

Parshas Korach 5771

SPOTLIGHT ON SOME CELEBRATED STICKS

There is a well-known Mishnah in Pirkei Avos that provides a most interesting list of unique items, which were brought into existence at the beginning of Creation in their own unique time-slot. The Mishnah states (*Avos 5:6*):

עֲשָׂה דְבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְעֶרְבַּ שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֶשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ,
וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֵתוֹן, וְהַקֶּשֶׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמַּטָּה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַכֶּתֵב,
וְהַמִּכְתָּב, וְהַלְוִיָּהוּ. וְיֵשׁ אֲוֹמְרִים, אִף הַמְזִיקִין, וְקִבּוּרָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה,
וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ.

“Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath during the twilight period (i.e., right before the onset of the Sabbath), and they are: **The mouth of the ground**, the mouth of the well, the mouth of the donkey, the rainbow, the manna, **the staff**, the *Shamir*, the writing, the writing implement, and the tablets. Some also include the demons, Moshe’s grave, and the ram sacrificed by our forefather Avraham (in place of his son, Yitzchak).”

Curiously enough, a number of these items appear throughout Sefer Bamidbar and relate to events that occurred during the Jews’ sojourn in the wilderness. As we encounter the relevant *parshiyos* at this time, we are afforded the opportunity to examine more closely some of these fascinating entities.

A LONG AND ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER

The “staff” listed in the Mishnah was no ordinary implement. In fact, our Sages relate that it possessed quite an extensive history, recounted in the following Midrashic passage:

“R’ Levi says: The staff that was created at twilight (during the first week of Creation) was originally presented to Adam Harishon in Gan Eden. Adam then transferred it to Chanoch (his righteous descendent); Chanoch (subsequently)

transferred it to No’ach; No’ach transferred it to (his son) Shem; Shem transferred it to Avraham; Avraham transferred it to Yitzchak; Yitzchak transferred it to Ya’akov; and Ya’akov transported it with him in his descent to Egypt, where he transferred it to his son, Yosef. Upon Yosef’s death, his quarters were ransacked (by the Egyptians), and the staff (together with the rest of Yosef’s possessions) made its way to Pharaoh’s palace. Yisro, who (at the time) served as one of Egypt’s magicians, saw the staff and the signs contained on it, and secretly coveted it for himself. (Eventually,) he took it, brought it to his home and planted it in his garden. Once it was implanted, no one was able to approach it (or even touch it). However, when Moshe arrived at his house, he entered Yisro’s garden, saw the staff, read the signs inscribed on it, stretched forth his hand and took it. When Yisro beheld this event, he remarked: ‘This is the future redeemer, who will deliver Yisrael from Egypt.’ He subsequently gave Moshe his daughter, Tziporah, for a wife” (*Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer, ch. 40*).

(The *Ritva* [commentary to Passover Haggadah] appears to have a somewhat different version of the staff’s history. He contends that the staff descended from Heaven and was given to Moshe directly by Hashem Himself. This notion is borne out by the verse [*Shemos 4:17*], wherein Hashem tells Moshe: “And you shall take מִטָּה הַזֶּה [this staff] in your hand.” As the *Ritva* explains, such language is used when the speaker is grasping an object in his hand that he is in the process of transferring to the listener. In any event, it would seem that the *Ritva* understands that the staff was created during the Six Days of Creation and then retained by Hashem until the moment that Moshe stood on Mt. Horeb, at which point it was handed over to perform the wonders in Egypt.)

Aside from its impressive history, the staff also distinguished

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itself through an extremely eventful career. From the commentators it emerges that the staff was involved with the transformation of staffs to snakes in front of Pharaoh, the administering of the Plagues, the splitting of the sea, and, in general, all of the miracles wrought on behalf of the Jews in Egypt (cf. *Shibolei Haleket*, *Rashbatz on the Haggadah*).

Why did Hashem give the staff such a pivotal role, mandating that the numerous miracles be performed through this medium? The *Peirush Niv S'fasayim* explains that this purposeful gesture was taken specifically to highlight the true Source of the Great Power on display in Egypt. Had Moshe performed the miracles simply at Hashem's command, people may have erroneously attributed some power to him. Hashem instructed that he take hold of a staff, which, in essence, was a worthless, inanimate object. As such, people would not assume that it possessed any ability of its own, and they would realize that the miracles emanated only from

Hashem Himself.

This could also be the reason why specifically the staff of our Mishnah was chosen. As the *Shem Mishmuel* observes, the time of twilight is somewhat of a non-entity: it is not exactly day nor is it night. This would seem to be the perfect implement to use for the miracles. As stated, the purpose in employing a staff was to highlight that the "power" came only from Hashem. The more of a "non-entity" this staff was, the more this point was accentuated.

THE KORACH CONNECTION

Our discussion until this point has reflected the prevailing view that the staff referred to by the Mishnah is that of Moshe Rabbeinu. There is another opinion, though, which interprets the Mishnah in light of the events recorded in this week's *parshah*:

Korach had mounted a challenge to Moshe's leadership. His argument, however, became a moot point when his followers were either seared by a Heavenly fire or plummeted into the abyss of the פִּי הָאָרֶץ (the mouth of the ground). To forestall the eruption of future murmuring against Hashem's chosen leaders, He instructed that the chief of each tribe should submit his staff to Moshe (for the tribe of Levi, Aharon's staff was taken). The staffs were collected and kept overnight in the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Meeting Tent). On the morrow, when the chieftains returned to reclaim their staffs, they beheld a wondrous sight, as one staff stood out from amongst the rest. It was the staff of Aharon, which had blossomed and lay festooned in flowers. This staff would henceforth serve as a clear sign that the tribe of Levi had been designated by Hashem to perform His Service (*Bamidbar 17:16-26*).

The *Tiferes Yisrael* cites a view that it was this staff (Aharon's) to which the Mishnah refers. Although the above event did not occur until the time of Korach, a tree was created during the first week of Creation with the potential for its wood to burst forth in blossom. This potential was passed down through the generations and came to "fruition" through the staff of Aharon.