

Toras Aish



Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RAV MEIR GOLDWICHT

Mei Merivah

Parashat Chukat deals for the most part with the incident of the mei merivah, in which Moshe Rabbeinu struck the rock instead of speaking to it as Hashem had commanded him. For this act of disobedience, Moshe and Aharon were punished by being barred entry into Eretz Yisrael.

Ramban asks why Moshe and Aharon's punishment was so severe; after all, was it any less miraculous that the rock brought forth water after being struck than it would have been had it brought forth water after being spoken to? Certainly they sinned in that they did not obey Hashem's command to speak to the rock, but was their sin so severe so as to merit such a punishment? This question is especially strong in light of the fact that Aharon, after forming the eigel despite an explicit tzivuy Hashem to the contrary, did not merit such a severe punishment. Why was this sin singled out for the punishment of not being allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael?

Immediately after the incident of mei merivah, the Torah says that Moshe asked the King of Edom to allow B'nei Yisrael to pass through his land. The King of Edom responded, "Don't even think about it. If you even try to pass through my land, I will confront you in battle." Why was the King of Edom so opposed to B'nei Yisrael's passage through his land, especially considering Moshe's promise not to veer from the path determined by the King of Edom so as not to damage any fields or vineyards?

The answer to these questions is as follows: One of the reasons Am Yisrael had to travel through the desert after they left Mitzrayim was in order to teach the nation the ability of proper dibbur to transform a midbar into a yishuv and the ability of improper dibbur to reverse a yishuv into a midbar. Passing through the midbar would teach the nation proper dibbur.

Speech is essentially what separates man from the animals, that which combines the neshama with the guf. Speech is not just moving one's lips in order to communicate, but rather the expression of thought and the reflection of the tzelem Elokim in each of us. For this reason, sefer VaYikra, which deals in its entirety with the different types of kedusha that exist? kedushat ha'adam (tumah and taharah); kedushat hazman (the yomim tovim); kedushat ha'aretz (shemittah and

yovel)? also deals with the mekalel, because the key to all other kedusha is kedushat hapeh. Even Shlomo HaMelech writes, "Mavet v?chayim b?yad lashon" (Mishlei 18:21).

Hashem commanded Moshe to speak to the rock on the eve of B'nei Yisrael's entrance into Eretz Yisrael in order to instill in them the understanding that the key to inheriting the land is dibbur nachon bein adam laChaveiro and dibbur nachon bein adam laMakom. Had Moshe spoken to the rock, this lesson would have been clear as day and B'nei Yisrael would have entered Eretz Yisrael permanently. The moment Moshe struck the rock, although the result was no less miraculous, he forfeited the opportunity to demonstrate the power of dibbur. Therefore, because his act prevented B'nei Yisrael from remaining in the land for all eternity, he was barred from entering the Holy Land himself.

Immediately afterwards, the Torah discusses Moshe's request to pass through Edom. Chazal explain that essentially Moshe told the King of Edom that the two of them represented Yaakov and Eisav. Yaakov promised to meet Eisav in Seir (see Bereishit 33:14). Moshe wanted to fulfill the promise of Yaakov to Eisav. The King of Edom's response was that if Moshe really represented Yaakov, he would have used the power of Yaakov, of "hakol kol Yaakov," in dealing with the rock. Instead, Moshe used the power of Eisav, of "hayadayim y'dei Eisav." If you want to use your yadayim, said the King of Edom, then be aware that my y'dei Eisav are stronger than your y'dei Yaakov.

We must intensify the koach of hakol kol Yaakov, in order to allow us to inherit the land through our proper dibbur. The more we increase and intensify the kol Torah in our batei k'nesset and batei midrash, the sooner we will merit to hear the kol of the mevasser, may he gather together the dispersed of Israel. May we speedily merit the fulfillment of, "V'r'a'u chol basar yachdav ki pi Hashem diber" (Yeshayahu 40:5). © 2007 Rabbi M. Goldwicht & yutorah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Life is certainly nothing but mystery. The unknown and the uncertain far outweigh what we believe we understand and base our life's activities and plans upon. Events that are unforeseen and sometimes less than fortuitous occur to us all of the time, jarring our

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sense of security and serenity. Though this week's parsha dwells upon one of the laws of the Torah called a chok - a law without understanding or rational explanation - it really informs us about human life.

The Torah states explicitly zot chukat haTorah - this is the law of the Torah regarding all matters of life. Really what we think we understand is still not fully understood by humans. Every layer of scientific discovery and advance unpeels for us the specter of untold new mysteries of which we were previously completely unaware. The nature of all life is therefore chok. So the Torah, though concentrating on the commandment and mystery of the parah adumah in all of its particularities really addresses itself to life generally.

In the Torah viewpoint, humans have limitations in their abilities to understand and rationalize our existence and purpose. "No living creature can see Me" is interpreted in Jewish tradition to mean "No living creature can ever understand fully the world, nature and logic of the Creator of us all. Man is doomed to be a wanderer in a desert of doubt and uncertainty, without ever being able to find one's way clearly on his own. All of the frustrations and disappointments of human life stem from this hard fact of life.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto in his immortal work, Mesilat Yesharim, compares life to a gigantic maze in which without directions or guidance one can never emerge. I remember that once when I visited one of the royal palaces and its grounds in Europe, I tried my luck at entering the maze of tall hedges that existed there. There were many other people with me in the maze. Suffice it to say that after forty minutes none of us had found our way out of the maze. There were people who were bemused by the situation. Others were visibly frustrated and almost angry in their inability to escape. And then there were those who were visibly panicked by being lost in the maze. After a while a guard entered the maze and guided all of us safely out.

Rabbi Luzatto had made the point that if one stands on a high platform that overlooks the maze and maps it out in one's mind then negotiating the maze becomes possible, even simple. The Torah is that high platform that allows to deal with the maze of life. That is the ultimate lesson of this week's parsha. Life is a chok - a confusing maze of events, personalities and forces.

Why the maze is constructed as it is, or even to appreciate why the necessity for a maze itself is chok - beyond our level of comprehension. But how to negotiate the maze, how to stand on the high platform overlooking and informing the maze, that is within our grasp and abilities. And that is really the chukat haTorah that is granted to us. © 2007 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.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron: 'Because you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the children of Israel; therefore you shall not bring this assemblage into the land which I have given to them.' (Numbers 20: 12) What a difficult and harsh punishment this seems to be - specifically in terms of Moses and Aaron - for what is seemingly a rather mild refraction. G-d instructed them to take a staff and speak to the rock, after which water would come forth from the rock and provide drink for the thirsty Israelites. Moses strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. Is there that much more of a miracle if the water emerges from the rock after speaking to it than after striking it? And remember that G-d did instruct Moses to take a staff, and that previously G-d had instructed Moses to strike the rock in order to bring forth water from it. Why deprive Moses from his life's goal because he utilized the very staff which G-d had ordered him to take to strike the rock instead of merely speaking to it?!

I believe that the answer to this question as well as the connection between what seemed to be disparate subjects during the biblical readings of these weeks are to be found once we understand the most profound message our Bible comes to teach. The overwhelming power and significance of love. Let us begin with what is truly the most egregious transgression of the desert, the sin of the scouts. How could G-d have commanded a reconnaissance mission if the outcome could have been so dangerous as to dissuade the nation from setting out to conquer the Promised Land? The answer according to my revered teacher Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik is that G-d did not command a reconnaissance mission. The Bible uses the Hebrew word "vayaturu" rather than the usual and to be expected verb "vayeraglu" (Numbers 13:1). The verb "latur", as it is made clear slightly further on in the text (Numbers 15:39) means "to look at with love-lust" as in "You shall not look with love-lust after your heart and after your eyes".

G-d wants the Jewish people to love the land of Israel just the way they must love the Torah of Israel

which is just the way a bride and groom love each other. That is why both Torah and the land of Israel are biblically called 'Morasha', an unusual term linked to the Hebrew word "m'orasa" which means engaged, affianced. Just as the powerful love linking bride and groom will make it possible for them to overcome all of the expected challenges and problems which family life of necessity experiences, so must love-lust for land and love-lust for Torah enable the Israelites to overcome the requisite hardship involved in the acquisition of both of these treasures. Hence, just as our Sages teach us that bride and groom must get to know each other before marriage in order that they may fulfill the Biblical command of "loving your life's- partner as yourself" (B.T. Kiddushin 41), so did G-d expect that the scouts would bring back the kind of inspiring and exciting picture of Israel that would imbue the Israelites with love-lust for the land.

But alas, the very antithesis occurred because the scouts never really understood the Divine purpose of their mission. The Israelites are doomed to die in the desert, the exalted vision of the exodus has fallen upon rocks of despair, and rebellion disputation and argument breaks out against the leadership of Moses. Fascinatingly enough however all dispute and disagreement are not at all denigrated by our Sages. All argumentation for the sake of heaven will ultimately continue (and lead to eventual peace) and all argument which is not for the sake of heaven will not ultimately continue (and will not lead to eventual peace). Argument for the sake of heaven is like the argument between Hillel and Shamai. Argument not for the sake of heaven is like the argument between Korah and his cohorts (Mishnah Avot 5,20) The argumentation of Korah was grounded in his hatred of Moses and therefore will only destroy; the argumentation between Hillel and Shamai is grounded in their search for truth and desire to serve G-d best, and therefore must lead to greater wisdom and even love between the disputants. A married couple are called "beloved and loving friends"; friends often engage in dispute because no two people see everything eye to eye. But if the basis for every dispute is to strengthen the love relationship and arrive at the best possible way to create a family, then that is the kind of difference which leads to unity and dissension which brings even greater love. Hence we find so very often that the academy of Hillel gives in to the academy of Shamai or that the academy of Shamai gives in to academy of Hillel. The goal of their disputes was always truth and peace, understanding and love.

The Biblical subject just prior to Moses' striking of the rock is the red heifer, a ritual commandment which does not seem to be rooted in logic. Indeed, the 613 commandments of our bible are usually divided between mishpatim and hokim, the former based upon reason and the latter based upon certain faith

commitment which leads us to accept from G-d even that which we do not understand. Permit me a brief analogy, if my wife has had a particular difficult day during which she hasn't eaten anything at all, and then asks that I buy her an ice cream, fulfilling her request can hardly be termed an act of love; I imagine any person in difficult straits who would ask of me a similar thing would reasonably expect that I do the favor. But if, apropos of nothing my wife would exclaim that although she has just had dinner she feels in the mood for an ice cream and I run out to fulfill her request - as illogical nutritionally as it may be- that would be a sign of love. Similarly it is the hok which is specifically not based upon logic that demonstrates the special love that the Israelites have for G-d.

Whereas the language of power is the language of the staff which strikes, the language of love is the language of the tongue that speaks. What makes us specifically human is our ability to speak and communicate - especially to communicate in a loving fashion. Indeed, the Abarbanel interprets the very name Havah, the name which the Bible gives to the first woman, as coming from the Hebrew which means to express in words. Adam did not find satisfaction in his relation with the animals with whom he could not communicate verbally; he only found such satisfaction with Havah, his life's partner with whom he could speak. And certainly there is a profound connection between Havah and Ahavah the Hebrew word for love. The Book of Numbers is called in Hebrew Bamidbar, and a dabar, is a shepherd - who nurtures his sheep in the desert with sounds and words rather than hitting and striking (dabar from dibbur). Enemies are struck at, just as Moses struck and smote the Egyptian taskmaster who was enslaving the Hebrews; that same Moses communicated the loving commandments of G-d with the words of the Ten Commandments (Aseret Dibrot, dabar, dibbur). Those whom we love and whom we wish to nurture must be related to with words and not strikes.

G-d did not punish Moses when the great prophet struck the hard rock (a metaphor for the stiff necked Israelites), he demonstrated that he no longer loved his people and therefore could not lead them.

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

Untold amounts of ink have been used up in the effort to understand Moshe and Aharon's sin with respect to "Mei Merivah," the controversial water which Moshe obtained by striking the rock. Without going into the details of the various commentaries, we will make our own modest attempt to understand the essence of this affair, based on the simple text of the passage. It is likely that the key to understanding this

affair can be found in the punishment that Moshe and Aharon shared. According to the description in the passage and what is written each time the sin is mentioned in the Torah, this joint punishment stemmed from the fact that the sin was a joint act. As is written in this week's Torah portion, "Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael? therefore, you will not bring this community into the land" [Bamidbar 20:12]. This is written in the plural, indicating both Moshe and Aharon. The same holds for the verse, "because you rebelled against my word with the controversial water" [20:24], also written in the plural. The same is true in later verses: "... as you rebelled against my word in the Tzin Desert" [27:14]; "... because you sinned against me... because you did not sanctify me" [Devarim 32:51].

This point can help us understand exactly what the central point of the sin is in this passage. In G-d's original command, it is possible to see what Moshe himself was commanded and what commands were given to both Moshe and Aharon. "Take the staff, and gather the nation together, you and your brother Aharon, and you shall talk (plural) to the rock in front of them, and it will give up its water, and you shall take water out of the rock (singular) and give the community and their cattle to drink (singular)." [Bamidbar 20:8]. The only commands that included Aharon were to gather the nation together and to speak to the rock. Thus, the sin must be connected to not obeying these two commands.

As the passage continues, the Torah describes the actions of Moshe with respect to the staff separately. "And Moshe took the staff of G-d as He had commanded him... And Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and much water came out" [20:9,11]. Since Aharon did not participate in this activity, we can conclude that the sin was not related to this action or to the staff in general. In another verse, on the other hand, both Moshe and Aharon are mentioned explicitly: "And Moshe and Aharon gathered the community (plural) at the face of the rock, and he said to them (singular): Listen you rebellious ones, will I be able to take water out of this rock for you?" [20:10]. The gathering of the nation was done according to the command given to Moshe and Aharon. Thus, the only joint command that was not obeyed was that they did not speak to the rock but instead Moshe spoke to the nation.

The conclusion is that Moshe and Aharon's sin was that they did not obey the command to speak to the rock. In general, one who does not obey a command is considered to have rebelled, and therefore the Almighty says, "you rebelled against my word." Thus, it was not only Bnei Yisrael who rebelled, it was Moshe and Aharon. Various suggestions have been proposed to explain why it was so important to speak to the rock (for example, see Rashi, 20:12). In any case,

we have seen by looking at the text that disobeying this command was the essence of their sin.

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. Heteronomous 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 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." © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-

AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevi Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah, read in conjunction with Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, reveals to us a secret dimension of this significant date. In fact, as we will discover, Rosh Chodesh possesses the potential of assuming a greater personality than ever seen before. Its heightened effect will be so powerful that it will be likened to the impact of one of our three Yomim Tovim.

The prophet opens the haftorah with a fiery message regarding the privilege of sacrifice in the Bais Hamikdash. Yeshaya declares in the name of Hashem, "The heavens are My throne and the earth is My foot stool. What home can you build for Me and what is an appropriate site for My Divine Presence?" The Radak explains that Hashem was rejecting the notion of His requiring an earthly abode wherein to reside. Even the span of the universe barely serves as a throne where upon Hashem rests, how much more so our small Bais Hamikdash. But the purpose of His earthly abode is in order for us to experience His Divine presence. And it is in this uplifting environment that we offer sacrifices to Hashem and commit ourselves to fulfilling His will.

Yeshaya continues and expresses Hashem's view of the Jewish people's sacrifices at that time. Hashem says, "One who slaughters the ox is likened to smiting a man; he who sacrifices the sheep is akin to slashing a dog's neck; a meal offering is like swine's blood.....(66:3) The Radak explains Hashem's disturbance and informs us of the attitude of those times. The people would heavily engage in sin and then appear in the Bais Hamikdash to offer their sacrificial atonement. However, this uplifting experience was short-lived and they would return home and revert to their sinful ways. Hashem responded and rejected their sacrifices because the main facet of the sacrifice was missing, the resolve to elevate oneself. From Hashem's perspective, a sacrifice without an accompanying commitment was nothing more than an act of slashing a useful animal.

The prophet continues and notes the stark contrast between the above mentioned and the humble and low spirited people. Hashem says, "But to this I gaze, to the humble and low spirited and to the one who trembles over My word." (66:2) These humble people do not need the experience of the Bais Hamikdash. They sense the Divine Presence wherever they are and respond with proper reverence and humility. Unlike the first group who limits Hashem's presence to the walls of the Bais Hamikdash, the second views the earth as Hashem's footstool and reacts accordingly. In fact we are told earlier by Yeshaya that they are actually an abode for His

presence as is stated, "So says Hashem, "I rest in the exalted and sanctified spheres and amongst the downtrodden and low spirited ones."(57: 15)

In a certain sense we resemble the first group when relating to our Rosh Chodesh experience. Rosh Chodesh is a unique holiday because its entire festivity consists of a special Rosh Chodesh sacrifice. There are no specific acts of Mitzva related to Rosh Chodesh and there is no halachic restriction from productive activity. However, the first day of the month provides the opportunity for introspect. After our serious contemplation over the previous month's achievements we welcome the opportunity of a fresh start. We offer a sacrifice in atonement for the past and prepare ourselves for the challenges of the new month. Unfortunately this new opportunity is met with trepidation and is always accompanied by mixed feelings of joy and remorse. Because each Rosh Chodesh we realize how far we have strayed during the previous month and we look towards the next month to be an improvement over the past.

This is the limited status of our present Rosh Chodesh. However, as we will soon learn, a greater dimension of Rosh Chodesh was intended to be and will eventually become a reality. The Tur in Orach Chaim (417) quotes the Pirkei D'R'Eliezer which reveals that Rosh Chodesh was actually intended to be a full scale Yom Tov. The Tur quotes his brother R' Yehuda who explains that the three Yomim Tovim correspond to our three patriarchs and that the twelve days of Rosh Chodesh were intended to correspond to the twelve tribes. This link reveals that each Rosh Chodesh truly has a unique aspect to itself and that one of the Biblical tribes' remarkable qualities is available to us each month. However, as the Tur explains, due to an unfortunate error of the Jewish people this opportunity has been, to a large degree, withheld from us.

But in the era of Mashiach this error will be rectified and the experience of Rosh Chodesh will actually reach its intended capacity. Yeshaya reflects upon this and says at the close of our haftorah, "And it will be that from month to month.... all will come and prostrate themselves before Hashem." (66:23) The Psikta Rabbi (1:3) explains that in the days of Mashiach we will have the privilege of uniting with Hashem every Rosh Chodesh. All Jewish people will come to the Bais Hamikdash each month and experience His Divine Presence. During the illustrious era of Mashiach sin will no longer exist and Rosh Chodesh will be viewed exclusively as an opportunity for elevation. Each month will provide us its respective quality and opportunity which we will celebrate through the Rosh Chodesh festivities. The sacrifice of Rosh Chodesh will reflect our great joy over being with Hashem and will no longer contain any aspect of remorse or sin. In those days, the experience of His

Divine Presence in the Bais Hamikdash will be perpetuated throughout the month and the entire period will become one uplifting experience.

This, according to the Maharit Algazi is the meaning of our Mussaf section wherein we state, "When they would offer sacrifices of favor and goats as sin offerings.... May you establish a new altar in Zion.... and we will offer goats with favor." With these words we are acknowledging the fact that the goats which had previously served as sin offerings will now become expressions of elevation. Without the need to reflect upon our shortcomings of the previous month, Rosh Chodesh will be greeted with total happiness, and we will welcome with great joy the uplifting spiritual opportunity of each respective month. © 2007 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

JONATHAN MILNER

Googling to G-d

My spiritual journey of a thousand miles began with a single click. I fondly remember my first Google. The summer of 1999. It was a typically balmy Australian afternoon. Well, probably. I don't recall even glancing outside that day. Or for weeks afterwards, to be honest.

Our shiny new family computer had just been installed, and the world was at the fingertips of a inquisitive 16 year old. Of all the knowledge mankind had collected throughout our existence, there was practically nothing out of reach. What were my most innermost desires?

"C-H-E-A-T-S F-O-R N-I-N-T-E-N-D-O G-A-M-E-S" And there they were, like magic. Nice one, Google.

We became the best of friends. He'd help me through school biology essays, no matter how late at night (or early in the morning!). Choosing the right university was simple—he knew all about them! My adventures through South American jungles would have been a mess if it wasn't for his advice. And graduate opportunities? No problem. He even suggested the quickest ways to the interviews.

Life was running smoothly. For a typical 22 year old male, all the boxes were ticked. Career? Check. Car? Check. Fun in the sun? Check, check. But spirituality? Not even on the list.

No wonder. I had always viewed Judaism as our family's pro-team in a sport that I just didn't like. Sure, I was a season ticket holder, but it was rare that I'd attend any of their games. The spectacle was hardly that, and navigating my way through the match-program only confused me more. But even as my loyalty steadily wavered over the years, I always admired the cheering fans in the bleachers. But what they saw in it all, who knew.

Following another intolerable Rosh Hashana, it occurred to me; maybe Google had the answer. After

all, he taught my father all the songs from Fiddler on the Roof. But I forgave my electronic buddy for that. Eventually.

"J-U-D-A-I-S-M" Spilled across the screen were a multitude of sources for me to explore. One of the more credible looking options was "Aish.com-Your Life, Your Judaism."

Click. As the front page loaded, the article "Falling in Love with Judaism" by Rabbi Nachum Braverman caught my sceptical eye. I looked over my shoulder, making sure that no one was in the room.

Click. Suspiciously intrigued after a rushed glance, I read through the article again. As I digested its words I felt my guard drop. After the third reading, which was a more methodical study, my cynicism melted away. I was ready to explore.

I had questions. Loads of them. But I wanted the fundamentals tackled immediately: How do we know that there is a G-d? Is there any evidence that the Torah was actually written by G-d?

They had answers. Loads of them. But I wasn't expecting them to be drenched with logic and critical analysis. Weren't all religions dependent on a leap of faith, empty of intellectual appeal? The articles I'd scrutinize at home, the daily/weekly emails I'd read at the office, and lectures I'd listen to while I drove to and from work suggested otherwise.

I decided that if there is a truth, I wanted to know it, intimately. And my ol' pal Google was going to be my navigator.

Over the coming months he led me to all ends of the Earth, from Tibet's mountains to Oxford's philosophy library. And I didn't even need to leave my study. But I kept coming back to Aish.com's virtual study hall in Jerusalem. After analysing another frighteningly rational insight into Torah, I'd find myself sitting quietly at my computer, staring at Kotel via the website's live feed.

I was terrified. I'd stumbled on the truth, and I didn't know where it was taking me. Why and how should all this obligate me? But as a matter of integrity, what I know must become part of who I am.

Plucking up the courage, I emailed my local Aish HaTorah branch. Before I could blink, I'm sitting at a rabbi's Shabbat table with 10 other guests. And I wasn't the only guest wearing a dusty kippah.

I started to attend stimulating weekly classes, where I immersed myself more in Torah thought and discovered that there were others like me who were falling in love with Judaism.

As I slowly become more exposed to the depth and beauty of Torah, I knew I needed to take some time off work to study full time. The inevitable moment eventually arrived: "F-L-I-G-H-T-S T-O J-E-R-U-S-A-L-E-M"

My spiritual journey of a thousand miles began with a single click. Now I'm in the grandstand's front

row, touching the Kotel's tear- stained stones, and I'm cheering my heart out. © 2007 J. Milner & aish.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

This is the chok (decree) of the Torah" (Bamidbar 19:2). What exactly is meant by "chok?" And why is para aduma (the red heifer, whose ashes are used to restore a state of spiritual purity to one who has come in contact with a corpse) considered the epitome of chukim?

Rashi seems to address the first issue, telling us that Satan, as well as non-Jews, taunt us regarding the rationale for para aduma. Therefore, G-d classified it as a chok, meaning "it is a decree from [G-d], and we cannot question it." This implies that the definition of "chok" is a decree without a logical explanation that we are to accept as being part of the Divine intelligence. However, Rashi himself provides a rationale for it (when he gives an alternative explanation at the end of the topic), explaining that this calf is coming to atone for the damage done by the golden calf. Evidently, accepting it as G-d's decree without questioning it is merely the way to respond to Satan's taunts (or when we haven't discovered, or don't understand, the rationale). Elsewhere (Vayikra 18:4, see also Beraishis 26:5) Rashi contrasts "chok" with "mishpat," with the latter being things that would have been appropriate to be commanded even if G-d had not commanded them. A chok would therefore be a decree without an obvious rationale.

This approach is based on the Talmud (Yuma 67b), where five examples are given of mishpatim that "deserve to be written even if they weren't;" pagan worship, illicit relations, murder, theft and blaspheming G-d. (Interestingly, the first and fifth indicate that the Talmud does not mean that a mishpat is a law that humans would have come up with on their own in order to maintain a society, but laws that a G-d fearing society need to have even though they weren't divine commandments.) This is followed by five examples of chukim, including eating swine and wearing a wool/linen mixture. Rashi explains what the Talmud means when it says that Satan is dismissive of these types of laws; "[he] tries to trick [us] by suggesting that the Torah is not true, for what purpose do these [rituals] serve." We would have expected one of the examples brought by the Talmud to be para aduma, but it isn't. Rabbeinu Chananel adds six additional examples of chukim, but again, para aduma isn't one of them. This omission is so puzzling that the Ain Yaakov adds it (in parenthesis), Rashi includes it (in Vayikra) and the Maharid says that it should be added to Toras Kohanim (13:10, the source "beraisa" for the Talmud). However, being that all three of these texts (Toras Kohanim, Talmud and Rabbeinu Chananel) do not include it, it is much more likely that it was not part of the original

teaching. The question is why not. We also have not addressed our second issue above, namely why is para aduma considered "the chok of the Torah?" Is it any less rational than any of the other chukim listed?

Although the Talmud (and Toras Kohanim) give five examples of chukim, and Rabbeinu Chananel has 11, Bamidbar Rabbah (19:5, as well as parallel Midrashim in the Tanchuma, Pesikta Rabasi and Pesikta de'Rav Kahana, and included in Yalkut Shimoni and Midrash Hagadol) lists only four, and says explicitly that there are only four; three that are mentioned by the Talmud plus para aduma. Nevertheless, the Midrash explains why these four are unique. (1) It is forbidden to marry a brother's wife, yet one is biblically permitted to marry her if they had no children; (2) wearing a garment made of wool and linen is forbidden, yet it is permitted if it has tzitzis; (3) the goat sent to Azazel on Yom Kippur causes the one who escorts it out to become tamay (spiritually impure) yet brings atonement to the entire nation; and (4) the para aduma causes all involved to become tamay while making the one who is dabbed with its ashes to become tahor. Whereas the Talmud understood chok to mean a law without an obvious reason, these Midrashim understand it to mean a law that has an internal contradiction. Even the shared examples aren't really the same; the Talmud includes the process of ending the possibility of marrying a dead brother's wife (chalitzah, which Rabbeinu Chananel says refers to the spitting) while the Midrashim refer to the ability to marry her. It could be similarly suggested that the Talmud is referring to wearing any wool/linen garment, while the Midrashim refer to being able to wear one with tzitzis, and that the Talmud is referring to the concept of sending a goat to Azazel while the Midrashim refer to it's causing tuma while atoning.

The piyut said on Shabbos Parashas Para indicates that there is a third definition to chok as well. In it, the author discusses how we cannot to begin to fathom divine logic, and proceeds to give 12 examples of laws where similar things are forbidden/permited (such as meat and milk cooked together being forbidden even though one can cook and eat an udder, which has the taste of milk and meat together) or tamay/tahor (such as a small nega vs. one that covers the entire body). All four of the examples cited in the Midrashim are included, while only three overlap with the Talmud.

It would seem, then, that we now have three definitions for what would be considered a chok; (1) a law that doesn't seem to make sense, (2) a law that has a similar circumstance that has the opposite status, and (3) a law that contains an internal contradiction. There are numerous examples of the first two categories, but only four of the third. Not only that, but of those four, one stands out as being the biggest enigma. You can have a woolen and linen garment with no internal contradiction (it just remains forbidden) and a brother's

wife can always be forbidden. The goat sent to Azazel has two separate aspects, as the nation gets atonement, not the removal of tuma (even if atonement is sometimes worded as "taharah," see Vayikra 16:30). The whole purpose of para aduma, on the other hand, is to remove tuma, yet it creates much tuma in the process. This is why it is considered the epitome of the chukim.

In truth, the third definition is a subset of the second, which in turn is a subset of the first. If there is an internal contradiction, there is obviously a similar circumstance with the opposite status, and two things that are similar yet have the opposite status are automatically not the most rational. When the list of chukim with the first definition is given, para aduma may have been purposely left off, because it symbolizes the utmost in internal contradiction, which is not the point of the list (and would be overkill). Rashi uses the more encompassing definition of chok throughout his commentary, and therefore consistently explains it as a law without a rationale explanation. Nonetheless, since all three definitions apply to para aduma, and it is the most self-contradictory, it is considered to be "the" chok of the Torah. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

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Essential Vitamins

Parshat Chukat speaks about the Para Aduma, the Red Heifer used in the times of the Holy Temple.

The ashes of the Red Heifer represented the ultimate paradox—the ashes purified someone who was impure, but the ashes had the exact opposite effect as well: If someone was ritually pure, the ashes would make him impure. King Solomon said that he was able to understand the logic behind all the Torah's commands—except for this one. So from here Solomon deduced: While we can try to understand the reasons for the mitzvot, the bottom line is we do them "because G-d said so."

If that's true, we might ask, why do so many of the mitzvot have an observable benefit—for instance, the weekly recharge that Shabbat provides, or the lessons of discipline we gain from keeping kosher?

Actually, we could ask the same question about our physical health: For example, it is understandable that our bodies require Vitamin C, but why did G-d put Vitamin C into delicious oranges? Why didn't G-d simply make Vitamin C pills, or put all the essential vitamins into something bland like oatmeal?!

The answer is that G-d created us with a drive for meaning and satisfaction. So while Vitamin C is an essential requirement, G-d wanted to give it to us in the most pleasurable form possible. The orange flavor is a great reason to eat oranges—but not the real reason!

So too with our spiritual health: Although we enjoy the practical benefits of mitzvot, the real reason

we observe them is "because G-d said so." In doing so this raises our relationship with G-d to a much higher level of love and commitment. And ultimately, that is the best reason there could be. © 2007 Rabbi S. Simmons & aish.org

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

A drash that characteristically notices nuances in the text. "And our fathers went down to Egypt and we dwelt in Egypt many days and the Egyptians did us evil and to our fathers." (Numbers 20:15)

"And to our fathers"—Rashi: "From here we learn that the forefathers are in pain even in the grave when tribulations come upon Israel. This is certainly a drash." What would you ask on the comment?

A Question: Why does Rashi abandon p'shat here? The simple meaning of "fathers" in this verse refers to the fathers and grandfathers of those in the wilderness, who were also enslaved in Egypt but who did not live long enough to be redeemed by Hashem at the exodus. Remember that the period of enslavement in Egypt lasted 210 years; several generations didn't live long enough to see the redemption. Why did Rashi prefer this drash interpretation to the simple p'shat?

There are several clues in the verse that you should find. An Answer: The order of the words here is strange. "The Egyptians did evil to us and to our fathers." Since chronologically, the fathers suffered before the children, it should have said: "The Egyptians did evil to our fathers and to us." Probably for this reason Rashi chose the drash.

How does the drash deal with this difficulty?

An Answer: The drash tells us that, in fact, "we" suffered before the fathers. So the word order is correct. But in order to accomplish this reinterpretation we have to understand that the "us" in "did evil to us" refers to all the generations who were enslaved in Egypt. And the "fathers" in "and to our fathers" refers not to those who were enslaved but to the forefathers, who obviously preceded the generations of the enslavement. Now the word order in the verse can be understood (the suffering of the sons before that of the fathers), because only once the sons suffered, was the pain then felt by the forefathers as well. So the order of "to us and (then) to our fathers" is correct.

Can you find grammatical support for Rashi's drash in this verse? This is not easy. An Answer: Notice the vowels under the word (in Hebrew) "v'la'avosainu" ("and to our fathers"). There is a patach under the "lamed" which means it precedes a definite article like the "heh Hayedia." This is equivalent to "and to our known fathers." This could only refer to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the well-known fathers, the only fathers who were fathers to all the enslaved Israelites. © 2007 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org