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GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT KI TISA

The Natural Order

"Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chanina: We can't stop between Parah and HaChodesh. Rabbi Levi further said that a mnemonic to remember this is that one is permitted to drink between the first and second cups [at the Seder], as well as between the second and third; however, one is not permitted to drink between the third and fourth cups." - Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 3:5

Leading up to Pesach, there are four extra Torah readings that we add after the regular Torah reading on four separate Shabbats. The first is Shekalim, which discusses the contribution of a half-Shekel to the Tabernacle, and is read on the Shabbat preceding Rosh Chodesh Adar (or Rosh Chodesh itself, if it falls out on Shabbat, as it did this year).

The second special portion is Zachor, which is read on the Shabbat before Purim, and speaks of the mitzvahs to remember what Amalek did to us, not to forget, and to annihilate them.

Let's skip to the fourth extra parsha for a moment, HaChodesh, which is read on the Shabbat that falls on or before the first of Nissan. This details G-d's communication with Moses two weeks before the Exodus, and features the establishment of a new month, the Paschal Lamb, Matzah, Maror and the Seder.

On the Shabbat immediately preceding that one (today!), we read Parah, which is the laws of the purification process with the Red Heifer.

So, Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, that sometimes there may be a break (i.e., a vacant Shabbat, per se) between Shekalim and Zachor, as well as between Zachor and Parah. However, there is never a break between Parah and HaChodesh. Once you get to Parshat Parah, you can't stop and must go immediately to Parshat HaChodesh.

This corresponds to the Four Cups at the Seder, where one may drink wine between the first and second cups, as well as between the second and third cups; however, one may not drink between the third and fourth cups.

Curiously, the Jerusalem Talmud does not explain the reason why we can't stop between Parshat Parah and HaChodesh.

Perhaps I can offer the following insight: In the continuation of the Jerusalem Talmud there, Rabbi Levi once again quotes Rabbi Chama bar Chanina: "It makes sense to [reverse the order and] read HaChodesh before Parah."

The reason is because the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was built on the first of the month of Nissan (which is also when the commandment to establish Rosh Chodesh (HaChodesh) was said), while the burning of the Red Heifer took place on the second day of the month. So the correct chronological order would be to read HaChodesh followed by Parah.

So why, then, do we read Parah first? Rabbi Levi offers: "Parah is read first because it speaks of the purification of the Jewish People." In other words, purification (Parah) is the preparation for redemption (HaChodesh).

Since purification is the idea of Teshuva (often translated as repentance, however more accurately rendered as return), there is no room for a pause afterwards. As soon as we do teshuva – we are redeemed. Immediately. And that's why we can't stop between Parah and HaChodesh. As soon as we read Parshat Parah – purifying ourselves through teshuva – we usher in Parshat HaChodesh – redemption.

One should view the world as evenly balanced on a scale; all it takes is one good deed to tip the scales for good. Maybe what the world is waiting for is one singular act – that we should activate the purification/teshuvah process of Parah within ourselves – and this will bring me to a state of personal redemption, in turn ushering in the collective redemption for the entire world. May it be very soon.

Written By R' Shaul Wertheimer

Who's First?

There was once a group of Chassidim sitting around the table discussing whatever was on their mind. As with any worthy Chassidic gathering, the table was adorned with some light refreshments and a little schnapps with which to say L'chaim.

Without notice, their Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael, entered the room. They gathered from the look on his face that he did not approve of the gathering. One of them mustered up the courage to declare that Rabbi Pinchas had stated that such camaraderie could be equated with the greatness of Torah study.

"I will certainly not contradict the words of the righteous Rabbi Pinchas... but it all depends on how something is done. In the Torah, we find precedent for this idea. There is a word which, while appearing in one context, has holy connotations, while when appearing in a different context, is rather profane. When Moses is instructed to carve the Second Tablets [in this week's Torah portion], the verse states, 'Engrave for yourself – פסל לך.' The Hebrew word for engrave is comprised of three letters: pey, samech and lamed. Now this exact same root word appears in the Ten Commandments, 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image – פסל לך תעשה לא.' In this context, those same three letters refer to an idol.

"How could the very same letters mean completely opposite things? In the first verse, the word refers to the holy Tablets, while in the second verse they refer to idols! What is the difference between them?" asked R' Yisrael.

Without waiting for a response, he continued, "I will tell you the difference between them. When those three letters signify something holy, then the word 'yourself' comes after it; but when the word 'yourself' comes before it, then not only is it profane, but it is prohibited by the Second Commandment of 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image!'"

Friends, the guide to those grey areas of our lives is "yourself." When we do something positive without thinking first and foremost about our own self-interest, then this can be likened to "carving the Tablets," a most holy activity. On the other hand, if we perform the very same action, but put ourselves first, then we transgress, so to speak, the commandment of not making a graven image. These sharp words of the holy Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin are certainly still pertinent, and can help us in navigating the grey areas of life. It's not enough what you do, but we also must be mindful of how we do it.

Written By R' Shaul Wertheimer