

Riddles for Yiddles Parshas Mishpatim, 5774-2014

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This week I would like to try something different. I'd like to share with you several "yiddles" (yiddle is an endearing term for a Yid, a Jew). We'll discuss three different riddles you can try on your friends, each with a simple but profound message. And each riddle each based upon this week's Torah portion, Mishpatim. Ready? Let's get started.

Yiddle #1 "Three Frogs on a Log"

Three frogs are sitting on a log. One decides to jump off. How many are left? None? One? Two? Three? Four?

I'll give you a hint: The answer doesn't depend on the structural integrity of a lily pad.

Answer: Three. The frog made a decision to jump off the log but took no action.

Does this sound familiar? Ah, indeed, there is a notable difference between deciding to do something and actually doing it. It's relatively easy to decide to do something, but to translate that decision into real action is a frog...er, horse of a different color. We decide to do things all the time. But that doesn't mean we do them. Why do we refrain from acting upon things we decide?

"If you buy a Jewish bondsman, he shall work for six years; and in the seventh he shall go free..." But if the bondsman will say I shall not go free" then his master shall bring him to the court and shall bring him to the door or to the doorpost, and his master shall bore through his ear with the awl, and he shall serve him forever (Exodus 21:2, 5-6)

How could this happen? How could an individual willingly relinquish his freedom and extend his servitude?

Many people experience sweaty palms driving across a high, long bridge. But believe it or not, some people are so afraid of bridges that they will drive hours out of their way to avoid them. Others try to cross but freeze up in the middle of a bridge and can't go on, blocking traffic. An article on the subject reported that one man could only cross a particularly long bridge if, before crossing, his wife (the driver) would lock him in the trunk of their car!

The operators of some of the longest and highest spans in America now offer a driving service. On request, one of the bridge attendants will get behind your wheel and drive you and your car over the bridge.

Michigan's Timid Motorist Program annually assists about 800 drivers across the Mackinac Bridge, which is five miles long and rises two hundred feet above the water. At Maryland's Chesapeake Bay Bridge, which is over four miles long and rises two hundred feet about the water, each year authorities take the wheel and help one thousand fearful motorists.

Fear can be debilitating.

One of the most debilitating aspects of any form of enslavement is that it robs a person of his self-worth and self-confidence. The slave becomes fearful; fearful of a life of independence, fearful of a life trusting only in G-d, Himself.

We've all made decisions to do something, but, like the frog on a log, have been too afraid to follow through.

Take steps that are small and measurable. If necessary, sign up for a 'Timid Motorist Program', and turn the keys over to someone else to help you. Turn the keys over to G-d. We should certainly look before we leap. But when we decide to leap, don't just *decide* to jump.

Yiddle # 2 “Three Birds on the Roof”

Three birds were sitting on the roof. Along came a hunter and shot at the birds, killing one of them. How many were left on the roof?

One. Since the gun made a loud noise, two of the birds were scared and flew away. The only bird left on the roof was the one that was shot dead.

This riddle from the Ben Ish Chai, in his commentary to Parshas Mishpatim, serves to illustrate a fundamental Torah truth regarding the mitzvah to give tzedakah (charity) to the poor.

When you lend money to My people, to the poor person who is with you, do not act toward him as a creditor; do not lay interest upon him. (Exodus 22:24)

Why don't people give tzedaka properly?

A person who gives tzedakah mistakenly thinks that the money that he gives away is lost from him forever – just like that dead bird that will never come back – and that all that he has left for himself is the remaining money that is still in his possession – represented by the two birds that didn't die.

The Torah teaches us that just the opposite is true. The only money that one truly “has” is the money he gives away, as he is assured a great reward for this mitzvah in Olam Haba, the World to Come. The rest of his money sitting in his bank account he doesn't truly “own”, since there is absolutely no guarantee that he or his family will end up benefiting from it in the future.

Ultimately, what counts is what we do, not what we have. At the beginning of life we are given a name, and at the end of life a "good name" is all we take with us. The yiddle of the 'Three Birds on a Roof' teaches us that our greatest contributions are the ones we leave behind.

Riddle # 3 The Tale of Two Towns

Does a city with many doctors indicate that the citizens are sickly or healthy?

A local from a mid-sized town said to a friend from an adjacent town, "I'm not so sure having doctors is such a good thing. I think they make people sick. Look, here in my town we only have one doctor, yet there are very few sick people here. But in your town -- the same size as my town -- you have 30 doctors, and there are many sick people. People in your town are constantly visiting doctors."

The friend answered: "In your town, a person isn't considered sick until he is at death's door. So in a sense, what you say is true: the more doctors, the more sick people. With us, more people are under medical care to make sure they will not become seriously ill. So, really, the more doctors, the healthier the town is."

Why do the Jewish people have so many mitzvos? There are 613 commandments given to the Jewish people -- 53 mitzvos in Parshas Mishpatim, alone -- whereas the nations of the world have only 7 Universal Laws (seven commandments of the children of Noah.). One could ask: If the Jewish people are so ethical, why do we need so many laws? If we are so moral, why do we need so many judges, with a court set up in every town and region?

The Jewish people are expected to be on a high moral level, to be a "light unto the nations." Other nations are only concerned with major offenses - murder, robbery, and so on. These major crimes occur infrequently, so there is no need for an extensive court system in every small village.

We the Jewish people, on the other hand, are commanded to avoid even minor offenses, such as not embarrassing others and not slandering. Also, many Torah laws are not intuitively obvious. Therefore the Jewish people need many judges to guide them. This way we will be able to acquire the level of ethical behavior in our day-to-day lives that the Torah demands.

A mitzvah and a doctor is an opportunity to promote good spiritual and physical health. The more mitzvos and doctors, the better one's health.