

Love & Limits Rabbi Maury Grebenau

This year one of the teachers in my school asked me how he should approach speaking about the punishment for eating Chometz on Pesach. There are different opinion for exactly what *karet* entails but none of them are very pleasant. I think the basis of the question was really a discomfort in how to approach the idea of the punishments we have in the Torah in general. I find that growing up in America can make many of the punishments laid out in the Torah harder to relate to.

Living in a society where a child can “fire” his parents over how they handle his or her finances can make it difficult to accept that the Torah prescribes the death penalty for bruising a parent. In our legal system any physical punishment is left for the murderers and worst offenders so it is hard to imagine kares or eating a bagel (regardless of what time of the year we are dealing with). When framed this way, the question of how to approach the idea of punishment in the Torah is a topic worthy of some deep thought. I want to share a thought from Rav Reuven Leichter of Yerushalayim which should help to shed some light on an approach.

It begins with an interesting comment of Rashi in our parsha. Rashi (Shemot 19:3) comments on the language used to tell Mohe to let the Jewish people know about the various statues which make up the Torah. He is told “*כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל*” so should you say to the children of Israel. There are a number of words which could be used for the verb “say” and here “*Tagid*” is used. This is the same root as Hagadah (as in Pesach) and Agadeta (as in the non-halachic parts of the Gemara). This verb usually connotes the telling of a story and so it is an interesting choice here. Rashi comments on the word choice and explains that it is related to the Hebrew word for sinew, “*gid*”. Rashi explains that Moshe here is instructed to tell the Jewish people the punishments in particular which are as “hard as sinews”.

This is a fascinating simile. If Rashi wanted to pick something to represent things which are hard, sinew does not seem to top the list. If the idea is that there are laws which are immovable like a brick wall then should that not have been the comparison, hard as a brick? A rock? A diamond? Rav Leichter points out that clearly something else is being said here.

There are two important characteristics of sinews, one halachic and one biological. The Gemara (7th perek of Chullin) tells us that sinews don't have tam, flavor. This has halachic ramifications in a case such as when a forbidden sinew is cooked into a dish but then removed when the flavor (or lack thereof) becomes critical. The second aspect of sinews is that they are necessary for any type of movement, ligaments provide the tension needed for muscles to properly move each of the bones.

These two aspects explain the idea that there are laws which are like sinews and this was an integral message for the Jews. There are laws which are immovable and must be followed

regardless of other concerns. They do not fill us with excitement and make us feel wonderful about our service of G-d but without them we are totally unable to have spiritual growth. They lack flavor but they are what allows us to move. It is the daily commitment to our principles and actions which keep us on the path of spiritual growth and not necessarily the one time inspirational acts.

I recently read a book lamenting the fact that in America frequently when there are movements to raise the educational standards in schools they end up being overcome by those afraid that students will fail to meet them. The author noticed that a theme in other countries who score higher than America in global testing was that they had high standards for success which they held students to and for the most part they were met. This push to shield our children from consequences extends beyond education. There are experiences in life which might be difficult for our children and times when they might experience the negative consequences of their choices. We sometimes wish to shield them from this discomfort and pain but this same pain might help them to learn to overcome adversity before they face it later in life.

This is part of the message Hashem gives Moshe. You have to tell the people about the harsher realities too when you share the Mitzvot. There is grandeur and splendor and there is also responsibility and consequences, they really go hand in hand. Don't try to shield the Jewish people from giddim, they are a necessary part of life and without them we can't have spiritual growth. The same is true of explaining the concept of punishments to our children. The first step is to recognize that there are consequences for our actions, but that boundaries are part of life which help us grow. Far from being a negative this really points to the importance our actions.