

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Moshe *ben* Nochum *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

***Tashlich* and the Frog**

PARSHAS SHEMINI 5776

(The following is based largely on the treatment of this subject in the sefer Mo’adim L’simchah, vol. I, pp. 231-233.)

Many creatures are listed in this week’s *parshah*, primarily in the context of the laws governing forbidden foods and ritual impurity. One section deals with the “*shemoneh sheratzim* – the eight creeping things”; the Torah lists those creatures to which special laws apply. These eight creatures are subsequently featured in the Mishnah in relation to the laws of Shabbos. As the Mishnah states (*Shabbos 14:1*):

שְׁמוֹנֵה שְׂרָצִים הָאֲמֹרִים בַּתּוֹרָה, הַצֹּדֵן וְהַחֹבֵל בְּהוֹ, חָיִב.

“(Regarding) the eight *sheratzim* that appear in the Torah – one who either traps or wounds them is liable (for Shabbos desecration).”

One of these creatures in the Torah’s list is the “*tzav*” (*Vayikra 11:29*), which is identified by Rashi as a creature resembling the “*tzfardei’a*” (frog). There is a most curious account that has come down to us involving just such a creature. It would seem to be appropriate to cite this narrative here; it is noteworthy not only for its fascinating quality, but for the fact that it seems to run counter to the laws mentioned in the Mishnah above.

Barred from Attendance

The story involves the great Kabbalistic sage R’ Chaim Vital, prime disciple of the saintly Arizal. Recorded for posterity by his son R’ Shmuel Vital, the narrative states the following:

“I remember that on one Rosh Hashanah, my father and teacher was delivering a lecture by the waterside, on the day on which *Tashlich* is recited. We beheld that in the river a *tzfardei’a* was approaching him, and we began to throw rocks at it in order to expel it. The eyes of my father and teacher, may his memory be a blessing, had been closed as he expounded from the Torah, as was his wont. But from the sound of the *tzfardei’a*’s chirping, his eyes suddenly opened. (Beholding the sight), he rebuked us, saying that this was actually a (departed) soul coming to hear the words of Torah, having assumed the guise of a *tzfardei’a*. It was actually in honor of this soul that he had begun to lecture in the first place...”

This account, as mentioned, gives rise to a variety of perplexities, not the least of which is the question of conformity to the laws of forbidden labor. One issue in this regard involves the prohibition against moving items deemed *muktzeh* (set aside from usage). Pebbles and stones are often singled out as a classic example of *muktzeh* items, as they are removed from the classification of vessels and serve little function (*cf. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 308:7*).

How, then, was it permissible to move and throw these stones on the *Yom Tov* of Rosh Hashanah?

Another problem involves the issue mentioned explicitly in the Mishnah above. The people in this narrative were throwing rocks at this creature, thereby running the real risk of injuring or even killing it – an act expressly forbidden on Shabbos and *Yom Tov*.

In light of these issues, there are those who wanted to suggest that the event did not take place on the actual *Yom Tov*. While the narrative mentions that it was a “*yom* (day of) *tashlich*,” the performance of this ritual is not exclusive to the day of Rosh Hashanah. While it is customary to perform it on Rosh Hashanah, it can actually be done throughout the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Perhaps, it is surmised, this event actually took place on a regular weekday. Although the account records the term “Rosh Hashanah,” this may be – according to this approach – simply a scribal error that somehow made its way into the text.

Protecting Their Master

However, it is possible to resolve these issues even while retaining the supposition that the episode did actually occur on Rosh Hashanah itself. R’ Shlomo Tzucker, a disciple of the Minchas Elazar of Munkatch, offered the following approach, to which his *rebbe* acquiesced.

He asserts that, in the eyes of Rav Chaim Vital’s students, this was actually a matter of *sakanas nefashos* – danger to life. That is, this creature that was making a beeline towards R’ Chaim Vital appeared to them to be a venomous frog. As such, they were completely authorized to take whatever measures they deemed necessary to preserve the safety of their beloved leader. Thus they threw rocks at the animal in an attempt to divert it from what seemed to be its intended target.

But R’ Chaim Vital knew the truth; rather than some amphibious marauder, this was actually a soul thirsting for Torah knowledge. And so he instructed his followers to end the barrage.

There is one final point the *Minchas Elazar* raises, for which he was unable to find a resolution. As spelled out in the *parshah*, this is one of the unclean creatures deemed to be inherently impure and repulsive. Generally speaking, then, for a soul to be reincarnated in this form is considered a kind of Divine retribution. How, then, could a pristine soul – which thirsted for Torah and in whose honor R’ Chaim delivered the lecture – have been granted such a “persona”? This is a matter for which we may have to wait some time before discovering the true answer.