

Rabbi Ziegler - Va'etchanan 5780

The headline of the Israeli Newspaper, dated 15 Av, 2448, stated in bold glaring letters:

“JEWS STOPPED DYING”.

When Jews stop dying –that’s a day of great Simcha. That’s why WEDNESDAY, August 5, of this year, the 15th of Av is a celebrated holiday on our calendar. AS We commemorate tragic events that occurred many years ago, by the same token we celebrate with joy the happy events of the past.

Who were these Jews, how were they dying, and what happened that they stopped? Gemara Ta’anit (30b) teaches us the joy of this day, and the importance of Teshuvah.

Prior to entering the Land of Israel, Moshe Rabbeinu sent 12 spies to scout the land. The spies returned with a negative report saying, “We cannot conquer them; the land consumes its inhabitants” (Bamidbar 13:32).

Our ancestors, upon hearing this, believed the spies and began to cry. They lost their hope in G-d, and despaired of ever entering the Land.

HaShem then swore and decreed “in this desert shall you die” (14:29). And over the next 38 years, all men between ages of 20-60 began to perish, except Kalev and Yehoshua.

Tosafot, citing the Midrash on Eicha, described this process. Every year, on the night of the ninth of Av, the anniversary of the spies’ return, Moshe commanded all men to dig their own graves and lie in them for the night. The following morning, Moshe called out: “Living ones, separate yourselves from the dead!” This happened every year, and an average of 15,000 men died every year.

On the 40th year, something unusual occurred. They dug their graves as usual, and lay down in them. Yet, the next morning, all men got up. None died; they were all alive. They thought a mistake had been made about the date. Perhaps last night was not the 9th of Av, after all? So back they all went into their graves for the next five consecutive nights, and this procedure was repeated until the 15th of Av, when the full moon shined brightly. The people then realized that G-d had indeed forgiven their generation for the sin of the spies. The 15,000 still-living would enter the Land of Israel together with Kalev and Yehoshua, the younger generation, and the Jewish women who never lost faith in HaShem.

The question asked is, if only 15,000 would die every year why was it necessary for each man of the 600,000 to dig their own graves? They should have been commanded to dig only 15,000 graves and those who died that night would be buried the next morning in those graves. HaShem hopefully reasoned that by commanding them to ‘Dig your graves’; this was giving the men the motivation and impetus to do Teshuvah. Lying in the grave they cried and pleaded with G-d, “Please let me live, I love my wife; I love my children. To sleep the night in a grave is a morbid thought. I doubt if any of the men actually slept that night; wondering if they would be alive in the morning to ever again see their family. But this is precisely the answer.

A negative decree of G-d can be changed, for nothing stands in the way of Teshuvah. They pleaded desperately, "Please G-d forgive me. I am sorry for doubting You; I will never lose trust in You again".

This worked well for 38 years, and now they were down to the last 15,000. Moshe tells them to "Go back into the pit; a more intense Teshuvah is needed". Finally, the last year, on the 15th of Av, their Teshuvah was accepted. They were now given clearance to enter the Holy Land. G-d forgave the sin of the spies, the Jews ceased to die, and the 15th of Av became a joyous holiday on the Jewish calendar.

From this we learn the power of genuine Teshuvah; and together with Tefillah and Tzeddaka can overturn the Heavenly decree of death, as we say on Rosh HaShana, "U'TESHUVA, U'TEFILLA, U'TZEDAKA, MA'AVIRIN ET RO'AH HA'GEZEIRA".

QUESTIONS ON PARASHAT VA'ET'CHANAN:

1-"Mishneh Torah"- is another name for the Book of Devarim. What famous Rabbinic Sefer is also known by that name?

2- Telling someone that a Muktzah item is Biblically forbidden to be moved on Shabbat is in violation of which Mitzvah?

3-Moshe Rabbeinu pleads with HaShem to let him cross the Jordan and see the "Good Land", and also "HaHar HaTov", the good mountain (3;25). What was he referring to by HaHar HaTov? (see gemara Brachot 48b)

4-Technically, one is not permitted to charge a fee for teaching Torah. Where is the source of this ? (see Bechorot 29a)

5-FROM WHICH PASUK DO WE DERIVE THE LAW THAT REGARDING RELIGION- THE CHILD FOLLOWS THAT OF THE MOTHER??

6- 3 times a year we read the 10 COMMANDMENTS in our services. What are those 3 times?

7= In the Aseret HaDibrot of Va'etchanan the 5th Commandment states: (5:12)

"SHAMOR ET YOM HASHABBAT"- "Safeguard the Shabbat"

In the Aseret HaDibrot of Yitro (Shemot 20:8) it is written:

"ZACHOR ET YOM HASHABBAT"- "Remember the Shabbat"

What category of Laws do we learn from Zachor and what category from Shamor?

8-The first section of "*SHEMA YISRAEL*" is in our Parasha. Where is the 2nd and 3rd in which Parshi'ot??

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