

Dear Community,

Ignoring the greatest miracle experienced by the Jewish people to focus on an episode which appears to be a footnote may seem a sacrilegious act. While this accusation has merit, I am ready to risk the scorn of my people to convey an idea that I found extremely meaningful. Despite the Technicolor drama and the pivotal significance of the crossing of the Red Sea narrated in this week's Torah portion, I'd like to focus on the brief sojourn of the Jewish people in Marah.

The masses of Jews traveling to Mt. Sinai stop in Marah, where they are faced with the first challenge that a people traveling in a desert must contend with: thirst. The only water available is bitter, brackish, and non-potable. G-d tells Moshe to throw a branch into the water, which will render the water sweet and potable.

The episode concludes in a strange way: "There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He proved them." What were these statutes and ordinances? Why did the Torah not bother telling us which statutes are commanded here? And why were statutes commanded specifically at this point, just a short time before the giving of the Torah, when we would receive all of the commandments?

The Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin (40) writes that the mitzvot commanded in Marah were Shabbat, civil law, and the law of the Red Heifer. This selection of commandments only seems to make this episode more confusing. Why is Shabbat given at this point if it will be repeated at Sinai? Why would the law of the Red Heifer be mentioned of all the other mitzvot? What relevance does it have to this specific episode? Civil law is also imparted later in Parshat Mishpatim; why do the Jews get a preview in Marah?

The Medrash writes that before G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people, he first approached the other nations and asked them if they wanted it. At each encounter, the nation in question responded with a concern that was relevant to their culture. Some found the civil laws onerous, some found the aspect of forbidden relationships restrictive... each had their own problem with integrating the laws of the Torah into their lives and culture.

However, when G-d approached the Jews, a nation who is clearly a stubborn and questioning people, they replied: "Na'aseh V'Nishma": we will do and we will hear. We accept upon ourselves to do the mitzvot, and after we've made this commitment, we will investigate the reasoning and details of the various commandments. This type of acquiescence went against the cultural fabric of the Jewish people. How were the Jews

able to subdue their natures and make such a drastic commitment based solely on trust? Also, why was it so important that it be done in this way? Surely the Torah, an intellectual masterpiece, would be all the more attractive to the Jewish people if they were first given a glimpse of the depth and meaning of its contents?

The answer is that to accept the Torah and to become a nation of G-d, we had to be able to overcome our natural tendencies and subjugate our will to a greater will. How can we, with any integrity, call ourselves “followers of G-d” when we have the freedom to cherry pick those bits of the Torah that jive with our personal wants and sensibilities? If we are not ready to accept a system in its entirety, how can we claim to follow its dictates?

The Ramban writes that the specific mitzvot given at Marah were a taste for the Jews of what was to come. They were not actually commanded these laws in Marah; rather, they previewed what the Torah contains. The mitzvot given, address three different aspects of what the Torah demands of the Jewish people. Observing the Shabbat, a time of rest and sanctity, implies that the Torah demands faith in the creation of the world and of G-d’s dominion. Indeed, it is not enough to just believe in this idea as an abstract intellectual concept: Shabbat provides a tangible and concrete part of our lives that expresses this faith. The fact that we take one day and dedicate it to focus on our souls and our relationship with G-d is a testament to what we believe and how we choose to live our lives.

The law of Parah Aduma (Red Heifer) is the epitome of a Chok: a commandment for which the reason is hidden from us. In fact, it is recorded that this was the only one of these commandments for which King Solomon was not able to deduce a reason. This concept of following seemingly irrational laws is anathema to a people as inquisitive and skeptical as the Jewish people. How can we possibly follow something we don’t understand? How can we possibly do something just because we are told to do so?

The key to understanding this passage lies in the third set of commandments given, those of civil laws. The first Mishna in Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Fathers, transmits to us the guidance given by the Great Assembly. This group of sages were looking at a new world, one in which the era of prophecy, the direct communication of G-d’s will to Jewish people, had ended. They had to impart to us some way of being able to hear G-d’s voice even after we lost our hearing.

The answer they gave, “Be deliberate in judgment,” a mitzvah already written a few times in the Torah, seems astounding. This is what will save our faith? Honestly?

Admitting to cutting down a cherry tree is the path to a G-dly world? Yes, a judge should be honest and exacting in arbitrating a case -- we can all agree that that is important -- but a message for a people who lost G-d's direct voice? Really?

Rabbenu Yona explains that it is the very fact that this is an intuitive truth is what makes it so powerful. The part of the Torah that emphasizes a morality we can ourselves divine intellectually is what will create an appreciation for the entire system. The purpose of the Great Assembly's focus on civil justice and morality was to give this newly G-d-tone-deaf nation an expanding value for the entire Torah, including those parts that are not intuitively moral and appealing.

This is what was being taught at Marah, Judaism rest on a three-legged stool. We need the experiential aspects of living by the dictates of our faith, this is symbolized by Shabbat. We need intuitive morality, this is symbolized by the civil statutes. And we need to have the ability to serve G-d even when we don't appreciate the simple meaning behind the acts of service and suffice with the understanding and the belief of overall truth of G-d and His Torah.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein