

Toras Aish



Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the most profound mysteries of the Bible is the rite of the red cow, called a hok (Hebrew for statute) because it is an illogical Divine decree, concerning which we may not even speculate in an attempt to understand it (Numbers 19:1, Rachi ad loc).

Detailed in the first twenty-two verses of our Torah reading, the ceremony certainly sounds strange to the modern ear: a completely red cow, without blemish and upon which no yoke has been brought, shall be entirely slaughtered outside of the encampment of Israel; cedarwood, hyssop and a scarlet thread shall be cast into the burning pyre of ashes, and a "personage of purity" (Ish Tahor) shall gather the ashes in a sacred place, mix them with spring water (mayim chayim), waters of life, and use the mixture to purify those who have been contaminated by contact with a corpse. What can we possibly make of such a primitive sounding ritual?

We must be mindful of the fact that all other impurities other than a death impurity find their purification by the defiled individual's immersing himself/herself in a mikveh, a gathering of freshly running spring water or specially collected life-giving rainwater; in effect, in all these instances, the defiled individual actually purifies him/herself! Only in this rite of the red cow does the Kohen, representing G-d Himself, effectuate the purification. It is as though the Bible is teaching us that we can save ourselves from many of our weaknesses, we can rise above many of our temptations, but only G-d can ultimately redeem us from death.

And from this perspective, the symbolism of the red cow ritual begins to make sense. A cow is the consummate symbol of life, cow's mother-milk serving as the universal expression of maternal nurturing of her young; red is likewise the color of blood, and blood is the life-force, the very nefesh, of the living organism. However, although human beings come in various shapes, sizes, personalities and powers-they can be as tall and proud as the cedar tree and as mean and humble as the hyssop plant nevertheless the angel of death ultimately conquers them all, because the scarlet thread of human sin condemns each of us to the common destiny of mortality. The "personage of purity" then gathers the ashes of the remains, mixes them with

the life-giving waters of the Divine, and born again, purified life emerges even from the surrealistic specter of death itself.

This symbolism of the red cow has assumed new significance for me since my recent trip to Frankfurt and Berlin. Ohr Torah Stone's Joseph Straus Rabbinical Seminary has sent close to two hundred rabbis and their families to communities throughout the world, from Caesarea to Curacao to Guatemala City to Johannesburg to Lincoln Center-with six of our graduates presently in Germany. This past week we sponsored two inspirational events-replete with cantorial music and messages of Torah-one in Frankfurt and one in Berlin. While in Berlin, I took advantage of the opportunity to visit their newly completed Holocaust Memorial at the very center of the city, not far from the last bunker from which the mad fuhrer committed suicide. The open air memorial consists of 2,711 stones, monuments of various shapes and sizes.

Walking amongst the narrow, massive slabs of stone, one becomes lost within a giant cemetery, feeling helplessly and hopelessly minute and insignificant within a maze of monuments whose eerie, death-imbedded caskets seem to have overtaken world and life; one then descends into a netherworld of hell, where pictures and life stories of Holocaust victims evoke live experiences, and potentials which were, which could have become, but which were cruelly and inexplicably torn asunder from the tree of life by monstrous and subhuman hands.

I stumbled away from the experience feeling as though I had just awakened from a horrific nightmare. The symbolism of the monuments continues to haunt me days after I returned to Efrat; after all, those who lost loved ones in the Holocaust don't even have grave site monuments to weep over. Each empty stone screams out with any name, with every name, with my name and with my children's names because a part of each human being was killed in those death camps whose perpetrators attempted to destroy every last vestige of humanness.

But I also came away from the experience feeling cheated by the Memorial. Something was missing, the essence was missing, the victorious ending was missing. Because, you see, the Jewish people, won the war which Hitler tried to wage against us. Yes, he succeeded in destroying six million of us, but as he records in Mein Kampf, he wasn't waging a war against

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six million Jews. He was waging a war against the last Jew, against Judaism.

And we won that war. Alas, the brilliantly alive red cow which was the Jewish people, a people who nurtured the world with the milk of the morality of the Ten Commandments and the milk of human kindness of "you shall love the stranger" and "You shall love your neighbor like yourself", was to a large extent, tragically and inexplicably slaughtered beyond the human encampment in Auschwitz and Treblinka. But the Almighty G-d, the "Personage of Purity", Himself gathered the ashes, Himself mixed them with living waters of rebirth, and Himself transformed those ashes into the fertile soil of the re-created sovereign State of Israel. And the "Personage of Purity" Himself mixed the ashes with the life-giving well springs of Torah, our tree of eternal life, and revived Torah centers and Daf Yomi Talmud study groups to an unprecedented and unparalleled degree all over the world. Take note: there are 2,711 monument stones in the Memorial, and, as pointed out by Rav Moshe Kotlarsky of Chabad, there are 2,711 folio pages in the Babylonian Talmud! Adolf Hitler is thankfully dead, and discovered alongside of his self-inflicted suicide-tomb was a Tractate Pesahim which tells of the Passover Festival of Jewish freedom and redemption; he apparently had hoped to bury the last Talmud tome in existence, but instead the Talmud tome buried him! Indeed, 2,711 pages of the Talmud have literally walked out of the 2,711 monument stones, and have granted to the Jewish victims the eternal life of Jewish victors!

The Bible promised us 4000 years ago that despite exile, persecution and death, G-d would sprinkle upon us His revivifying waters of purity and rebirth, and would restore us to our land, our law and our lore. And so, "from Zion is coming forth Torah" to the world at large with the scores of rabbis and educators we're sending all over the globe every year. Judaism is reawakening even in the failed fuhrer's own home city of Berlin, where three new Yeshivot (Torah Study Academies) have been dedicated during the past several years. Imagine the historical irony in the fact that the only two growing Jewish communities in the world today are Israel and Germany!

We learn from the rite of the red cow that only G-d, the Personage of Purity, can redeem from death; and in our post-Holocaust generation, He certainly has.

There ought be a final glorious exhibit in the Holocaust Memorial which features pulsating present day-religious Jewish life in Germany, as well as a magnificent tribute to the State of Israel reborn.

"Thus says the Lord your G-d....I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves and bring you into the Land of Israel...And I shall put My spirit in you and you shall live and I shall place you in your land". (Ezekiel 37:13,14) © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah sheds a ray of light on our dark and troublesome exile. The Book of Shoftim, is replete with experiences during which the Jewish people followed the foreign influences of their Canaanite neighbors. In response to this, Hashem's policy was to incite foreign nations into war with the Jewish people. The Jews would immediately recognize their wrongdoing and plead with Hashem for salvation. Subsequently, Hashem would send them a leader who would successfully defeat the enemy. One such experience was with the nation of Amon whom Hashem sent to awaken the Jewish people of the severity of their actions. Amon forced his way into the land and the Jewish people became petrified. They immediately turned to Hashem for assistance but He responded with severe words of reprimand. After absorbing this strong message the Jewish people began sincerely repenting and a new Jewish leader, Yiftach was inaugurated.

The haftorah portrays Yiftach as one far from perfection. Yiftach was not from accredited descent and was rejected by his family members for this. He left home and developed a following of undesirable individuals. But, now in their time of great distress The Jewish people summoned the family to approach Yiftach and appoint him their leader. After a most appropriate response Yiftach rose to the occasion and, acting as Israel's protector, delivered a powerful message to Amon. He stated unequivocally that it is Hashem Who defeats the major powers of the world and, with this he called upon Hashem to assist in this war. Hashem responded and Yiftach, armed with bold courage and strength, defeated the entire nation of Amon.

Many have questioned the peculiarity of this victory. In fact, this is the first time in Jewish history that the Jews were led by an individual so inferior in spiritual and moral quality. If Hashem deemed it appropriate to perform a miracle on behalf of His people, couldn't He have chosen a more qualified person? In addition, why were the Jewish people so desperate that their only choice was a man of Yiftach's low stature?

An answer to this may be suggested through properly reflecting upon the general status of the Jewish nation at the time. As mentioned above, the Jews of

those times were seriously lax in their devotion to Hashem. Although by now they had begun a sincere return to Hashem much remained to be done in order to complete the process. Hashem's response to them is best depicted in the passage preceding our haftorah. "And Hashem's soul was disgusted over the plight of Israel." (10:16) Radak quotes Rambam who explains that Hashem's decision to save His people was based solely on their suffering. Hashem simply couldn't tolerate watching His people suffer any more. After all, how many more times could they be subjected to such suffering? Hashem therefore responded to their inklings of repentance and sent Yiftach to deliver them from the hands of Amon.

In light of the above we gain clear insight into the strange appointment of Yiftach. In reality, the Jewish people didn't deserve miracles or leaders of stature. Their total merit was nothing more than Hashem's unwillingness to watch their suffering. Hashem therefore chose Yiftach, the man who best reflected the timely status of the Jews, to be their leader. Open miracles and direct contact with Hashem were not in order at this point. Therefore a leader of Yiftach's stature was chosen for the task. A victory was experienced but the Divine dimensions of it were totally concealed. Yiftach, like the Jewish people, did not deserve miracles, yet a heavenly response was appropriate. Once Yiftach and the Jews turned to Hashem with sincerity Amon was defeated and peace was restored to the Jewish people.

This experience is paralleled in this week's parsha. After the passing of the High Priest, Aaron, the Jewish people became fearful of the inhabitants of Canaan and began heading back towards Egypt. After the tribe of Levi forced the issue the Jewish people regained their courage and returned to their path towards Eretz Yisroel. However, their diversion gave rise to disgust and exhaustion and concern over their extended stay in the desert. They subsequently staged a serious complaint against Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu with the claim that they would never reach the land of Israel. Hashem immediately responded and released poisonous snakes which killed large numbers of the nation. After realizing their wrongdoings they pleaded with Moshe Rabbeinu who interceded on their behalf and successfully calmed Hashem's wrath.

Reflecting upon this, Chazal (see Bamidbar Rabba 19:24) explain that Hashem remained angry at the Jews long after they were healed his blow. Apparently, this complaint left a serious stain on the Jewish character and diminished their contact with Hashem. Yet, as we continue reading the parsha we discover that Hashem continued to assist His people and miraculously defeated the Emorites. In fact, mountains were even levelled to crush all the Emorites who were waiting inside their caves to ambush the Jews.

We learn from both of these incidents the extent of Hashem's concern and feeling for His people. Although there was much room for improvement, Hashem did not forsake His people. True, they did not deserve His assistance, however, when they sincerely turned to Him a favorable response was forthcoming. In a similar manner we realize how much improvement our generation needs. Yet, as in all times, we may rightfully look to Hashem for our salvation. Hashem's total concern for His people will forever exist irrespective of how truly deserving we are of it. © 2005 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There are differing opinions concerning the meaning of hok (commonly translated as statute), the type of law discussed at the beginning of this week's portion. (Numbers 19)

Some maintain that hok is a law that although not understood today, one day in the future will be understood.

The most mainstream approach to the meaning of hok is that it is a law that does not and will not ever have a reason besides the fact that it is a decree from G-d. For this reason alone, it must be kept. In the words of the Talmud "It is an enactment from Me, and you are not permitted to criticize it." (Yoma 67b)

The idea that a law must be observed even if it has no rationale runs contrary to the modern, critical approach to law—that everything must have a reasonable explanation. However, this mainstream approach to hok is at the very core of the Jewish legal process.

That process is based on a belief in Torah mi-Sinai, the law given by G-d at Sinai to which the Jewish people committed itself. Torah mi-Sinai is a form of heteronomous law, a structure of law that operates independent of any individual or group.

Torah mi-Sinai reflects a system of ethics that comes from G-d. Halakha (from the root halakh, "to go,") is not random; it rather guides us, and is the mechanism through which individuals and society can reach an ideal ethical plateau. In the words of King Solomon: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." (Proverbs 3:17) One of the challenges of halakha is to understand how this law contributes to the repairing of the world (tikkun olam).

This system of G-d ethics differs from ethical humanism. Ethical humanism is solely based on what human beings consider to be proper conduct. Yet, this can be a dangerous approach to deciding law. Human thinking can be relative. What is unethical to one person is ethical to another. Freud is purported to have said, "When it comes to self deception, human beings are geniuses."

If however, the law at its foundation comes from G-d, it becomes inviolate. No human being can declare

it null and void. Heteronymous law assures that one does not succumb to one's subjective notions or tastes when the law does not suit her or him. Therefore the law ought to be kept even when its ethical underpinnings are not understood.

And this in no small measure is why the idea of hok is so central. It reminds us of the limits of the human mind. As Rabbi Elie Munk points out: "An essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue." © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

My oldest daughter was reluctant to move past diapers, as she appreciated not having to stop whatever she was doing (as her pretend play was very important) to go to the bathroom. (Thankfully, she eventually made the transition.) We take into account allowing time during the day for our bodies to get rid of whatever it thinks it can't use, even excusing ourselves from meetings (including our thrice-daily meetings with G-d), and the like. Imagine, though, finding a food that contained only what the body needed, and nothing more. Well, this was the food that G-d provided during the 40 years in the desert, the "mun."

However, instead of being thankful for the lack of interruptions, and not having to find an appropriate place for such interruptions, the nation complained about the "light bread" that they were forced to eat (Bamidbar 21:5). Rashi tells us they complained that "the mun will eventually explode in our innards; is there anyone born that takes in [food] but does not get rid of [the waste]?" Because of their lack of appreciation (and having insulted G-d's special food), they were punished by having the snakes and vipers attack them (21:6).

This complaint would never have been appropriate, but at least it would have made sense when they first started eating the mun and realized that they no longer had to make any pit stops. However, our verse is from the 40th year, shortly after Aharon had died. They had already been eating this mun for 39 years, with no ill effects. How could they claim that it would harm them?

The B'er Basadeh brings Rabbi Akiva's opinion, cited in numerous midrashim (e.g. Bamidbar Rabbah 19:21), that traveling merchants tried to sell various fruits to the nation. When they got close to the Land of Israel, the older generation couldn't eat its fruits (died from them), as G-d had sworn that they couldn't see any benefit from the land they had initially refused to enter. Based on this, the B'er Basadeh explains that they didn't realize what the real cause of death was, and thought it was because the mun had stopped up their systems. Rashi, however, follows the opinion that all those who were not going to enter the land had already

died (20:1), so there would have been no problem with anyone still alive buying Israeli produce.

The Netziv (Sifray on Bamidbar 11:6) suggests that they knew the mun was special, thinking that it miraculously stayed in the body without having to come out. However, they thought that this was not because there was no waste, but because the mun became attached to their life-force (nourishing it). Once the life-force would be gone (i.e. at death) they would lose this "miracle." This was when they feared their innards would explode, causing a very painful ending. The Sha'aray Aharon adds that after seeing their miraculous source of water dry up after Miriam's death, and the protective "clouds of glory" leave upon Aharon's death, they may have been concerned that the miracle of the mun would come to an end as well (which it would after Moshe's death), and the 40 years worth still inside them would cause their stomachs to explode.

This is also difficult to accept, as they had seen their parents' entire generation die out after having consumed the mun for decades, and no one had exploded. It should have been obvious that their assumption (if they had one) that the mun would cause a severe and painful death was unfounded. Which still leaves us with the question of how they thought the mun would cause their insides to blow up if they had been eating it for years without a problem, and had seen 600,000 adult males die peacefully when they climbed into their graves on Tisha b'Av.

Aside from this issue, there's a logistical problem with some of the midrashim regarding this complaint. In Midrash Tehillim (78:4) Raish Lakish mentions this grievance, based on the verse in our Parsha, and says that G-d's response is "how long will they anger Me, despite all of the miracles I did within them" (Bamidbar 14:11), referring to miracles literally "within them" (inside them) of the mun not having any waste. But this verse was said after the sin of the scouts, in the 2nd year, while the complaint was made in the 40th year! How could G-d be having a discussion with Moshe in the 2nd year and be responding to a complaint that won't be made for another 38 years? Similarly, when G-d informs Moshe that this generation, which "tested Me ten times" (14:22), won't enter the land, various midrashim enumerate what the 10 tests were. In Avos d'Rav Nasan (N'A 38), one of the 10 tests listed is the insult of the mun from our Parsha. How could an insult said in the year 2487 be one of the 10 things that G-d says was already done in 2449?

There is a discussion in the Talmud (Yuma 4a-b) as to why the "cloud" covered Mt. Sinai for 6 days before G-d called Moshe to ascend. Rav Nasan says that these 6 days were necessary to remove all the food from inside Moshe, so that he could be like the angels (with no internal waste) when he joined them in heaven. Although it is unclear whether it was the period of time (the 6 days) that allowed all of the waste to either be removed or disappear, or if the cloud had an integral

part in this cleansing, it would seem that there would be no need for it to have descended for the 6 days if it played no part in it. Either way, it is possible that the nation thought that the cloud had cleansed Moshe.

When they started eating the mun exclusively (which might have been after they were surrounded by the protective clouds that prevented any traveling merchants from getting close enough to try to sell them real food) and saw that they no longer created any waste, they were concerned that their stomachs would eventually explode. After time had passed and they were still fine, they didn't attribute it to the mun being so perfect, but to the clouds cleansing them as it had Moshe.

Now move forward to the 40th year. Aharon dies, and the protective clouds (temporarily) leave. Uh oh- if the clouds had been cleansing them all along, and there's still no waste from the mun, what's going to happen? Instead of realizing that it was the mun all along that created no waste, they complained that without the clouds this "light bread" is going to do them in. The lack of appreciation of the mun's perfection was there since the very beginning, but their fear came to the forefront now, when the clouds were no longer there.

It may have been the initial complaint that the mun would cause their stomachs to explode (before attributing it to the clouds) that was referred to as one of the 10 tests in the 2nd year; Our verse is quoted because it was after the clouds no longer provided a cover for the mun's perfection that they expressed this complaint so explicitly. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Summarized by Matan Glidai

Translated by Kaeren Fish

And G-d said to Moshe and Aharon: Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land which I have given them." (20:12)

This verse describes a great tragedy-Moshe and Aharon, who have been the leaders of Am Yisrael for a generation and a half, and who have done so much for the nation, will not be permitted to enter the land. This tragedy disturbed Chazal and the various commentators greatly, especially in light of the fact that the Torah does not state explicitly what they did wrong. Because their sin is not altogether clear, the commentators offer several different explanations.

Rashi maintains that G-d had commanded them to speak to the rock (verse 8) and they sinned by striking it (verse 11). This, then, represented a deviation from the command that they were given, and Rashi

explains that their action also diminished the scale of the kiddush Hashem (sanctification of the Divine Name):

"For had you spoken to the rock and then it gave water, I would have been sanctified in the eyes of the nation. They would have said, 'This rock- which does not speak, nor does it hear, nor has it any need of sustenance- obeys the command of the Holy One; how much more so should we.'" (Rashi on verse 12)

Briefly, the crux of the sin according to this view lies in the deviation from G-d's command.

The Rambam, in his Eight Chapters (chapter 4), explains that Moshe and Aharon's sin was that they became angry and said, "Hear now, rebels..." (verse 10). Although the Rambam teaches that in every trait man should adopt the "golden mean," there are nevertheless a few traits concerning which a person must adopt the one extreme and distance himself from the other. One such trait is anger (Hilkhot De'ot 2:3). The Rashbam, too, suggests that Moshe struck the rock "out of a sort of anger and rage." It appears that this anger itself had a negative result: the nation then thought that G-d was angry with them, while this was not the case.

A third possibility is cited by the Ramban in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel (quoted also in Rabbeinu Behaye): Moshe and Aharon sinned in that they said, "Shall WE bring forth water from this rock?" instead of "Shall G-D bring forth water for you?" The nation may have received the impression that it was Moshe and Aharon who had brought forth the water by their own wisdom, and the opportunity for a kiddush Hashem was thereby lost. For that reason, according to this view, G-d says, "Why did you not believe in Me TO SANCTIFY ME..."

The Midrash (19:5) follows Rashi's understanding of the sin (hitting the rock instead of speaking to it), and raises the question that since it was specifically Moshe who struck the rock, why was Aharon also punished?

"This may be compared to a creditor who came to claim the threshing floor of the debtor, as well as that of his neighbor. The debtor asked, 'I may be guilty, but what has my neighbor done?' Similarly, Moshe here says, 'I may have been too strict, but what is Aharon's sin?' Therefore the Torah praises him:

'And to [the tribe of] Levi he said: Your tumim and urim be to Your righteous one whom You tested at Masa and with whom You strove at the waters of Meriva' (Devarim 33:8)."

The verse in Devarim shows that Aharon in fact did not sin at Meriva. The question then becomes even more problematic-why was he punished? Further on, the Midrash (19:6) answers this based on the following verse: "There is vanity which is performed upon the earth, where the righteous suffer in accordance with the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people who

enjoy the benefits of the deeds of the righteous; I said that this, too, is vanity." (Kohelet 8:14)

The Midrash compares this to the snake who was punished by G-d, although he could have argued that Adam was at fault for having listened to him instead of to G-d—"If the rabbi speaks and his student speaks, to whom do we listen?" (Sanhedrin 29a). Likewise, Aharon could have claimed, "I did not transgress Your words; why, then, should I die?" But G-d gave him no opportunity for such an appeal, nor did He argue on Aharon's behalf. The Midrash explains his fate as falling under the category of "the righteous who suffer."

It is certainly difficult to accept the line of thinking proposed by the Midrash, especially in light of the fact that Moshe pleads at length for G-d to cancel this tragic decree, to the point where G-d is forced to say, "Enough-do not speak to Me any longer concerning this matter" (Devarim 3:26). Why does Aharon not offer his own plea, especially since his claim is much stronger?

In light of all of the above, it seems that we must seek some other way of understanding the sin. The verse does not state that they sinned, but rather that they did not sanctify G-d's name: "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael?" and likewise "Because you did not sanctify Me amongst Bnei Yisrael" (Devarim 32:51). The punishment, it seems, is not for a sin which was committed, but rather for something which they did not do. (Rabbeinu Behaye similarly explains that they did not sin, but he explains the punishment in accordance with kabbalistic principles.)

Had they spoken to the rock, G-d's name would have been sanctified to a much greater degree: everyone would have witnessed the obedience of the rock, and there would have been a clear demonstration of the verse, "Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit..." Moshe and Aharon missed a golden opportunity that would perhaps never be repeated. Although it was Moshe who struck rather than speaking, Aharon was also punished because he hesitated rather than speaking immediately to the rock, and did not object when Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Both were therefore responsible for the missed opportunity.

This failure is not only severely punished but is also referred to with great severity. Later on in the parasha G-d says, "Aharon will be gathered to his people... because you REBELLED AGAINST MY WORD... at the waters of Meriva." (20:24)

Their sin is regarded as rebellion. Similarly, in parashat Haazinu (32:51) we read, "For you ACTED TREACHEROUSLY (ma'altem) against Me amongst Bnei Yisrael." The Gemara (Me'ilah 18a) compares acting treacherously (me'ilah) to idolatry and adultery.

This severe attitude is certainly related to the fact that G-d is very exacting of the righteous. We read, "These are the waters of Meriva, for Bnei Yisrael strove

with G-d and He was SANCTIFIED THROUGH THEM" (20:13), corresponding to the verse, "By means of those close to Me I shall be sanctified" (Vayikra 10:3). It was not even as though Moshe and Aharon missed completely the opportunity for a kiddush Hashem; they merely brought about a kiddush Hashem that was on a smaller scale than what would have been possible.

The very fact that G-d punishes them although they did not actually sin but rather missed an opportunity for something greater, holds a lesson for us. G-d relates to each individual according to the relationship between what he does and what he could have done. A person can learn Torah and fulfill the mitzvot but nevertheless be punished because there was more that he could have done, but he did not. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 99a) teaches that anyone who could study Torah but does not do so is included in the verse, "For he has spurned the word of G-d." The Gemara (Berakhot 12b) teaches that someone who could have pleaded for mercy on behalf of his fellow but does not do so is called a sinner. Nowhere is it written that a person is commanded to pray for his fellow, but nevertheless a person who fails to do so is called a sinner since he could have helped his fellow but did not.

There are two reasons for such a severe view of someone who all in all does not do as much as he is able:

i. Wasted potential is considered like actual damage. The Rambam (Hilkhot Sekhirut 20:3) writes in the name of his teachers (i.e. the Ri Migash) that someone who gave over his vineyard to a watchman or tenant on condition that the latter will dig or prune, and he does not do perform these acts of cultivation, "he is as culpable as one who actively caused a loss."

ii. Such a missed opportunity arises at best from laziness and at worst from apathy. If someone fails to pray for his fellow, it is a sign that his fellow is unimportant to him.

The Gemara (Berakhot 5a) teaches that if a person is overcome with suffering he should examine his deeds, and if he finds no fitting reason, he should assume that he is being punished for wasting time that could have been spent on Torah study. In other words, if someone finds no specific sin that could be the cause of his suffering, he should assume that the punishment is for missed opportunities. It is unclear whether missing an opportunity for Torah study is forbidden from the formal halakhic perspective—a person is not obligated to study Torah every minute of his whole life; but there is certainly an element of wasted opportunity.

All of this teaches us that a person should always strive to achieve the maximum that he is able to. A person may never set himself a standard for action in accordance with what his peers are doing, or what previous generations did, since his potential may differ from theirs. Each person has to recognize his own personal potential and then strive with all his might to

fulfill it. (*Originally delivered on leil Shabbat, Parashat Chukat 5755 [1995].*)

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

This week's portion begins with the phrase, "This is the law of the Torah" [Bamidbar 19:2]. This includes two terms that are basically opposite, "chukah" and Torah. Chukah usually refers to an act that Bnei Yisrael have been commanded to perform or to refrain from doing, typically a permanent command. One example is the positive commandment related to Pesach: "Celebrate it as a holiday for G-d throughout your generations, an eternal law" [Shemot 12:14]. With respect to Yom Kippur, "Let this be for you an eternal law, in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls" [Vayikra 16:29]. The phrase also appears with respect to the prohibition of eating forbidden fats and blood, "As an eternal law for your generations, in all your settlements, do not eat any fat or any blood" [3:17]. The term "Torah," on the other hand, refers to a group of mitzvot which includes general principles and specific details (one exception is in the book of Devarim, where "Torah" is the title given to the summary of all the mitzvot). For example, at the end of the description of the sacrifices, it is written, "This is the Torah of the Olah, the Mincha, the Chatat, the Asham, the additional sacrifices, and the Shelamim sacrifice" [7:37], referring to the complete system of sacrifices, including the differences between them. The laws of leprosy end in a similar way: "This is the Torah for all blemishes of tzaraat or a netek. Also for tzaraat of a garment or of a house..." [14:54-55]. This leads us to wonder what the meaning is of the combined phrase, "the Chukah of the Torah." Does this refer to specific mitzvot or to a complete system with assorted details?

It may be that this is the main point of the issue of the Red Heifer (Bamidbar 19:1-22). The passage can be divided into two parts. Verses 1-10 describe the "chukah"-preparing the ashes of the heifer, meant to serve as an eternal law (see 19:10). The second section of the passage refers to "Torah," as is written explicitly, "This is the Torah: if a man dies in a tent..." [19:14]. Indeed, many details of the laws are listed. But at this point, there is an innovation. As opposed to other cases of a "Torah," which usually present various details, with their specific laws, this "Torah" leads to the same practice in all cases. (1) "This is the Torah: if a man dies in a tent, anything that enters the tent and anything that is in the tent will be ritually impure for seven days. (2) And any open utensil that does not have a seal on it will be impure. (3) And anything that touches, in an open field, one killed by a sword, or a dead body, or a human bone or a grave, will be impure for seven days." [19:14-17]. In addition, the verse that describes the way to become ritually pure includes all the different cases

at once, without distinguishing between them. "Let a pure man take hyssop and dip it into the water, and let him sprinkle it on the tent and on all the utensils, and on the people who were there, and on one who touched a bone or a dead body or a grave." [19:18].

Thus, it seems that the main message of this passage lies in this particular phrase, "the chukah of the Torah." As opposed to other cases, where there are different details depending on circumstances, with respect to ritual impurity connected to death the "Torah" is a "chukah"-all the different types of impurity are treated in the same way. This emphasizes the severity of this type of impurity, and it prepares mankind to make the proper choice: "I have presented you with life and death, a blessing and a curse. You shall choose life, in order that you and your descendants will continue to live" [Devarim 30:19].

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Daf HaShavua

by Rabbi Mendel Lew,

Southend & Westcliff Hebrew Synagogue

Judaism is defined in a variety of ways, invariably connected to the performance of recognised Divine commands. Some of these instructions seem fairly logical to our human mind, while others most certainly do not. A classic example of an incomprehensible law is the one with which our Sidrah begins:

If an individual had become ritually defiled, that person was required to undergo a process of purification. The highlight of this procedure was the sprinkling of a special brew of different ingredients that included the ashes from a red heifer.

How, the greatest Jewish thinkers wondered, could a simple potion with ashes from a pure red heifer so transform the one who had become defiled? Even more bizarre, the preparation of this purifying mixture actually conferred impurity to those involved! The answer to this dilemma? There isn't one! It is a formula dictated by G-d and no reason is offered. Being loyal to the Torah, we accept it faithfully.

This type of directive (where no logical explanation is apparent) is recognised in Hebrew as a Chok. The word 'Chok' shares a root with the Hebrew for "engraving". Engraving in rock has an advantage over writing with ink since it becomes one and the same with the material into which it is being cut. While it is relatively simple to remove the written letter, it is nigh impossible with the hewn rock.

But even in engraving, there are two outcomes. It is possible to engrave into the rock, as is common practice. Alternatively, one can carve right through the rock-like the tablets into which the Ten Commandments were engraved.

In the first method, the letters are connected and attached to the rock, while in the second example there is no association between the letters and the

mineral. The wording is simply visible through the hollow crevices. The message is identical, but in the second case the letters seem independent from the rock.

There are similarly two types of Chok. Although the definition of a Chok is that it does not make sense, it is sometimes possible to engage in conjecture. But then there is the rule of the red heifer, which has absolutely no attachment to logic. The red heifer law would qualify as a letter carved right through the stone, where its attachment and link are lost.

Crucially, its detachment is a human one. It does not connect to our own human logic and understanding. But by obediently following its instruction, we are able to unite with something much higher and valuable than our perceived advanced intellect. We connect to the Divine, with all its many advantages.

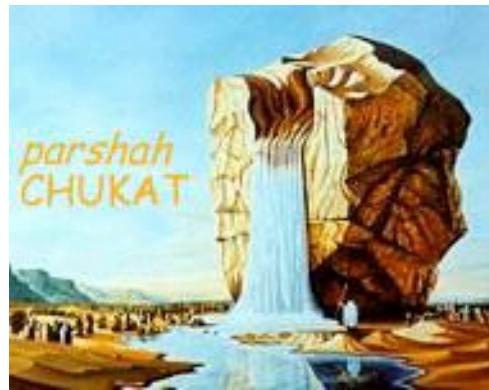
Indeed, the spiritual energy that flows through our veins is the direct result of an inner trust and faith in G-d and His challenge to us. The essence of faith is, after all, the following of the Torah's guidelines- with or without understanding. In this way we become chiselled and united with our ultimate Divine source. © 2005 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The series of tragic events that overtook Israel in the desert that have been recounted in the Torah readings of the last three weeks culminates in this week's parsha with the story of Moshe striking the rock at the waters of Meriva. Moshe too will not be able to reach the promised land of Israel. And even though the Torah seems to attribute Moshe's punishment in not being allowed to enter the Land of Israel solely to his hitting the rock instead of speaking to it as he was commanded to do by G-d, the commentators throughout the centuries have searched for the "real" reason that lies behind such a punishment for what is apparently so minor an offense. Maimonides attributes the punishment to Moshe's anger, which recurred many times in his career. Others attribute it to Moshe's very greatness and therefore even the slightest deviation from the level of holiness and greatness brings about consequences and his punishment. There is another reason advanced that I find most striking and intriguing. It is that if Moshe's generation did not merit entering the Land of Israel, then Moshe himself as the leader of that generation must suffer the same fate as his flock. The rabbis taught us that "there is no king without a people." The leader is held responsible for the community that one led. It would therefore appear grossly unfair that the leader - even Moshe - should enter the Land of Israel while his entire congregation dies in the desert of Sinai.

The rabbis extended this thought to include the relationship between teachers and students. If students do not merit the World to Come, then their teacher is also jeopardy of not arriving there either. Perhaps this is the rationale behind the idea of the rabbis as expressed in the Talmud in warning teachers not to teach Torah to "improper" students. If the students do not merit immortality, it is unlikely that the teacher will be held completely blameless. Therefore, the series of events that led up to the incident of the waters of Meriva - the hedonism of those who desired meat and complained about the manna, the disaster of the spies, the rebellion of Korach, all of which led to the demise of the generation of the desert, in effect also precluded Moshe from entering the Land of Israel. To a great extent, the adage of the navies of the world that the captain goes down with his ship applies here as well. It is therefore more understandable to us that Moshe's intensive prayers to G-d to be allowed to enter the Land of Israel, justifiable as his request and prayers may have been, went largely unheeded. It is the people that make the king. It is the student that makes the teacher. It is the flock that determines the fate of the shepherd. We are all caught up in the generation that we live in - in its greatness and follies, its triumphs and reverses. We must therefore strive to improve not only ourselves but our generation as well, for our fate is inextricably tied to its fate as well. © 2005 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.



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