

The public reading of the four פרשיות, שקלים, זכור, פרה, חודש, takes place during the month of Adar. While the normative opinion is that זכור is a biblical obligation, there is an opinion that פרה is also a biblical requirement. The other two are Rabbinic according to all opinions. The public readings of these פרשיות announce the upcoming events and obligations related to events that occur around this time of the year, such as assembling funds for the new year's sacrifices, connecting the biblical obligation to eradicate the name and memory of Amalek with Purim, the requirement to purify those that were defiled by coming in contact with a corpse, prior to bringing the Paschal lamb sacrifice for Passover. The obligation to read these portions was instituted by the members of the Great Assembly, אנשי כנסת הגדולה. פרה is read before פרשת החודש.

פרה begins with the words זאת חוקת התורה, telling us that this portion represents the fundamental laws of the Torah. There are many laws that would seem to be more fundamental within Judaism than פרה, for example, idolatry, keeping the Sabbath. What is so special about the commandment of פרה that it deserves this special status?

The Torah says זאת חוקת הפסח, this is the law of the Paschal Sacrifice, תורה אחת, יהי-ה לכם, similar to the language used regarding the Red Heifer. The Midrash Raba asks which is more important, the פרה אדומה or the קרבן פסח, the Red Heifer or the Paschal offering? The Midrash offers a parable of two distinguished women who were observed from a distance as they were walking. How does one distinguish between the relative importance of each? We can determine the answer by observing who accompanies whom to the door of her residence. The one who is accompanied is more important than the one who continues alone to her own home after ensuring that the noble woman she accompanied arrived home safely. One would assume that the noble woman represents the Paschal Sacrifice and the woman accompanying her represents the Red Heifer. The Midrash tells us the opposite is true, the Red Heifer is the more important of the two. Though they share similar terms, what is the basis for connecting these two sections of פרה ופסח?

At their core, the Paschal Sacrifice and the Red Heifer are contradictory. The Paschal sacrifice celebrates redemption and freedom from slavery. The Jews,

enslaved for so many years, finally threw off the yoke of the Egyptians. They went from being slaves with no time or personal awareness, whose daily program was dictated by their overseers and tormentors, from a life of constant fear of unprovoked abuse and torture, to a free people who suddenly had complete control of their time, work and existence. The symbol of redemption was the breaking of the yoke of slavery. In taking us out of Egypt, **וַאֲשַׁבֹּר מִוִּטְוֵת עֹלֵכֶם**, Gd shattered the staves of your yoke, to release you from your Egyptian bondage.

A yoke is the symbol of bondage. In ancient Hebrew, the word **עול**, yoke, was used in conjunction with an ox or mule as a method to break the independent will and coerce docility and conformity from a wild animal. The Talmud refers to a yoke or collar placed on an individual to indicate that he was a slave and who his master was. The breaking of the yoke is the outward sign of release. We pray daily, **וַאֲשַׁבֹּר** **עֹלֵנוּ מֵעַל צִוְּאֵינוּ**, break the yoke from upon our neck so that we can return to our land and destiny. And if we rebel against Gd, He has promised to place an iron yoke on our neck, **וְנָתַתִּי עֹל בְּרִזְל עַל צִוְּאֵיִךְ**.

It is natural for one who was discriminated against, upon experiencing freedom and redemption, to swing all the way to the other side and indulge in those activities and behaviors that were previously denied to him. Whether in the food he eats, the company he keeps, the intimate relationships he engages in, his frame of reference becomes the world that kept him in bondage. He has an insatiable desire to consume food that was previously denied, to engage with people that are debased and disgusting. The Torah warns us in several places not to act like the Egyptians or the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan. For their actions and lifestyles are in opposition to the Torah. We must resist our natural tendencies to take on the personae of the oppressor once we are granted freedom.

A yoke can be a positive as well as a negative. The liberated individual loses his sense of perspective because of his new-found freedoms. The liberated individual seeks to drink from the cup of enjoyment without limitation. While many took the lessons about the evil Nazis **י"מ"ש** to heart after World War 2, there were a number of survivors who, even after witnessing first-hand the Nazi barbarians murder and burn their entire families before their eyes, renounced their Judaism and married

non-Jewish German spouses. How could they be so sycophantic to overlook the role played by the German Nation in general, and perhaps some of the individual Nazis they engaged with themselves in particular, who murdered their loved ones without mercy and with complete and utter depravity?

An enslaved individual seeks compensation for the deprivation he suffered during his years of servitude. One who suddenly experiences freedom without reflection, without limitation and boundary, can descend to such depths if there are no moral checks and balances on that freedom. That is why the Torah reminds us כמעשה ארץ מצרים אשר ישבתם בה לא תעשו for so many years.

A person living through a stressful and traumatic period of great hardship and deprivation will often lash out and go to the opposite extreme in his desire for gratification. The aggrieved seeks compensation for his suffering. Historically after wars a period of anarchy sets in as people feel a release from the restrictions of war and engage in all sorts of cynical and wanton behavior. Many European and Russian communities of devoted and Gd fearing Jews immediately rebelled against Judaism when the Communist revolution swept through their towns and cities. People abandon law and societal restrictions in the aftermath of a cataclysmic event that wipes out their world, even if they attempt to rebuild atop the wreckage and ruins. Noah was deemed a righteous individual before the flood. After he left the ark, he planted a vineyard, drank to excess and revealed himself, ויתגל. The Midrash interprets ויתגל differently – Noah caused exile to himself and his future generations. Noah's act of drunkenness was a rebellion against Gd. Upon being released from his mission to build the ark over so many years prior to the flood and the pressure and demands of caring for his family and the animals he saved in the ark, he threw off the yoke and restrictions that bound him, swinging to the opposite direction, to a path distant from Gd.

We are commanded to refrain from eating disgusting insects, שקצים ורמשים, in order to separate and distinguish ourselves from those around us who feel free and unrestricted to consume anything they wish and to engage in any hedonistic form of enjoyment. The freed slave is overwhelmed by his desire to engage in any and

all forms of satisfaction seeking. The Jew is commanded to control those urges, lest he be consumed by his insatiable desires. מאכלות אסורות, איסורי ביאה are restrictions that temper our lust for freedom, reintroducing a yoke that limits and controls our behavior so we recognize that all comes from Gd. It tells us to reject כחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה. For one who lacks a sense of esthetic discrimination when presented with unrestricted freedom will make poor choices.

A freed slave seeks to accumulate two sorts of capital. The first is taste from every forbidden fruit and relationship that was previously denied to him. He sees the life of his former overseers and desires the same privileges to act as they did. The second is a drive to accumulate wealth without limit in a zero sum game where he has to have it all. He will not entertain the idea of leaving something over for the less fortunate. The Torah commands us to restrain our drive, to place a yoke on ourselves and reject this Egyptian notion of domination over others. Instead we must leave over לקט שכחה ופאה in the field so the poor person can survive alongside of you.

פרה אדומה symbolizes the sin of the golden calf. The ערב רב sought unbridled pleasure. Both עגלה ערופה and פרה אדומה share the requirement that the specified animal must never have worn a yoke, עול. Why was that necessary? The absence of a yoke represents a complete lack of control, freedom to act as one wills. The yoke is a training instrument that teaches the animal to obey his master's orders. The parallel situation in a human being is one who lacks the yoke of heaven, עול מלכות שמים. One without a yoke will more readily engage in debased behavior, טומאה. To correct this we are commanded to take a red heifer, perfect, without blemish and burn it to ashes to demonstrate that our pursuit of what we consider perfection is meaningless, null and void. By doing so we demonstrate that the lack of a yoke and restrictions is the root of debasement and defilement. The Torah tells us אדם כי ימות באהל refers to the defilement associated with a corpse. However it goes deeper as Chazal tell us that the dead are חפשי מן המצוות, relieved of the obligation to perform the Commandments. It symbolizes the individual who rejects all boundaries and limits in pursuit of pleasure, including idolatry, desecrating the Sabbath, illicit relationships. We must turn to ash those desires we have that we think will lead us to unrestricted gratification, but in reality exile us from Gd.

The Torah tells us that if a murder victim is found between two cities, we must measure the distance from the corpse to each of the cities and the elders of the city must perform the *עגלה ערופה* service. Why place this responsibility on the elders? Surely we do not suspect them of having committed the crime. However ultimately they are responsible because they did not teach and rebuke the people of their town appropriately or sufficiently so that such an act could never have been perpetrated by one of their own. A child must be taught from an early age that there are boundaries, permitted and prohibited acts with consequences. The failure of our education system and the debased and violent behaviors we see are attributable in no small measure to the lack of discipline and control inculcated in the youth through the absolute freedom and lack of accountability society craves and demonstrates. The Torah does not approve of “just do it”. There is a story of Rav Yisrael Salanter who was traveling with a wagon driver who came across unguarded hay and proceeded to feed his horses. Rav Yisrael began to scream “they are watching!” and the wagon driver left the hay and ran away. After a while he saw that no one was pursuing him so he confronted Rav Yisrael claiming that no one was really there. Rav Yisrael asked why he was unconcerned about the heavenly eye that sees all and the heavenly ear that hears all? One cannot simply do as he sees fit. The hypocrisy of the world towards Israel and the Jews manifests *למאן באה* *אדם כי ימות באה*, they have exceeded all bounds of proper behavior and introspection in defiling themselves.

At the time of our celebrating our redemption and our coming into the land of Israel with our own government and army, we must also recognize that we must understand that there are limits on how far we can go and what we can do. If we do not understand the concept of a yoke, we risk losing it all.

The Midrash says that when Moses ascended to heaven to receive the Commandments, Gd was analyzing the requirements of the *עגלה ערופה* and *פרה* and quoted “Eliezer my son says that the *עגלה ערופה* must be one year old and *פרה* must be 2 years old”. Both cases represent an age where the animal, if not trained properly, will become rebellious towards its master. Why did Gd start with *עגלה ערופה*?

עגלה ערופה is associated with act of murder, בין אדם לחברו, while the defilement associated with idolatry and desecrating the Sabbath is בין אדם למקום. One can more readily understand the societal benefits associated with refraining from murder, but what benefit is there from refraining from the commandments that are בין אדם למקום? If one throws off the yoke of idolatry, Sabbath and the בין אדם לחברו מצוות, the end result is they will violate לא תרצח. The laws of murder, עגלה בת שנה, are dependent on the laws of טומאה associated with פרה בת שנים. While the Torah celebrates the breaking of the yoke of slavery, it teaches us to contain our desires and actions. Throw off the yoke of slavery, but accept the yoke of Heaven which will lead you on the path of a fulfilled life.

We now understand why פרה אדומה is considered more important than פסח and why the Torah refers to it as חוקת התורה. For without appreciating the concept of a yoke, there can be no תורה שבכתב or תורה שבעל פה. We must burn that which we are tempted to think of as perfection and embrace the limits associated with עול מלכות שמים.

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