

The Rebbe's Discourses

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

Re-Published for Shabbat Sedra Shemini 27 Adar II 5784, 6 April 2024¹

LEVIATHAN AND THE OX

L EVIATHAN IS A MYSTERIOUS BIBLICAL CREATURE, A GREAT FISH². THE MIDRASH DESCRIBES a kind of 'circus' in which Leviathan battles with another creature, 'the Wild Ox', also known as Behemoth. According to the Midrash on Sedra Shmini³, Leviathan slaughters the Ox with its fins. A question is then posed: the knife for slaughtering must be perfectly smooth. The fins of Leviathan are serrated. So how can its 'shechitah' of the Ox be kosher? The Midrash answers that at that time (the future to come), G-d will decree that this kind of slaughter is also kosher.

This is discussed by Rabbi Shneur Zalman in Likkutei Torah for Sedra Shmini⁴. In addition, the concept of the 'circus' is presented in Torat Chaim by his son Rabbi Dov Ber. Torat Chaim⁵ explains that the 'circus' is a primitive and cruel form of amusement, which might be indulged in by noblemen. They take a lion and a leopard, tie both in chains, and let them fight each other. Because men have power over the animals which are gripped in chains, it is not a real fight. The men control the way the leopard attacks the lion, and they prevent the lion from responding; and then they allow the lion to attack the leopard. It is something false and low, and cruel.

But for the men involved it is intensely enjoyable. The power of delight which each person has at their essence is channelled into the enjoyment of this low sport. The Rebbe then makes the striking statement that this parable applies to

¹ *Livyatan Zeh Shemini 5725*, published in *Dvartalchut Shemini 5776, 5782*. The Hebrew text is not *mugah*, ie not finally edited by the Rebbe. This English summary was first published by the CRU in 1982.

² See Psalms 104:26.

³ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah, Shmini 13:3. This Sedra gives the laws of kosher animals, fish and birds, providing the context for the Midrashic account of Leviathan slaughtering the Ox.

⁴ See fol.18a ff.

⁵ Torat Chaim, Toledot, ch.10 (153d).

our service of G-d through the positive and negative Mitzvot. G-d gives us situations in which we struggle to keep the Mitzvot, to attempt to do something positive or to avoid doing something negative. In this G-d's delight is expressed. The Divine 'delight' originates at the highest level of the Essence, but it is expressed at the seemingly low level of our struggles to keep the Mitzvot.

Now we return to the section in Likkutei Torah, which discusses the Midrash on our Sedra, concerning the 'slaughter' of the Ox by Leviathan. It explains that Leviathan and the Ox represent two different kinds of Tzaddik. The higher kind, symbolized by Leviathan, carries out spiritual unifications in an exalted way. The lower kind of Tzaddik is involved with practical aspects of life: daily Mitzvot. The higher kind of Tzaddik (whom we can see as a Chassidic Rebbe), elevates the lower kind (the more ordinary individual, the Chassid). This is the inner meaning of the 'slaughter' described in the Midrash: which we can understand in terms of the way the Rebbe elevates the Chassid⁶.

The upper Tzaddik, like a great fish, swims swiftly, darting 'from one end of the world to the other'. The fins of the Fish, ie Leviathan, are like the wings of a bird which bring it higher and lower, expressing love and awe of the Divine respectively. The twin aspects of Love and Awe are like *Ratzo*, moving forward towards the Divine, and *Shov*, returning, in an ebb and flow motion, as mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel⁷. This quality of intermittent movement in relation to G-d is basic to our relationship with the Infinite Divine. For this reason, Leviathan, the higher Tzaddik, the Chassidic Rebbe, is described as elevating the Chassid, (a movement depicted in the text as 'slaughtering' the Ox), 'with his fins': with love and awe of the Divine.

The theme of *Ratzo* and *Shov* in fact permeates all our service of the Divine. This is explained in Likkutei Torah in the section discussing the Red Heifer (Numbers 19:1 ff), a passage read on this Shabbat, Parshat Parah. The Red Heifer is called 'the statute of the Torah'. The twin actions of burning the slaughtered heifer, a movement upwards, and putting living water on its ashes in a vessel, a movement downwards, express the *Ratzo* and *Shov* which apply to everything.

This is why the *serrated* fin of Leviathan is so important. Because the serration expresses the movement upwards in *Ratzo* and then the return in *Shov*. In the actual practical laws of ritual slaughter, the knife may not be serrated, but must be perfectly smooth. The Midrash states that the serrated knife will only be kosher for Shechitah in the World to Come.

⁶ This interpretation is not spelled out in the discourse, it is the view of the translator.

⁷ 'The chayot - angels - moved forward and back, *ratzo* and *shov*.' Ezekiel 1:14.

The Rebbe now explains that although the movement of *Ratzo* and *Shov* characterizes our service of G-d, it bears within it an implicit danger. The individual climbs higher and falls back, climbs yet higher and then falls back - isn't the 'fall' something potentially dangerous? It might lead to serious problems, falling further than one intended....

And yet, the texts we have been discussing suggest that *Ratzo* and *Shov* is basic to our service of the Divine.

Very unusually, the Rebbe does not answer this question, but suggests that we the students exploring this discourse should try to work out an answer ourselves.

[A possible answer is that, given that we are discussing the relationship between the higher Tzaddik and the lower, the Chassidic Rebbe and the Chassid, if the individual firmly connects himself or herself to the Rebbe, then even when we fall, we do not fall too far, and are able to climb up again, closer and closer to the Divine.]

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care