the fact that it could even be entertained hints at significant connections between *Shabbat* and *Shemittah*. In this space, we are exploring those connections.

R' Meir Leibush Weiser *z"l* (1809-1879; Poland, Romania, and Ukraine; known as "*Malbim*") writes: Only the Sabbath Day and the Sabbatical Year are referred to in the Torah as "*Shabbat La'Hashem*" / "A Sabbath to G-d." Some of the festivals (*Yom Kippur* and *Pesach*) are called "*Shabbat*," but never "*Shabbat La'Hashem*." This suggests some relationship between the Sabbath Day and the Sabbatical Year.

Malbim continues: *Shabbat* testifies that *Hashem* "rested" on the seventh day. Consistent with this, the Torah commands that our animals and our belongings rest on *Shabbat*. It would be fitting if our land also would rest and plants would not grow on the seventh day. However, the world operates according to consistent laws of nature, and, for whatever reason, *Hashem* made it that plants do continue to grow on *Shabbat*.

Therefore, *Malbim* writes, we have a *Shemittah* year, when the land rests for an entire year, once every seven years. This makes up the missing days of rest that accumulated during the prior six years.

(*Ha'Torah Ve'ha'mitzvah: Parashat Behar*)

R' Aharon Rotter *shlita* (Bnei Brak, Israel) explains the *Malbim's* calculation: There are 354 days in a lunar year, of which one-seventh--approximately 50--are *Shabbatot*. In six years, there are approximately 300 *Shabbatot* [more precisely, 303]--the same number of weekdays that there are in a typical *Shemittah* year. (*Sha'arei Aharon: Parashat Behar*)

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“The people spoke against *Elokim* and Moshe . . . *Hashem* sent the fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people. A large multitude of *Yisrael* died. The people came to Moshe and said, ‘We have sinned . . .’ Moshe prayed for the people. *Hashem* said to Moshe, ‘Make yourself a fiery [serpent] and place it on a pole, and it will be that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live.’” (21:5-8)

The *Gemara* (*Avodah Zarah* 44a) interprets: “Make yourself a fiery serpent”--from your own money. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

R’ Chaim Shalom Yisrael z”l (*Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshiva Ner Shmuel in Yerushalayim; died 2002) writes: This is incredible! *Bnei Yisrael* speak against Moshe, Moshe prays for them, and then *Hashem* tells Moshe to spend his own money on a “cure”!

R’ Yisrael explains: Well-known *Midrashim* relate that both Moshe Rabbeinu and King David were shepherds in their earlier years, and they were chosen by *Hashem* as future leaders because of their extraordinary compassion for their flocks. Here, the Torah is teaching us how far-reaching are the obligations of the shepherd of *Hashem*’s nation. Even though *Bnei Yisrael* spoke against Moshe, Moshe was responsible for doing everything necessary to improve their situation. (*Rachashei Lev*)

“Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of *Hashem*, ‘The gift of Reeds and the rivers of Arnon.’” (21:14)

What happened at the rivers of Arnon? The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 54a-b) explains: The Emorites planned to ambush *Bnei Yisrael* as they passed through a canyon along the Arnon River [identified with Wadi Mujib in present-day Jordan]. The Emorites did not realize, however, that the *Aron Kodesh* that traveled before the Camp of *Yisrael* flattened any mountains that were in *Bnei Yisrael*’s way. As a result, the Emorite ambushers were pulverized, their plan was foiled, and *Bnei Yisrael* passed by, completely unaware of the danger that had threatened them. Only when two *Metzora’im* / lepers trailing behind and outside the camp noticed a river of blood running through the wadi did the miracle come to light. [Until here paraphrased from the *Gemara*]

R’ Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z”l (1865-1935; *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*) writes: Everything that happened to our forefathers is a sign of what would/will happen to their children. In particular, what the Generation of the Desert experienced in a short time foreshadowed all of Jewish history.

R’ Kook continues: Besides its plain meaning, our verse and the above *Gemara* allude to a time in history when anti-Torah philosophies will lay in ambush for us, without our being aware of the spiritual danger we face. However, the Torah that we study--represented by the *Aron Kodesh* that carried the *Luchot* and flattened the mountains--will always be there to smooth the way for us, “crushing” foreign ideologies in its wake. Those who were always loyal to the Torah will be unaware at first what the Torah has done for them. However, those who were outside and experienced foreign ideologies will relate the danger we were in and how the Torah saved us. (*Ain Ayah*)

“Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank. *Hashem* said to Moshe and to Aharon, ‘Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of *Bnei Yisrael*, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them.’” (20:11-12)

Rashi z”l explains *Hashem*’s meaning: “Had you spoken to the rock and it had given water, I would have been sanctified before the whole congregation, for they would have said, ‘If this rock, which cannot speak and cannot hear and needs no maintenance, fulfils the bidding of the Omnipresent *Hashem*, how much more should we do so!”

R’ Meshulam Feish Segal Lowy z”l (the *Tosher Rebbe* in post-War Hungary and, from 1951, in Montreal, Canada) asks: Was *Hashem*’s Name not sanctified by the rock giving water on command--whether that happened through Moshe’s speaking to the rock or hitting it?

Also, we read later in the *Parashah* (21:17-18), “Then *Yisrael* sang this song, ‘Come up, O well, announce it; well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through a lawgiver, with their staff. A gift from the Wilderness.’” Why, asks the *Tosher Rebbe*, did *Bnei Yisrael* not sing in praise of the well when Moshe brought water out of the rock in our verse, or, better yet, when Moshe hit a rock and the well first appeared nearly forty years earlier (see *Shmot* 17:6)? Indeed, why was Moshe commanded to hit the rock forty years earlier, and now he was not permitted to do so?

The *Tosher Rebbe* explains: When Moshe hit the rock and it gave water on the earlier occasion (in *Sefer Shmot*), *Bnei Yisrael* did not sing praises of *Hashem* because they thought it must be a natural occurrence that rocks produce water when they are hit. That is why *Hashem* did not want Moshe to hit the rock again on this occasion. He wanted Moshe to speak to the rock so there would be no question that a miracle had occurred. That is what *Hashem* meant when he said: “Since you did not speak to the rock, My Name was not sanctified.”

Why did *Bnei Yisrael* sing in praise of the well later in our *Parashah*? *Rashi* explains that they sang when, through the waters of the well, they were informed of another miracle that had occurred, as the verse says, “O well, announce it.” (See facing page and *Rashi* to 21:15-16 for details.)

This teaches, continues the *Tosher Rebbe*, that the purpose of miracles is to make an impression on us, to raise our level of awe for *Hashem*. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of all of our efforts in this world should be to attain awe of *Hashem*--what is known as “*Yir’at Ha’rommemut*” / “reverence for His loftiness.” This is our obligation no less than it was the obligation of our ancestors in the desert. (*Avodat Avodah: Pitgamei Kodosh*)