

PARSHAT TERUMAH
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In the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menahot, there is the following passage: “A Tanna of the school of Rabbi Ishmael stated: Three things presented difficulties to Moses, until the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses with His finger, and these are they: The candlestick, the new moon, and the creeping things.”

Two of the three items mentioned in the Talmud are part of our ritual here today, so let me explain the text. According to the Torah, Moses was the prophet, a lawgiver, a leader, a mediator, and a servant of G-d and the people of Israel. Yet, Moses remained a man and the Torah makes clear that this is the case. There are times in the Biblical narrative when Moses does not know an answer to a problem or how to explain a specific dictate from G-d. It is at that time that we see his human limitedness as he asks G-d for help in each of these cases.

According to the text in Menahot there are three things that Moses could not understand until G-d demonstrated what he meant by pointing to them so Moses could actually see them. The first is the candlestick, or the menorah. In our Torah reading of today describing the construction of the Tabernacle, the Torah tells us: “ You shall make a menorah of pure gold; the menorah shall be made of hammered work; its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes and petals shall be of one piece. Six branches shall issue from its sides; three branches from one side of the menorah and three branches from the other side of the menorah.” This is the seven branched menorah which is the oldest symbol of the Jewish people. It is the coat of arms of the State of Israel and the symbol of this Congregation. Moses was asked to construct the menorah and to place it in the Tabernacle. It later found its place in the Temple in Jerusalem. According to Menahot he did not know exactly how to construct it, so, as is stated later in the Book of Numbers he is told: “And this was the work of the menorah,” G-d actually showed him a picture as to how to construct it.

As you know, today is Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the month on the Jewish calendar, in this case, Adar I. The Jewish month goes according to the lunar cycle and the beginning of the month represents the new moon as it appears in the sky. The new moon cannot be seen and, therefore, when G-d told Moses in Exodus Chapter 12 concerning the month of Nisan: “This month shall be unto you the beginning of the months,” he had to actually show him what a new moon looked like since it was not visible in the sky.

The third occurrence happened when G-d explained the laws of Kashrut, the dietary laws, to Moses and told him which insects could be eaten. While most of us stay away from this all together, and for good reason, there are actually types of grasshoppers that are considered to be kosher. I don't think you'll find them in Sunset, Jewel, or Garden Fresh, but in North Africa where grasshoppers are plentiful, apparently the Jewish community knew which ones were kosher and which were not. However, Moses was not so sure. Therefore, in the Book of Leviticus in describing these insects, G-d says to him: “And these are they which are unclean,” actually showing him which are kosher and which are not.

The text in Menahot actually goes on to tell us that there is another item which Moses was not familiar with and that was the slaughtering of beasts: “Now this is that which you shall offer upon the altar.” As it described in the Book of Exodus G-d demonstrated to Moses the regulations of slaughtering.

While I don't see an actual image of G-d displaying a slide show, a PowerPoint, or performing a demonstration to Moses to describe all of these items, I do think that the passage is trying to teach us something important. It is reminding us that even Moses, the great teacher and lawgiver, was only human and could not know everything. Even Moses, the one who ascended Mount Sinai to receive the great truths of the Ten Commandments, could not possess all knowledge and needed a teacher, a mentor, at certain times in his life.

I believe this is a very important lesson for all of us today. We live in a world where knowledge is at our fingertips. Think how far we have progressed since many of us went to school. With the internet, instant communication, and the ability to find answers to almost all of our questions, anyone who is in a learning situation today is at a distinct advantage from those of us who went to school even half a generation ago. With Google and Wikipedia at one's fingertips, only two among many resources, simply with the touch of a finger one can find instantaneous answers to many of the factual questions we have. Looking items up in books, in encyclopedias, as many of us used to do, and, at least, some of us still do, seems almost passé as for the younger generation everything is found online.

The problem with this type of technological advancement occurs when we cannot find an instant answer to our question. We tend not to have the patience nor the tools available to really delve deep down into the issues that confront us. And, at least from a point of view of religion, belief, and faith, the great questions of human life cannot be answered on Google and Wikipedia. What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? Why are some people fortunate to live lives of health and fulfillment, while others not? What should we do with our lives for the limited time we have on the face of this earth? The more knowledge we have, the more we realize how much we do not know.

I learned one of the great lessons of my life when I spent a year in Israel after I received my BA. I studied at the Hebrew University and at what was then known as Neve Schechter. I took a class with one of the great Bible teachers of my generation, Dr. Moshe Greenberg, at the Hebrew University. It was a class taught in Hebrew in the regular school and in English in the Rothberg School of Overseas Studies. I took it in Hebrew, Bryna in English. It was entitled *An Introduction to the Religion of the Bible*. I sat with Israelis to whom the Bible was national literature. Dr. Greenberg would begin a quote and they would conclude it. At first I felt inadequate for the course, even with my day school education. I asked for an appointment with the Professor and told him that I didn't know if I could keep up. It was at this point, that Dr. Greenberg taught me a great lesson. He told me that being able to quote text is important, but what is more important is to be able to analyze that text. To simply be able to quote verses, as we know, even the devil can do that. However, to understand those verses, the truth behind the text, the history and context of that text, is what education is all about. I am pleased to say I received a good mark in the course and his lesson has remained with me to this day. I may not

have all knowledge at my fingertips, but I have learned where to search for it and then to use that knowledge creatively in my teaching, preaching, and my personal life.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, the former president of Yeshiva University learned the lesson as well. He recalls that when he was a new student in Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's Talmud shiur, the most advanced Talmud class at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Soloveitchik asked him to summarize the approach of Tosafot (a medieval commentary) to a passage the class had been studying. The young Lamm, thinking to please his teacher, repeated the explanation of the passage Rabbi Soloveitchik had offered the previous day. But instead of being pleased, the rabbi said to Lamm, "I know what I am saying. I do not need you to tell me. What do you think? ... The problem is that you check your evil inclination (yetzer hara) outside the classroom door and come in with your good inclination. Next time, bring your evil inclination with you, and leave your good inclination outside."

We are the People of the Book, knowledge is very important to us. What we do with that knowledge is more important. How it affects our personal character is even more crucial. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), popularly known in Jewish life by the title of his first book, *Chafetz Chayyim*, founded and headed a yeshiva in the Belarus (White Russia) town of Radin. Students streamed to the yeshiva from throughout Europe. During World War I, a student from Germany was arrested by the czarist police and charged with spying for his native land. The defense lawyer asked the Chafetz Chayyim to appear in court as a character witness. Before summoning the rabbi to the witness stand, the lawyer, it is reported, approached the judge and said, "Your honor, the rabbi who is about to testify has an impeccable reputation among his fellow Jews. They tell a story that one day he came home and saw a thief rummaging through his living room. The frightened thief climbed out a window and ran off with some of the rabbi's possessions, and the rabbi ran after him, shouting, "I declare all my property ownerless," so that the thief would not be guilty of having committed a crime."

The judge looked at the lawyer skeptically. "Do you believe that story really happened?" "I don't know, your honor," the lawyer answered, "but they don't tell stories like that about you and me."

What matters is not only knowledge but character. What matters is how we use the knowledge at our disposal. What matters is whether we can take that knowledge, analyze it properly, and use it appropriately. Knowledge itself is neutral, the manner in which it is used is not. The Chafetz Chayyim was a great scholar. More importantly, he was known as a kind and compassionate human being who used his knowledge appropriately.

All of us are following the issue of Iran and its pursuit of nuclear energy. Each country should have the ability to use its resources appropriately. Nuclear energy, in and of itself, is not evil. It can be used for positive purposes. However, the record of the Iranian regime is clear. It subjects its own population to a totalitarian regime, it exports terrorism across the globe, it is an avowed enemy of the State of Israel, or as it calls it "the Zionist entity," it seeks the downfall of "the evil empire," the United States, and is a threat to the West. It has used its resources for terrorist actions in Buenos Aires, Argentina and through its affiliates in Burgas, Bulgaria and Beirut, Lebanon. It aids the Syrian regime and supplies missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

While its leaders sometimes talk of moderation, there is no doubt that the supreme leader himself, in recent interviews, has made the claim that no country will stop Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. This nuclear weapon will be a game changer not only in the Middle East, but throughout the Western world. A country which is not afraid to use terrorism at-large as an instrument of the state is a danger to us all. Should it possess a nuclear weapon? It is clear that all efforts must ensure that this never occurs.

Moses was only a human being and, therefore, could not possess all knowledge. According to the Tractate of Menahot, G-d had to actually demonstrate for him certain aspects of the laws that he was supposed to teach. For us, knowledge at our fingertips is taken for granted, but we need to analyze carefully all its aspects. Using that knowledge appropriately very much depends on the purpose for which we want to use it and the outcome that we desire. What we learn from the story of the Chafetz Chayyim is that all of us need to develop our character to the point where we will use the knowledge we have for the betterment of our society and for the benefit of all humanity. If we can do this, then we will have demonstrated that we are wise people and honorable human beings.