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LA VOIE
A SUIVRE

THE SONG OF THE WELL: WELLS THAT THE PRINCES DUG (BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “Then Israel sang this song: Come up, O well, announce it...” (Bamidbar 21:17). The commentators ask why Moshe’s name is not mentioned in this song. They also ask why the Children of Israel sang a song for the well, but not for the manna or the clouds of glory. We should also be surprised by the fact that they felt the need to sing about a well after 40 years had passed, as they were about to enter Eretz Israel, since they knew that it would dry up as soon as they entered the land, where they would have bread and water.

In fact why did the Children of Israel not sing this song at the very beginning, when they merited such things? All these things were outside the laws of nature, for the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them food and water in a place of serpents and scorpions.

There is something else that we need to understand. In the book of Devarim, we do not see Moshe mentioning the song of the sea, whereas he mentioned the Ten Commandments as well as other things that happened to the Children of Israel. For example, he mentioned the subject of the spies and Korach, but not the sea and the miracles that happened there, nor did he mention the song of the sea. We do not see that Moshe mentioned any of these subjects.

The Song of the Well Came Through Effort

I would like to explain why Moshe avoided singing the song of the well with the Children of Israel at the end of their 40-year journey in the desert. He avoided singing this song, despite having sung the song of the sea with them, as it is written: “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang” (Shemot 15:1). Our Sages have said (Shemot Rabba 23:9) that when the Children of Israel left Egypt and were standing by the sea, Moshe wanted to teach them the ways of Hashem. He wanted to constantly thank the Holy One, blessed be He, for the miracles that He had performed for them, which is why he began to sing the song of the sea, and the Children of Israel repeated it after him. They did not put an effort into singing it, but simply repeated after

Moshe. Furthermore, they were all influenced by the Holy Spirit that rested on Moshe. Since Moshe had taught them this song as soon as they left Egypt, he does not begin to sing it here, for he wanted the Children of Israel to put an effort into it. Henceforth, they should be the ones who spontaneously start to sing, for a song that we do not put an effort into cannot be compared to a song in which we do. The former is merited through others, instead of being merited by ourselves.

The Patriarchs are Called “Princes”

Be that as it may, although Moshe did not begin the song of the well, all the Children of Israel knew that they had reached a level of prophecy – a level that allowed them to sing the song of the well – only by the power of Moshe. They could only sing now because Moshe had sung for them at the sea and started that song for them, as it is written: “Then Moshe sang.” In this way, the Children of Israel had merited for the Holy Spirit to rest upon them by the well, and they began singing on their own, as it is written: “Then Israel sang this song.” What did they say? “Wells that the princes dug.” Our Sages say (Tanchuma, Chukat 21) that this refers to the merit of the Patriarchs, who are called “princes,” thereby teaching us that they attributed the song to the merit of the Patriarchs and the merit of Moshe, as it is written: “‘When you have rested upon the lawgiver’ – the lawgiver is Moshe” (Zohar Chadash, Chukat 83a).

This is why the Children of Israel only sang the song of the well after 40 years, for “it may take a person 40 years to know the mind of his teacher” (Avodah Zarah 5b). Since 40 years had passed, the Children of Israel recognized that they only merited all these miracles because of Moshe, and they could only sing this song by his strength. Just as he had taught them to sing and express their gratitude for the miracle of the sea, they again sang after 40 years out of gratitude for the miracle of the sea and the well.

Prophecy Without Knowing Why

Here we should ask: Was the well dug by

men? They had a stone, not a hole in the ground! Therefore what is the meaning of, “Wells that the princes dug”?

By saying this, the Children of Israel were alluding to the fact that they only merited prophecy because of Moshe, who had taught them to put an effort into attaining it. Now Moshe had already dug and prepared the well. When did he do this? At the time when the Children of Israel encountered their first well, near the sea.

Why did Moshe not mention the song of the sea in the book of Devarim? It is because the song contains the statement, “You will bring them in and implant them on the mount of Your heritage” (Shemot 15:17). Now since there was a decree preventing Moshe from entering Eretz Israel, he was afraid that the Children of Israel would lose hope by thinking, “Just as Moshe did not enter the land, how much more will we not enter it?” Hence he did not repeat this verse, in order not to disturb them.

In reality, no falsehood escaped Moshe’s lips, as the Gemara states: “It is not written, ‘You will bring us in,’ but ‘You will bring them in.’ This teaches that they prophesied, but did not know what they prophesied” (Bava Batra 119b).

Nevertheless, Moshe gave them this song as an allusion, using enigmatic language. He said, “I implored Hashem at that time, saying...” (Devarim 3:23). We need to understand this, for nowhere do we find that Moshe implored Hashem at that point in time. In fact he wanted to say the same thing as in the song of the sea: “You will bring them in and implant them.” Since there was a decree preventing Moshe from entering Eretz Israel, G-d said to him: “Enough! Speak to Me no more of this” (Devarim 3:26). Hence in order not to disobey the Holy One, blessed be He, Moshe did not repeat this song. He only mentioned it by allusion, for the term va’etchanan (“I implored”) has the same numerical value as shira (“song”), because in the song of the sea Moshe implored Hashem to let him enter Eretz Israel.

THE WORDS OF THE SAGES

THE HOLY TORAH PROTECTS AND SAVES

It is written, "This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying..." (Bamidbar 19:2).

The passage on the red heifer, as the Sages tell us, not only teaches us something about itself, but about a whole other subject. This emerges from the details of the expression, "This is the chukat [decree] of the Torah," from which we learn that we must perform all the mitzvot of the Torah as if they were chukot (laws that are incomprehensible to the human mind), for Hashem states: "I have made a decree, and you have no right to contest it." Even if we do not understand the reason for a particular mitzvah, we must still carry it out as if it were a chukah. Korach, who was very clever, is the proof of this, for he erred concerning the reasons for the mitzvah of techelet in the tzitzit.

This is the lesson contained in the law of the red heifer, namely that the reasons behind the mitzvot are hidden from us. Even if we sometimes think that we may understand them, it is forbidden to rely on our comprehension: it is our duty to carry out every mitzvah as a decree issued from the king. It is G-d's will for us to perform His mitzvot with wholeheartedness, without weighing the pros and cons, and without any doubts, as the verse states: "You shall be wholehearted with Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 10:10).

The amazing story that follows, in which we see the wisdom of the Torah and the importance of obeying the Torah perspective – the views of the great men of Israel – without trying to outsmart them, is told by the gaon Rabbi Baruch Dov Povarsky Shlita. Rabbi Baruch, one of the leaders of the Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak, recounted the story during a gathering of Mifal HaShas Torah scholars that took place in the home of Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein Shlita. His account can be found in an issue of the Chassidic journal Tzanz, published in Eretz Israel.

His Final Request

This is what happened: During the time that Reb Moshe Feinstein Zatzal was a Rav in Russia, there was an informer within the Jewish community who reigned terror upon all its members. The fact that he was close to the authorities allowed him to hand people over to them, people who greatly feared him.

During his lifetime, this man had brought numerous ills upon the Jewish community, which suffered from him as much as possible. Everyone therefore loathed his name, and members of the community naturally distanced themselves from him as much as possible. They even excommunicated him till his dying day.

However a Jew still remains a Jew, and his soul is still a Divine spark, seeking to reclaim its rightful place. On the final day of the informer's life, when he sensed that his time had come to ascend to the Heavenly court and give an accounting before the Creator for all the terrible deeds he had committed during his lifetime, he requested the presence of the Chevra Kadisha. He said that he had something special to tell them.

When members of the Chevra Kadisha arrived, their hearts full of suspicion, the informer said that since he was about to render his soul to his Creator, and since he knew that the sins he had committed during his lifetime were extremely grave, he asked, as an atonement – be it ever so little – that he be given the "burial of a donkey." That is, he asked that his body be laid to rest in an upright position, not lying down, as is done for all Jews who pass away.

Those around his bedside were impressed by his words, which were spoken with tremendous sincerity, and they promised to fulfill his final request. He witnessed them sign his will, in which he again asked to be given the "burial of a donkey."

The Torah Perspective

After the death of this informer, as his funeral was being prepared, news of what had happened reached the ears of Reb Moshe Feinstein. When the gaon heard what the members of the Chevra Kadisha had promised the deceased, he was completely against it. He said that it was strictly forbidden by the Halachah for a Jew to be given the burial of a donkey, for such a grave is contemptible. They were therefore completely forbidden from keeping the promise they had made to the man, for whom Reb Moshe ordered a burial like that of all his Jewish brothers.

That is what happened: By Reb Moshe's order, the informer was laid to rest horizontally, according to Jewish law, without any change in the Halachah. Nothing in his will, not even the explicit promise of the Chevra Kadisha, could change that.

On the following morning, however, the Russian secret police, the NKVD [forerunners of the KGB] paid a visit to the Chevra Kadisha. They ordered them to open the grave of the Jewish informer who had been buried on the previous day.

The Chevra Kadisha tried in vain to explain exactly how Jewish law prohibited the opening of a grave after burial. The secret police then threatened to carry out their duties if they failed to open the grave immediately.

At that point the members of the Chevra Kadisha understood that their lives were in danger, meaning that they no longer had any choice. They trembled as they made their way to the Jewish cemetery, and they opened the informer's grave before the stern looks of the officers and secret police. The police looked inside, almost as if they were searching for something. Then they glanced at each other in amazement and left.

It was only then that the members of the Jewish community understood the great miracle that had happened to them by obeying the strict orders of Reb Moshe. The reason why the secret police had asked the Chevra Kadisha to open the informer's grave was to see how the Jewish community had buried him. They wanted to see if they had "punished him" after his death by giving him "the burial of a donkey."

If they had buried the informer as he himself had requested, in an upright position, the lives of everyone in the community would have been in danger.

Another version of the story has the informer himself telling the secret police that members of the Jewish community would probably want to bury him like a donkey in order to take vengeance on him, since he had reported them to the Russian authorities.

Only the Torah view of Reb Moshe Feinstein, who had prohibited the community from deviating in any way from what is written in the Halachah, had saved the Jewish community. Those who participated in this seminar of Torah scholars noted that this incident demonstrated the particular greatness of Reb Moshe Feinstein, as well as being a testament to the eternity of the Torah for all generations. As the Sages say, "He who takes counsel of the elders will not stumble."

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Things That Do Not Apply

This is why we must be very careful if we want to report that someone has done something wrong in order to reprimand him, although since that time he has acted correctly. The same applies if we wish to speak about his forefathers, who have acted incorrectly, although he has not adopted their ways, and other things of this nature, things that do not apply to him. It is forbidden to disparage a person on this account. One who transgresses by saying such things to others, even if not in the presence of the person in question, and even if he adds nothing to the truth, is among those who speak Lashon Hara and cannot welcome the Shechinah.

– Chafetz Chaim

AT THE SOURCE

The Pride of Man

It is written, “The kohen shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet yarn” (Bamidbar 19:6).

The Chida cites the Zichron Yosef in stating that a philosopher once said that the reason we dominate animals is because we eat them. Hence we have control over their lives, in order for them to help us work. One of his friends replied that if such were the case, worms should control us, since they eat our bodies in the grave.

Here the verse alludes to the pride of a person who raises himself like a cedar, whereas he should humble himself like hyssop and feel like a worm (from which the scarlet dye comes). In other words, the worm is immediately above man, for it eats his body, which is below it. This is how the proud should humble themselves.

Sage Advice

It is written, “He who sprinkles the water of sprinkling shall wash his clothes” (Bamidbar 19:21).

The book Yalkut Chamishai cites an allegorical explanation given by Rabbi Yosef Ziat Shlita:

The fact that the person who sprinkles this water remains pure after having sprinkled the impure, whereas the one who touches the water of sprinkling becomes impure until nightfall, teaches educators an important lesson: When they transmit words of wisdom and Mussar to people in order to purify them, they should feel that they are only a conduit, and that “Hashem gives wisdom; from His mouth [come] knowledge and discernment” (Mishlei 2:6). In other words, we learn this lesson directly from Hashem.

Hence the person who sprinkles the water takes the hyssop, which alludes to humility, and can purify an impure person by means of the water. Now there is no water but Torah, and the person remains pure even when he goes out to the people to sanctify them.

However one who touches the water of sprinkling – meaning that he senses some personal interest or benefit when transmitting words of Torah and Mussar to the people – becomes impure.

This is what we learn by the prayer of the chassid Rabbi Eliezer Papo Zatzal, the author of Peleh Yoetz. His book was written for preachers who address the public: “Save me from all pride. May I recognize my trivial importance, and may I always be small in my own eyes.” Let the wise hear and learn.

Anger was the Cause

It is written, “Listen now, O rebels” (Bamidbar 20:10).

The gaon Rabbi Simcha HaCohen Rappaport Zatzal explained that according to the Midrash, the Shechinah was speaking from Moshe’s throat. According to this explanation, it is difficult to understand why Moshe was punished for having said, “Listen now, O rebels.” After all, it was the Shechinah that was saying this, while Moshe himself said nothing.

The Sages say, “As to every man who becomes angry...if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him” (Pesachim 66b). Therefore since Moshe became angry, it was he himself who said: “Listen now, O rebels,” which is why he was punished.

This explains the verse in the book of Tehillim: “They provoked him at the waters of Meriva, and Moshe suffered because of them...and he pronounced with his lips” (Tehillim 106:32). This means that since the Children of Israel had provoked Moshe to anger, the Shechinah left him. He then “pronounced with his lips” by saying: “Listen now, O rebels,” which is why he was punished.

– Migdanot Yaakov

Silence for Two Selas

It is written, “Moshe lifted his hand and struck ha’sela [the rock]” (Bamidbar 20:11).

The book Tikkunei HaZohar states that if Moshe had not struck the rock, but had simply spoken to it, as Hashem had commanded, the Children of Israel would have learned Torah without difficulty or dissension.

In his book Yismach Israel, Rabbi Yaakov Haim Sofer Zatzal writes that we find an allusion to this in the Gemara: “A word is worth a sela [a coin], silence two selas” (Megillah 18a). This means that if there was “a word” for the rock (sela) – a word instead of the blow that Moshe gave to the rock – it would have resulted in two selas, meaning silence. Thus there would have been silence between two talmidei chachamim learning Torah, meaning that they would have studied Torah in peace, without difficulty or dissension.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE PARSHA FROM THE TEACHINGS OF THE TSADDIK RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA

The Mitzvah of the Red Heifer Leads to Complete Teshuvah

It is written, “This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying...and they shall take to you a completely red heifer.... Someone shall burn the heifer before his eyes.... The one who burns it shall immerse his clothing and immerse himself in water.... This is the law: A man who dies in a tent, everyone who comes into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean for seven days. ... And everyone who touches...a dead body, or a human bone, or a grave shall be unclean for seven days” (Bamidbar 19:2-16).

We need to think about this mitzvah, about what these things allude to, and what they are really dealing with. What is the meaning behind the heifer, behind the fact that it must be red, that it must be burned, and that its ashes are sprinkled upon a sinner? We also need to explain why the Torah rules that one who touches a corpse is impure for seven days, and that the ashes of this red heifer must be sprinkled upon him for purification.

We may cite the words of the Sages, who say that if a person experiences misfortune, he should reflect upon his conduct. If he has reflected upon his conduct and found nothing objectionable, he should attribute his misfortune to a neglect in Torah study (Berachot 5a). Since the Torah states that a person who touches a corpse becomes impure, in the times when the Temple stood, anyone who touched a corpse would become impure and reflect upon his conduct. He would ask himself why this had happened to him, and what sin he had committed such that the Holy One, blessed be He, had brought impurity upon him, for we are commanded to be holy and pure (Vayikra 19:2). There was therefore some sin in him, and the Holy One, blessed be He, probably wanted to push him to repent. This person would then search his soul, discover his sin, and completely repent.

A person’s teshuvah must be complete, and half measures in repenting are not teshuvah at all. Since many people fail by not doing complete teshuvah, the Torah commands us to burn a red heifer and throw its ashes on an impure person. This hints to him that he comes from dust and to dust he returns, a thought that will lead him to complete teshuvah. As the Sages have said, “Let him remind himself of the day of death” (Berachot 5a), which is how to be saved from the evil inclination.

With regards to the red heifer, we may say that the term parah (“heifer”) is formed by the same letters as the term rafeh (“weak”). This means that if a person has become impure, it happened because he has weakened in his Torah study, as the Sages have said on the verse, “Amalek came and battled Israel in Rephidim” (Shemot 17:8) – “Rephidim implies that they had weakened [rafu] in Torah. Hence Amalek came upon them” (Tanchuma, Beshalach 25). The term adumah (“red”) evokes din (“judgment”), meaning that judgment will arise against a person who has weakened in Torah study.

Thus the Sages have said, “If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. ... If he examines and finds nothing, let him attribute it to a neglect in the study of Torah” (Berachot 5a). This means that when something happens to a person that renders him impure, he should examine his conduct and look for what sin caused it. If he finds nothing, he should attribute it to a neglect in study, for he has certainly weakened in his Torah study and justice has awakened against him. This is the meaning behind the red heifer, rafeh and din (parah adumah). Ashes from the cow are sprinkled upon him, reminding him of the day of death and leading him to complete teshuvah before Hashem.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

RABBI ISRAEL YAAKOV ALGAZI

The greatness of the gaon Rabbi Israel Yaakov Algazi Zatzal manifested itself in Jerusalem in the year 5497. A descendent of a holy dynasty, Rabbi Israel Algazi had arrived in Jerusalem from the Turkish city of Izmir, the city of his birth. In fact “Algazi” is Turkish for “conqueror,” a surname adopted by the leaders of Jewish families when they arrived in Turkey after being exiled from Spain. Some believe that “Algazi” was a name adopted by the inhabitants of Gaza.

From his earliest years, Rabbi Israel studied the holy Torah with his father Rabbi Yom Tov Algazi Zatzal, one of the rabbis of Izmir and the son of the great gaon Rabbi Nissim Shlomo, the son of Rabbi Avraham Algazi. The Chida speaks of him with trembling and reverence: “The great Rav, learned and accustomed to miracles.... The elders have told us incredible stories about the Rav, for he studied Torah without ulterior motives, without benefiting from the honor of the Torah.”

All Are Drawn to Jerusalem

As we know, when Rabbi Yaakov of Izmir ascended to Eretz Israel, he first stayed in the holy city of Sefat, which the author or Chesed L'Avraham states is located in the territory of Naphtali, a city where deep Torah insights can be made. In all of Eretz Israel, no air is greater than in Sefat. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Rabbi Yaakov fell gravely ill, “Yet since I had made a great vow to the G-d of Israel when I fell ill here in Jerusalem and my life was in danger, Hashem made me suffer greatly but my life was spared. I then thanked Him for all His kindnesses, and I devoted myself to writing a book to help large numbers of people.” Hashem heard his prayer and supplications, and He healed him. Rabbi Yaakov then remembered his vow and wrote the book Ara DeRabbanan to thank Hashem for having healed him. On Shabbat Shira of the year 5498, Rabbi Yaakov publicly recited praise and thanks to Hashem in synagogue for having saved him, and he was given the name “Israel.”

Upon his arrival to Jerusalem, Rabbi Israel Yaakov became known among the leading Torah figures as an exceptional man. The Torah scholars of Jerusalem appointed him as a dayan in the court of the Rishon Letzion, the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Nachum Zatzal (the author of Chazon Nachum), along with the gaon Rabbi Moshe Mizrachi Zatzal (the author of Admat HaKodesh), and the gaon Rabbi Yitzchak HaCohen Rappaport Zatzal (the author of Batei Kehunah).

Rabbi Israel Yaakov wrote numerous books, the majority of which were responsa and works on Halachah, as well as sermons and books on Aggadah. At present, the Merkavat HaMishneh center is about to publish his great work entitled Kehilat Yaakov in five volumes. It deals with subjects of Torah and rabbinic origin, and it will be printed in a beautiful edition, as befits a marvelous Torah work.

Greatness Pursued Him

Where we find Rabbi Israel Yaakov's greatness, we also find his tremendous modesty. He attributed great importance to modesty and refused to use the Torah for his own benefit. According to the accounts of his contemporaries, he would constantly conceal himself because of his discretion and piety.

The teaching of the Sages, “He who flees from greatness, greatness pursues” (Eruvin 13b) was fulfilled in Rabbi Israel Yaakov. To his table came halachic questions on which he was asked to express his

views, for everyone recognized his great abilities. The Torah scholars of Jerusalem, who understood his importance, asked him to speak in public on Shabbat and the holidays. He spoke in a clear and pleasant way, which many of his listeners enjoyed. They lovingly accepted the words of Mussar and admonishment that he addressed to them, and he brought many back to the right path.

Maintaining Bonds of Friendship

About ten years after his arrival in Jerusalem, Rabbi Israel Yaakov was one of the leaders of a community of pious and holy individuals who elevated themselves in prayer and fixed regular times for study in the Beit El synagogue, founded by the gaon Rabbi Gedalia Chivan.

Thus for example, in the devotional agreement written by the members of the holy chavura, with the avowed goal of “doing everything to maintain bonds of friendship,” Rabbi Israel Yaakov's signature appears at the top, followed by the signatures of Rabbi Raphael Eliezer Farchi, Rabbi Chaim Della Rosa, Rabbi Yom Tov (the son of Rabbi Israel Yaakov), and Rabbi Shalom Mizrachi Sharabi (the holy Rashash).

Rishon Letzion

The Rishon Letzion, Rabbi Yitzchak HaCohen Rappaport, passed away near the end of 5515, and our teacher Rabbi Israel Yaakov was appointed to succeed him.

He took upon his shoulders a heavy burden that called upon his wisdom, and he received Divine aid because the situation of the Jews living in Jerusalem at the time was not very good. There were good days in which the atmosphere was relaxed, but also days that were not so good. When the Sultan of Constantinople exerted pressure on the local governors, the Jews of Jerusalem lived in peace. However when the influence of the central government weakened, the governor of the city did whatever he pleased and used the power that was at his disposition to extort money from Jews, who were at his mercy. The leaders and guarantors who procured money and taxes for the local governor were the leaders of the Jewish community, and they were often imprisoned as a way of extorting money from the Jewish community.

One of the ways that the governor of Jerusalem invented to extort money from needy Jews was to impose a tax on every burial, a tax that had to be paid before the deceased could be laid to rest. Muslim officers continuously guarded the gates of Jerusalem, not letting any funeral procession pass without a certificate stating that the tax had been paid. Thus the cry of the oppressed ascended to Heaven.

In this and similar cases, action from great Torah authorities was needed, for in their wisdom they knew how to reach a compromise and tread carefully, without damaging the delicate relationship that existed between the Jewish community and their non-Jewish neighbors.

Rabbi Israel Yaakov did not live long after being appointed Rishon Letzion. In fact he occupied this position for only 13 months, being summoned to the Heavenly yeshiva at the height of his glory. That day was Tammuz 10, 5516.