

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points of the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

ד"ה זאת חוקת התורה פרשת כי תשא תשכ"ו בלתי מוגה

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CHANGING DARK TO LIGHT AND BITTER TO SWEET

THE PASSAGE ABOUT THE RED HEIFER BEGINS ‘THIS IS THE STATUTE OF THE TORAH’. Rashi says it is called a statute because the nations mock Israel on account of this law², which seemingly has no rationale, so the response is that this is a Divine statute, beyond Reason. But the phrase ‘This is the Statute of the Torah’ implies that this is teaching us about *all* the laws of the Torah, and indeed about the Torah itself. However much we may feel we understand them, they always have a dimension which is beyond human understanding. For they come from G-d, Who is infinite and utterly beyond Reason.

The law of the Red Heifer in itself concerns purification from the impurity of death. The Midrash tells us that when G-d taught Moses all the laws of the Torah, Moses was struck by the idea of this kind of impurity. How can someone impure in this way achieve purity? G-d then told him about the Red Heifer. According to the Midrash, Moses did not see how that would have a purifying effect. The Zohar points out that the Red Heifer is from the ‘left’ side, from the side of Severity. How can it purify the impure, who are themselves in a state of ‘severity’?

A discourse by the Tzemah Tzedek will help us understand this. In our Sedra we read ‘And Moses pleaded’ (Ex.32:11). He was pleading with G-d to forgive the Jewish people for making the Golden Calf. The word for ‘and he pleaded’ is

¹ Maamar Zot Chukat Hatorah 5726 (1966). Printed in Dvar Malchut of Sedra Ki Tisa 5777. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² The law is presented in Numbers 19:2 ff. A red heifer is slaughtered outside the Sanctuary and burnt. Its ashes are mixed with water and sprinkled on those who are impure from coming in contact with the dead, in order to purify them.

vayechal. A Midrash explains this as meaning ‘and he sweetened’. When, earlier, the Israelites had come to the place Marah, where the waters were bitter, G-d taught Moses how to pray that the bitter should become sweet. Later when the Jews had become ‘bitter’ because of their sin, Moses applied the same prayer, and pleaded that the bitterness should be sweetened.

The Zohar asks: who of you can change darkness to light, and bitter to sweet? This encapsulates the two aspects of service of G-d: to change darkness to light, and bitter to sweet.

First let us consider changing darkness to light. When G-d created the universe He called the light day, and the darkness night. Day signifies light and revelation; night signifies darkness and concealment. These two aspects exist on all levels, including the Divine Names. The Tetragrammaton signifies light and revelation; Elokim, the plural name which has the same numerical value as Nature³ signifies darkness and concealment.

In fact the act of Creation took place through the Name Elokim, as the first line of the Torah attests: ‘In the beginning Elokim created Heaven and Earth’. Because, as the kabbalists explain, creation was an act of *concealment* of the Divine. Through this concealment we see the physical universe as reality, while the Divine, which is its source, is hidden.

The service of man is to change this darkness into light. But if creation is dark from the outset, how can that be achieved? Because on the sixth day, when Adam and Eve were created, they turned to all existence around them and said: ‘Come, let us bow and worship our Creator!’ Through this they revealed G-dliness in the dark world. In the same way, every Jew has the power to reveal G-dliness.

The source of this power is his or her Soul, which is termed ‘the lamp of G-d’ (Prov.20:27). G-d too is termed ‘my Lamp’ (II Sam.22:29), and also the Mitzvot are called a Lamp (Prov.6:23). In order for the individual to illuminate the darkness of the world with the radiance of one’s soul, one needs aid from G-d above, and also the power of the Mitzvot.

Then the person is empowered to illuminate the physical world. For almost all the Mitzvot have a pronounced physical aspect, like Tefilin and the scrolls within them, which are made of the hide of animals (and the entire Torah is compared to Tefilin⁴). Through keeping the Mitzvot, their physical aspect is spiritually illuminated, and this illumination flows into the source⁵ of their

³ Both *Elokim* and *HaTeva* (Nature) have the numerical value 86.

⁴ Kiddushin 35a.

⁵ This source is called ‘the shell of light’ (Kelipat Nogah). It is a shell, concealing the Divine, but can relatively easily be illuminated. This is the source of all *permitted* things, which are the things with which Mitzvot are

physical being. This expresses our positive service of G-d in the world: through the Mitzvot, turning darkness to light.

But there is also another mode of service: changing the bitter to sweet. This is the service of Repentance, through which, ultimately, even deliberate sins can achieve the status of merits⁶. This also relates to the ability to accept suffering with joy, seeing that it is in reality good, but it is from the World of Concealment⁷. A further, more rare level, is the ability to change what looks bad into revealed good, as Nachum Ish Gamzu was able to do⁸. In the future, that will be the reality for everyone; but even now, we are able to believe and feel that however negative the event, its ultimate source in the Hidden Realm of the Divine is good.

This is the special power of Moses: to make the bitter sweet, and hence he had the power to plead for the Jewish people and transform their bitterness (of the sin of the Golden Calf) to the sweetness of forgiveness. This power is expressed in his ability to reveal the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, as described in the Sedra (Ex.34:6-7).

This also explains the nature of the Red Heifer, because this has a special association with Moses: the verse says ‘they should bring to you a red heifer’ (Num.19:2) and Rashi says ‘it will always be called by your name: the heifer which Moses prepared’. Because the Red Heifer has this quality it is able to transform the bitterness of impurity into the sweetness of purity.

The power to change darkness to light, and bitterness to sweetness, is the task of every Jew, and is bequeathed to each one by Moses. Moses acts with the merit of the Patriarchs before him, but this is his special quality, as it says about him in Psalms (106:23): ‘[G-d] said He would destroy [the Jewish people], but Moses His chosen one stood in the breach before Him to turn aside His anger, that it should not destroy’. The power to sweeten the bitter is the special power of Moses, through which, ultimately, the darkness and bitterness of Exile will be changed to light and sweetness⁹.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care

carried out. Performing the Mitzvah with that thing actualizes the potential for radiance.

⁶ See Yoma 86b.

⁷ See Tanya Part 1 ch.26.

⁸ See the story about him in Taanit 21a, in which a negative action perpetrated against him by thieves was transformed into something very positive.

⁹ The end of the original discourse was not transcribed, and this ending is just a suggestion.