

Parshat Chukat – Shabbat 23 July 2016

An astrophysicist and a Jew were sitting next to one another on a plane.

The astrophysicist turns to the Jew and asks him:

“What do you do?”

“I’m a Rabbi” responded the Jew.

“I know a lot about Judaism” said the scientist

“You do?”

“Yes-Don’t do unto others what you would not want to be done to yourself.”

“Ah Ha” said the Rabbi “I know a lot about astrophysics”

“You do?” Asked the scientist.

“Yes - Twinkle Twinkle little star!!”

A little girl was walking down the road with her mother during the autumnal fall. A leaf flutters down by the side of them both.

The girl turns to her mother and asks:

“Why do the leaves turn brown and fall off the tree during the autumn?”

The mother explains:

“The leaves turn green by a process called photosynthesis-it’s a process by which plants and other organisms convert light from the sun into chemical energy that can be later released. The leaves use the chlorophyll to make glucose they need to grow. In the autumn and winter there is not enough light so the leaves lose the green chlorophyll.”

“That’s not what grandma says”- responded the little girl. “Grandma says that G-d takes every single leaf and paints each and every one – one by one.”

So who is right? The mother or grandma? Is it the scientific or the religious explanation as to how things come into existence?

In my humble opinion I think both of them are right. The reason is that they are both coming from different perspectives and sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that they are speaking on the same plane.

Science is answering the How things work. Religion is a response to the question why are we here? What is the purpose to my existence? It would be a mistake to even think that these responses are on the same level.

It reminds me of a previous member of mine in Staines who became a Shomer Shabbat member of the community whilst I was there, yet his day job seemed to be a contradiction to a religious way of life. Eric was a botanist, taught in a school, even wrote text books on the subject. So I said to him - “Eric if you are teaching evolution every single day how can you equate that with your life of coming to Shul, davening, keeping Shabbat, Kashrut etc etc?”

He answered:

“Rabbi, I look at the intricacies and the simple beauty of the irrigation of a leaf and I see the Hand of G-d.”

Indeed the psalmist declares: “From my flesh I perceive G-d”

I look at creation around me I gain a greater and deeper appreciation of Hashem.

The Rambam says that through dwelling and contemplating the depth of creation, it can bring one to Love of G-d.

So you can be a scientist and even the top of your field but that doesn't need to be a contradiction to basic faith in G-d- completely the opposite. Maimonides is saying that by studying and contemplating the world around us we get to a greater appreciation of Hashem.

You know we live in a world where we are able to understand and comprehend things that we never imagined years ago. As we speak, Juno is flying into the orbit of Jupiter. We are able to see pictures from millions of miles away that we would never have imagined. We live in a culture of understanding.

On a physical level, on a mundane level rational is everything. If we cannot understand the workings of universe then we are lacking something.

Indeed in Judaism there is a mitzvah to understand and comprehend. There is a mitzvah to study Torah. We are called the people of the book for a reason.

The greatest minds; scientists; psychoanalysts; philosophers, they come from our people.

But in this mornings Sedra we come in contact with the concept of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, a mitzvah which encompassed the absolute Chok. A statute par excellence a Mitzvah that defied reason.

Even King Solomon, the wisest of all men could never fathom the ta-am, the rationality behind the Red Heifer, it was only to Moshe Rabbeinu does it say in the Midrash: "I will reveal the rational behind the Red Heifer only to you!!"

Briefly said – if a person had become defiled by the dead, you sprinkle the ashes of the Parah Adumah and a person becomes purified. Indeed, it's difficult to understand how ashes of a dead cow could purify. Indeed, the whole idea of defilement by death is difficult but it's a mitzvah on the level of chok.

Just like keeping kosher or not wearing Shatnez are precepts that are described as Chukim-statutes. Yes people, Rabbis have tried to rationalize these mitzvot, but bottom line is that we keep them because ultimately by doing them we are fulfilling the Supernal Will.

There is a level of mitzvah that we do, which is difficult for our Western minds to accept and that is that we do a Mitzvah not because we understand it but because by doing the mitzvah we are connecting to Hashem.

If all mitzvot are relegated to our understanding and level of comprehension then it could become easy to rationalise away every mitzvah- but in addition –I am limiting my relationship to Hashem to my limited understanding of His Torah.

But if I recognise that there is a level of Hashem which is bli ge'vul transcends my limitations- and connection to Him which is on the level of Chok- I realise that there's something higher than me- that there's a level beyond my knowledge which I cannot reach.

I remember a series on Channel four with Lord Robert Winston about the Human Body. The very last programme in the series Lord Winston asks a number of searching questions about the mind and the human body for which he did not have an answer. Ultimately- you see him standing in Dunstan Road Shul with his Yarmulke and Tallit standing in front of the Aron Hakodesh.

At the end of the day - he said there are certain aspects of our lives that defy logic and we turn to a Higher source.

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