

Good heartedness, Emunah, & Simplicity

The Mitzvah of Beheading the Firstborn Donkey

On the first day of Chol Hamoed Pesach we read the chapter of sanctifying all firstborn males. The chapter concludes with the Mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn male donkey by giving the Kohen (priest) a sheep. If one does not redeem the firstborn donkey, he must behead it.

The Rambam¹ states that the mitzvah of פדיון, redeeming the donkey with a sheep, is preferable to עריפה, beheading. However, the Raavad disagrees very strongly with the Rambam and insists that עריפה is not a mitzvah because the donkey owner destroys the property of the Kohen. Nevertheless, according to the Rambam עריפה is also a mitzvah, albeit not the preferred form of performing the mitzvah.

This seems to be very difficult to understand. The mitzvah of redeeming a first born male donkey was given to the Torah observant Jew, who will fulfill the mitzvah of פדיון and will therefore not need to behead the donkey. Someone who is not mitzvah observant and will not fulfill the mitzvah of redeeming the donkey, will not kill it either. So to whom was the mitzvah of עריפה given?

An Interjected Command

Moshe was standing before Pharaoh after the Plague of Darkness when Pharaoh warned him, "Do not see me ever again!" Moshe agreed.

The next paragraph begins that Hashem told Moshe², "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and afterwards he will send you from here... Speak to the people [and tell them they should each] request, a man from his friend and a woman from her friend, vessels of silver and gold ...Hashem made the people appear favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians ..."

The following paragraph tells of Moshe's warning to Pharaoh about the upcoming Plague of the Firstborn. However, did Moshe not agree not to come before Pharaoh anymore?

Rashi explains that as Moshe was standing before Pharaoh Hashem told him about the Plague of the Firstborn, which Moshe immediately related to Pharaoh prior to exiting the palace.

However, between Hashem telling Moshe Rabbeinu of the plague and Moshe relating it to Pharaoh, there is an interruption of an unrelated topic – that of the Jewish people borrowing gold and silver vessels from the Egyptians and their finding favor in the eyes of the Egyptians.

Why was it necessary for this to be inserted here, during the warning of the Plague of the Firstborn?

Later, during the narrative of the actual exodus from Egypt, the Torah repeats that they borrowed dishes of precious metals and that Hashem made the Jewish people appear favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians.

Two Reasons for the Mitzvah of Redeeming the Firstborn Donkey

Rashi³ gives two reasons to explain why only the firstborn of the donkey species are redeemed and not that of any other impure animal. The first is that the Egyptians are compared to donkeys. The donkey is therefore inferior because the impurity of the Egyptians is vested in it and it needs special treatment.

The second reason is because it was donkeys that helped haul the precious vessels that the Jewish people had received from the Egyptians. This interpretation demonstrates that the

donkey has a degree of holiness that the other non-kosher animals do not have because of the good deed it performed for the Jewish people during the exodus.

These two different ways of interpreting the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn donkey explain the two options the Torah gives us for treating it. If the reason we redeem only the firstborn of the donkey is because it aided the Jewish people during their migration from Egypt, then it is to be redeemed through a sheep. If the donkey represents the evil Egyptians its head is to be knocked off.

The Egyptians were Stingy

The Ari HaKadosh states regarding the Egyptians; "They are the impure force of the feminine 'Yesod,' which is stingy even regarding her husband."

A very simplistic explanation of the words of the Ari HaKadosh is: Yesod - the sixth of the seven attributes that make up the personality of man - is the attribute with which one bestows goodness upon others. Evil is always the opposite of holiness. Therefore, evil Yesod is stinginess. The feminine aspect of evil 'Yesod' is so extreme in her miserliness; that she refuses to give even to her own husband.

Such extreme selfishness was the evil force that operated within Egypt. 'Yesod' - giving - was completely corrupt in Egypt. Even an occasional charitable act was just for selfish motives – honor, prestige, good image, etc.

The Egyptians could not give to anyone and eyed the abundance of anyone but themselves with jealousy. מצרים, is gematria (has the same numerical value as) צר עין, stinginess (they both equal 430). The Egyptians could not bear the good fortune of another person.

We begin the Haggadah with "הא לחמא עניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים", 'This is the poor-man's bread that our forefathers ate in Egypt.' The Egyptian tormenters provided us with Matzah because it was a cheap, unpleasant food, and suppressed the appetite.

Although by giving their slaves inferior food, they would lose out on their productivity, they could nevertheless not bring themselves to provide the Jewish people with better meals. They were simply incapable of providing another human being with a tasty meal despite the resulting loss.

Following our declaration that the Matzah was the only food our miserly Egyptian tormentors were able to provide us with, we generously invite all who are hungry to come and dine with us in our Pesach feast. We announce that we are completely the opposite of our tightfisted jailors and we declare, "כל דכפין ייתי וייכול", 'All who are hungry come and eat.'

Breaking the Impure Force of Egypt

Each of the plagues destroyed yet another aspect of the impurity of the Egyptian culture. The last plague destroyed the very essence of their evil.

During the Plague of the Firstborn, not only the eldest Egyptian of each household was smitten, but also their idols were destroyed. The life force and culture of each nation is bestowed upon them through their angel who is vested in their deity.

With the destruction of their idol, the cultural uniqueness of the Egyptian people, including their stingy jealousy, ceased to exist. When their life force and the source of their culture was destroyed, they were suddenly capable of giving graciously to their formerly despised slaves.

Hashem was particularly insistent that the Jewish people request precious vessels from their Egyptian neighbors immediately before exiting Egypt, in order to show what the Plague of

the Firstborn accomplished. This wondrous plague transformed their tightfisted masters into generous people.

Hashem included it as part of the warning of the Tenth Plague to impress upon Pharaoh the enormity of the destruction he was facing. The pride and stronghold of the Egyptians - the culture of his empire - will disappear with the death of their prided firstborn. The destruction will be so complete that the Egyptians will even become capable of giving precious dishes to their formerly despised slaves and not even feel forced to do it! To the contrary, they will find the Jewish people favorable in their eyes, and will give the gold and silver to them wholeheartedly!

The donkey, to which the Egyptians are compared, would have been unwilling to help the Jewish people carry their good fortune, had the evil trait of Egyptian stinginess not been broken.

The Essence of a Person Extends into his Possessions

The Pri Tzaddik, explaining the concept that a person's essence extends into his possessions, cites the example of the donkey of Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair, who refused to eat food upon which there was an uncertainty if it had been tithed⁴. A donkey is not capable of such a feat! It was only the essence of its holy master that extended into it that refused to eat food upon which there was only an uncertainty of its permissibility.

The Gemarah states that a generous person should give one fortieth of his field to the Kohen as Terumah; an average person one fiftieth; a stingy person one sixtieth.

The question arises, which person will admit that he has a stingy streak and give only one sixtieth of his field?

The Divrei Yisrael answers that in the times of the Bais HaMikdash, when the mitzvah of Terumah was in effect, the Jewish people had holy eyes and were able to discern spiritual reality. The stingy man surveyed his field, and to his dismay, it was apparent that only on sixtieth of his field had the holiness of the Kohen in it. If he would give more than that, the Kohen would not take it, it was very obviously not part of the Kohen's allotment.

The Rectification of the Miserly Jew

Based on this we can resolve our original difficulty. To which Jew was the mitzvah of עריפה given to? To the tightfisted man, albeit the mitzvah observant one.

He would look at his donkey and see his inner ugliness revealed on his animal. It contained no holiness; it was full of the evil traits of the stingy Egyptian. He would not be able to present the Kohen with such a donkey! The Kohen would immediately recognize that it was not fit for himself.

The owner's evil trait of stinginess was vested in his donkey which represents the jealous Egyptians. By destroying the donkey the Jew weakens this evil trait within himself.

The Or Hachaim⁵ explains that this was the reason why Moshe Rabbeinu ground the Golden Calf. Through destroying the object where their evil inclination toward idol worship was vested, the evil was weakened.

Hashem would cause it so that the donkey of a man who had the evil trait of stinginess, would give birth to a male donkey upon which it would be plainly revealed the evil essence of miserliness of the Egyptians. (This is in accordance with the first explanation Rashi gives for the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn of the donkey species only.) The Torah observant Jew would then destroy the donkey, and find himself relieved of his stingy heart.

This is similar to what we do on the eve of Pesach; we burn the Chametz, which on the eve of Pesach takes on the essence of the evil inclination, and are thereby relieved of our dark side.

The Simplicity of the Donkey

The Maharal explains why the donkey is the only impure animal that merits that a mitzvah is done with it.

The donkey is a very simple animal; it has no sparkle or beauty and its head faces downward. It wins no races like the horse and cannot fight fiercely like the bull. It is a one-dimensional beast of burden that simply does its duty. The Hebrew word for donkey is חמור, which is similar to the words חמרי, earthly or simple. The donkey is very simple.

A more refined, noble being is a combination of multi-dimensional features blended together that comprise its beautiful and splendid being. The donkey is none of that, it is very simple and has only one aspect to it; it dutifully serves its master.

Simplicity is a Spiritual Virtue

However, the simplicity of the donkey is its virtue. Simplicity holds hands with purity. A pure substance is very simple, it is not mixed together with any foreign matter; it is composed of only one element.

Because the donkey is so simple, it is similar to holiness. Hashem is "אחדות פשוט", simple oneness. He is "אחד, יחיד, ומיוחד", 'one, alone and unique.' Hashem is not comprised of multiple elements, He is Simply One.

When Moshe Rabbeinu traveled from Midyan to Egypt in order to redeem the Jewish people, he rode 'The Donkey⁶.' Rashi comments, that this was the donkey that Avraham rode to the Akeida, and that Mashiach will ride when he will come to redeem the Jewish people. This was a specific, very special donkey that Hashem created during the last moments of the Friday of creation.

A being, in its first stage of development is comprised of only one component. Later, as it develops further, it obtains the complexity of a multi-dimensional being.

The donkey is the animal that represents the aspect of the first stage of development. Therefore, Avraham, Moshe and Mashiach chose it as their form of carriage. These three great and holy men were very G-dly and were attracted to the simplicity of the donkey.

Furthermore, they were all 'first' in a specific aspect; Avraham was the first of the Jewish people, the Midrash refers to Moshe as 'the first,' and Mashiach is termed "the first of Tzion⁷,"

Although a horse is a more distinguished animal, it holds its head up high, rides swiftly and carries its body with grace, and therefore kings use the horse as their choice of transportation, it is only superior in the physical sense. The donkey has the spiritual advantage - it is simple.

The Matzah is a Simple Food

Matzah, too, the Maharal continues, has the advantage of simplicity, it is an exceedingly simple food; it is comprised of but flour and water. No other ingredients are allowed in it; not even time is permitted to affect it. Matzah is a holy food because it is so simple.

From the gourmet perspective, matzah does not even make it to the contest; it is a much too inferior food. However, in the sublime heavenly worlds of simplicity, matzah is very great.

This is also the reason why the Kohen Gadol would don simple white garments when entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Usually he would wear the eight splendid garments which were comprised of many colors and materials. These garments were definitely more appropriate for the grandeur of his position. However, from the spiritual perspective of the Holy of Holies, the simple white garments are superior and were therefore worn there⁸.

‘Simple’ Jews

The Rebbe of Rizhin once went to visit his Chassidim in a little village. The leader requested that the rebbe pray in the main synagogue. The Rebbe said, “How will there be place for everyone there?”

The leader answered, “We will not allow the simple Jews to come in.”

The Rebbe answered, “My grandfather, the Maggid of Mezritch, was a simple Jew. My grandfather, the “Malach,” was a simple Jew. My father, R’ Sholom of Probisht, was a simple Jew. If you do not allow the simple Jews into the synagogue, I cannot come in!”

An Exceptional Donkey

The Matzah is simple – it is holy. If the donkey is also simple, why is it a non-kosher animal? The answer is, true, the donkey is simple but it is very lazy, slow, and depressed. It hangs its head low as it dutifully but very slowly does its duty. Matzah is the opposite, it is a quick food, and can be produced only with swift, energetic alacrity, without which it would begin to rise and become leavened.

The donkey of Avraham, Moshe, and Mashiach is an exception to the standard donkey. It was created during the dusk of the Friday of creation.

The law is that one who runs in a public domain and thereby damages property is obligated to pay for it. One is obligated to be cautious and not cause anyone any damage. However, on Friday, at dusk, he is exempt from paying because it is the eve of Shabbos. Permission is granted to run because everyone is in a hurry to be ready on time for Shabbos.

The donkey Hashem created during the last moments of Friday was created, like the matzah, in a great hurry. It has the advantage of matzah - it is simple - without the disadvantage of laziness.

The three great men who used and will use it did so in situations of energetic activity and rushing. Avraham woke up early in the morning to go to the Akeida to sacrifice Yitzchak. Moshe used the donkey when he went to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt in a great hurry, "כי בחפזון יצאת ממצרים"⁹. Mashiach will arrive swiftly; he will not dawdle when the time for the final redemption arrives.

This donkey is a swift energetic one, it has the advantage of matzah. Therefore, "ויחבוש" "את חמרו"¹⁰ 'and [Avraham] saddled his donkey [before embarking on the Akeida] is gematria "תאכל מצות", 'you shall eat matzos' (they both equal 987).

Although the regular donkey is an impure animal, it did merit a degree of holiness. Because a member of its species is a speedy creature, it merits that its firstborn male are redeemed.

"וְכֹל-פֶּטֶר חֲמוֹר תִּפְדֶּה בְּשֶׁה"¹¹, 'and every firstborn donkey you shall redeem 'אֵי אֶשׁ' a sheep,' is gematria, "כִּי בְּחֶפְזוֹן יֵצֵאת מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם", 'because in a hurry you went out of the land of Egypt' (they both equal 1395). The firstborn of the donkey is redeemed because a member of its species is a swift creature and it carried Moshe Rabbeinu who led the Jewish people out of Egypt in a great hurry.

Our Generation has the Same Advantage as the Donkey

Our generation is the lowest of all the generation. Like the donkey we have nothing with which to promote ourselves. When we read stories of Jews who lived before the First World War describing how they served Hashem and the grandeur and greatness of their prayer and Torah study. When we hear of the emotions that would naturally be aroused within the average layman during the days when Elul and Tishrei arrived, we become very aware of our own lackluster and colorlessness. We have none of their greatness in Torah and mitzvos.

The Tanya explains that every Jew is rooted in a specific mitzvah. He will subconsciously be attracted to his roots and try to fulfill his mitzvah to the utmost. Every generation, too, has its specific mitzvah to adhere to.

The mitzvah of our generation is Emunah. Emunah comes into play when we realize we are lacking understanding or explanation. Jews believe in Hashem when it comes to things that are above our comprehension.

The Greatness of Simple Emunah

The greater a Jew is, the more he understands. However, even the greatest Jew, from his lofty viewpoint, sees a level of G-dliness which he does not yet understand, but must believe in.

After the splitting of the sea, the Jewish people perceived Hashem. Yet, the verse states, "And they believed in Hashem." From their sublime perspective, they perceived even higher spiritual spheres that they did not grasp and had to utilize faith for.

Our generation has almost no grasp of spirituality whatsoever. We feel neither the intimacy of Hashem, nor the holiness of a Shabbos or Yom Tov; we have to believe in everything.

However, it is in the merit of our Emunah that we will be redeemed.

Our Emunah is very simple. It gives the power for the donkey of Mashiach to hasten and appear. "עֲנִי וְרוֹכֵב עַל-דְּמוֹר" ¹², '[Mashiach will arrive like a] poor man riding on a donkey', is gematria ¹³ "כָּל מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֱמוּנָה", 'All your commandments are Emunah' (they both equal 718). In the merit of obediently following the directives of the Torah with the simple Emunah of the uneducated village Jew of yesteryear, Mashiach will come.

The Akeida – An Exercise in Simple Emunah

Avraham Avinu comprehended G-dliness with his great perception and sublime spiritual stature. However, at the Akeida he lost all of his spiritual awareness. He perceived Hashem from the foggy distance. The G-d he understood so well was now remote and obscured. His head felt clogged, his heart was blocked.

Heaven cast him down all the generations until he was in the same spiritual state as ours, the very lowest one. Avraham Avinu went through what we do today. With this confined awareness he had to withstand the difficult challenge he was facing. He went to the Akeida with the simple understanding of the donkey ¹⁴.

"דַּרְךְ" ¹⁶ "את המקום מרחוק" ¹⁵, '[Avraham perceived] Hashem from a distance', is gematria ¹⁶ "דַּרְךְ" ¹⁶ "אמונה בחרתי", 'I have chosen the path of faith.' Despite feeling distant from Hashem, Avraham Avinu followed Him simple mindedly, like the Jew who closes his eyes when he recites Shema, declaring that even though he doesn't see, he believes.

Be a Simple Jew

A Jew should emulate the simple well-meaning village Jew of yesteryear. Our Judaism should be without political motives, without conniving schemes or twisted ways of thinking. Pray

fervently, learn Torah studiously and do mitzvos with simple dedication to Hashem; leave out any complicated calculations. This is what Hashem wants from our generation.

The Zohar praises the donkey because it does not kick its master, as the horse sometimes does, because it has no haughtiness. We have to emulate the donkey and accept whatever Hashem sends our way, faithfully follow the directives of His Torah, and the directives of the bearers of the Torah, our Torah leaders.

Stop the Politics Between Sects of Jews!

One has to believe in the greatness of his rebbe, and in the greatness of *another Jew's* rebbe. Each Jew has his spiritual guide and should definitely keep close to him; but to say that the other rebbe is no good, is a serious flaw.

The Sanzer Rebbe warned his chassidim, "Whoever says that only his rebbe is a rebbe and that the other rebbe is no good, I will uproot him!" The correct attitude is: According to who I am, my rebbe is good for me; according to who the other person is, his rebbe is good for him!

Each true Torah leader (who guides his followers in the observance of the Torah) is like a tractate of Gemara. Is someone who is learning Meseches Shabbos, precluded from learning Meseches Berachos? A person is allowed catch a peek into a different way of serving Hashem and glean some good points to add to his own service of Hashem.

One should take good points from everybody. As for flaws, one should not even take his own.

The Chasam Sofer states that the generation prior to him was a very great one; they had very many great Torah giants, the Pnei Yehoshua and Noda BiYehuda among them. Mashiach was supposed to come, but then, alas! A disagreement broke out between the two great Torah giants, R' Yaakov Emden and R' Yonoson Eibshitz, which was for the sake of heaven, but the students got involved and disparaged the great Torah leader of the opposite side and thereby delayed the coming of Mashiach.

Pesach – Emunah and Chessed (Loving-Kindness)

The whole week of Pesach is also the first week of Sefirah, when we work on a different middah, character trait, each week. The first middah we work on is chesed. We have to focus on 'fargin' – wishing and rejoicing in the good fortune of – another Jew, another sect of Jews and their leader. When you see the good fortune of other person – that he is more capable of studying Torah, is richer, etc - 'fargin' him! Don't be jealous; break the impure force of Egyptian stinginess!

Pesach is a Yom Tov of simple emunah. Eat matzah, which the Zohar terms a food of emunah. It is a mitzvah to eat Matzah throughout Yom Tov, not just the first night (although there is no obligation to do so). Pesach is also a time to strengthen our belief in the coming of Mashiach.

The Jewish people have a special charm in the eyes of Hashem specifically when they are in exile and bereft of their spiritual loftiness. When Avraham Avinu fell from his spiritual stature for the duration of the Akeida, Hashem called out to him, "Avraham Avraham," and Rashi explains that calling a person twice by his name is an expression of fondness. Similarly, when Yaakov Avinu was descending toward the Egyptian exile, Hashem called out to him "Yaakov Yaakov."

When Jews of very inferior spiritual stature stick to Judaism through thick and thin, they are very appealing to Hashem.

May we merit - together with the entire Jewish people – a redemption

בעיתה בזריזות במהרה, במהרה בימינו בקרוב
In its time, swiftly, very quickly, in our times, in the very near future.

¹ הל' ביכורים פי"ב ה"א

² שמות יא ריש הפרק

³ שמות יג:ג

⁴ חולין ז

⁵ שמות לב:כ

⁶ שמות ד:כ

⁷ ישעי' מא:כז

⁸ ע"כ דברי המהר"ל

⁹ דברים טז:ג

¹⁰ בראשית כב:ג

¹¹ שמות יג:יג

¹² זכרי' ט:ט

¹³ תהלים קיט:פו

¹⁴ זוהר וירא

¹⁵ בראשית כב:ד

¹⁶ תהלים קיט:ל