

BESHALACH (EXODUS 13:17-17:16)

Because Your Father Said So!!

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

It's always good to have a reminder. Especially when it comes to matters spiritual.

Moses led Israel to journey from the Red Sea [When the bodies of the drowned Egyptian soldiers washed ashore, so did their riches. The Israelites were stuffing their pockets with the spoils of war, and Moses had to force them to leave.] ... *they traveled for three days in the desert but, they did not find water.* [Many commentaries observe that Torah is often compared to water. They went for three days without Torah study after the splitting of the Red Sea.] *They came to Marah, but they could not drink the waters because they were bitter.* [The Baal Shem Tov, (quoted in Stone Chumash, page 381) says that the PEOPLE were bitter, and therefore, they found fault with everything, including the water.] ... *The people complained against Moses, saying, "What will we drink?"* (Exodus, 15:22-24)

The nation had just witnessed some of the greatest miracles in human history. They achieved a level of prophecy, and sang songs of praise to G-d. They certainly understood that G-d takes care of the needs of His People. However, spiritual inspiration has a limited shelf life. It needs to be maintained. It was determined that Israel should never again allow itself to go three days without Torah study. (That is why the Torah is read in the synagogue every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday.)

He (Moses) cried out to G-d and G-d showed him a tree; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. [They got their water. But it was now necessary to insure that such rebellion would not be repeated.] *There He established CHOK and MISHPAT...* (ibid, verse 25).

What are *CHOK* and *MISHPAT*?

A *Mishpat*, literally "judgment," is a law that humans can understand. It is logical not to kill, steal, or commit adultery. Even an atheist can accept and follow a *Mishpat* because it makes sense. A *Chok* is a decree, a law that has no logical explanation. (See "Abs Of Steel/Calves Of Gold".) We don't know what's wrong with eating pork, or wearing clothes that are made of linen and wool. A believing person obeys a *Chok* simply because the Master of the World has told him to.

In order to insure that the People of Israel would not forget to be appreciative of G-d's kindness, and to have faith that it will continue, G-d gave them a sampling of both types of laws to study on a regular basis. These laws would "tide them over" until Mount Sinai, where they would receive the major bulk of the Commandments.

What were these Judgments and Decrees that they were given at the water hole of Marah? The Talmud (Sanhedrin, 56b) lists three Commandments: Civil laws, honoring parents, and Shabbos.

There is a little problem here. The sampling of Mitzvahs included *CHOK and MISHPAT* – incomprehensible Decrees and understandable Judgments. Which of these three laws is the Decree? Civil laws are certainly understandable; society could not function without them. Obviously we are required to honor our parents, who brought us into the world and raised and supported us. Shabbos is a statement of our belief that G-d created for six days and rested on the seventh.

All of these laws make sense! Why does the Torah refer to at least one of them as a Decree?

I think the Torah is talking about Shabbos. It seems to be telling us here that we shouldn't be overly creative in our interpretation of Jewish Law. The Torah says to rest on the Sabbath. What's more restful and relaxing than going fishing and then driving out to the ball park to watch the Red Sox? (Forgive the personal bias! J) And who feels like walking to synagogue in the rain or scorching heat? The Torah says to rest on the Sabbath. Why can't I rest MY way?!

The Torah says that resting on the Sabbath is a Decree. It is not our place to make a subjective determination of what WE think is the proper way to rest. Even if we'd rather rest some other way, we have to do it G-D'S way.

Perhaps that is why honoring our parents is included in the list. Sometimes we understand what our parents are telling us. Sometimes, especially when we are very young, we struggle to understand where they are coming from. Why can't I stay up as late as I want? Why do I have to get up for school? Why can't I drive my friend's car and dye my hair purple?

Eventually, as we grow in understanding and maturity, we come to understand the wisdom of our parents. We appreciate that our parents didn't give in and insisted that we accept their judgment whether we liked it or not.

As well, we don't always understand every Shabbos rule, and perhaps we never will. But our Father in Heaven understands them. And he knows what is best for us. And following G-d's laws will ultimately make us a lot richer, and a lot less bitter than we'd be from pursuing some Egyptian trinkets.

Have a great Shabbos.

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