

WHO IS WISE?

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Chukas

Who is Wise?

By Shlomo Katz

Volume 29, No. 35
10 Tammuz 5775
June 27, 2015

Sponsored by
Martin and Michelle Swartz
on the yahrzeit of his grandfather
John Hofmann a"h (12 Tammuz)

Today's Learning:
Nach: Tehilim 123-124
Mishnah: Negaim 10:1-2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nedarim 34
Halachah: Mishnah Berurah 616:1-617:1

This week's parashah opens with the mitzvah of the parah adumah / red heifer, which our Sages teach is a "chok" or "chukah" / a decree whose reason we cannot comprehend. Midrash Rabbah quotes King Shlomo, "the wisest of all men," as saying about this mitzvah (in the words of Kohelet 7:23), "All this I tested with wisdom; I said I could become wise, but it is beyond me." King Shlomo said: I comprehended the entire Torah, but when I came to this mitzvah, I studied it, I examined it, and I inquired about it, but I did not understand it. "I said I could become wise, but it is beyond me." [Until here from the midrash]

R' Yeshayah Horowitz z"l (the Shelah Hakadosh; rabbi of Prague and Yerushalayim; died 1630) comments on this midrash: One who studies and investigates and finally comes to the realization

that he cannot understand is a truly wise person. Our philosophers made a similar statement about studying the Creator: "The ultimate knowledge of You is the knowledge that we cannot know You." This, continues the Shelah Hakadosh, is alluded to in the verse (Shir Ha'shirim 1:8), "If you do not know, beautiful among the women . . ." The Jewish People are Hashem's bride, so-to-speak. What makes us beautiful to Hashem? The knowledge that we cannot know Him. Similarly, regarding parah adumah, when I understand that it is beyond me, that I cannot understand it, then I am wise. (Shnei Luchot Ha'berit)

"This is chukat ha'Torah / the decree of the Torah . . ." (19:2)

Rashi z"l comments: "Because the satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, 'What is this command [i.e., the parah adumah / red heifer] and what reason is there for it?'--therefore the Torah uses the term 'chukah' / 'decree,' implying--it is My enactment; you have no right to question it."

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: The word "chukah" appears in connection with many mitzvot of the Torah, yet Rashi does not make a similar comment about those commandments. What prompted Rashi's comment here is not the word "chukah," but the expression, "chukat ha'Torah."

Maharal explains: When a mitzvah is being performed, it makes no difference whether or not the person doing the mitzvah understands it. What matters at that moment is only that the action of the mitzvah is being performed properly. Thus, when the Torah speaks of performing mitzvot, it can refer to any of them as a decree that is not understood. Whether the person doing the mitzvah understands it simply does not matter.

Here, however, the verse says, "chukat ha'Torah / the decree of the Torah." "Torah" means "teaching," while "chukah" means "a decree that we don't understand." This makes "chukat ha'Torah" an oxymoron--a "teaching" that cannot be understood--which is what prompted Rashi's comment that even though, when we study the mitzvah of parah adumah, we cannot understand it, we must not question it. (Gur Aryeh)

"He shall purify himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day become pure; but if he will not purify himself on the third day, then on the seventh day he will not become pure." (19:12)

Literally, this verse teaches that one who has become defiled by contact with a corpse must be sprinkled with water containing the ashes of the parah adumah/ red heifer on the third and seventh days.

R' Chaim Tirer z"l (1760-1817; better known as "R' Chaim of Czernowitz"; rabbi in several Bessarabian cities and early chassidic figure) offers an additional lesson:

The "third day" refers to the Torah, which the Gemara (Shabbat 88) refers to as the "Tripartite Torah." [Some interpret this as referring to the three parts that make up the acronym Tanach -- Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim.] The "seventh day" refers to Shabbat. The only way for a person to purify his soul is through study of Torah and observing the sanctity of Shabbat. (Be'er Mayim Chaim)

"Moshe and Aharon gathered the congregation before the rock and he said to them, 'Listen now, you morim / rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?'" (20:10)

Rabbeinu Nissim z"l ("Ran"; Spain; 1290-1380) writes: Moshe Rabbeinu was punished for these words because he generalized in criticizing Bnei Yisrael. It's true that the individual Jews whom he was addressing were "morim" / "rebels." However, our Sages say that one should be in awe of any tzibbur / assembly of Jews. Jews as a group can never be labeled by a derogatory term, for even if the individuals in the group lack redeeming qualities that others in the group possess, the group as a whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Even if one is an intentional sinner in his own right, if he is part of a gathering that is serving Hashem, the group is enhanced because that sinner is part of it.

How so? Our Sages find a precedent in the ketoret / incense in the Temple, which had one foul-smelling spice in it--the chelbenah. The Ran says that this spice served to "awaken" the fragrance of the other spices [presumably through a chemical reaction]. Similarly, when people with different strengths and weaknesses get together, they awaken previously dormant positive traits in each other.

However, the Ran continues, this is true only if the group is not made up entirely of like-minded resha'im / wicked people. If all the members of the group have exactly the same bad traits, then they merely strengthen each other's wickedness. (Derashot HaRan: Drush No. 1)

"The people spoke against Elokim and Moshe: 'Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this Wilderness, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food?' Hashem sent the fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people. A large multitude of Yisrael died." (21:5-6)

R' Dov Meir Rubman z"l (rosh yeshiva in Vilkomir, Lithuania and Haifa, Israel; died 1967) asks: How is it possible that, after witnessing Korach's fate and after seeing Moshe Rabbeinu draw water from a rock, Bnei Yisrael complained--and against G-d, no less?!

He answers: There is no rational explanation for their behavior. A thinking person could not have acted as they did. However, Bnei Yisrael were not behaving rationally at that moment. Instead, they saw their thirsty children and their thirsty animals, and they panicked.

Then why did they deserve to be punished? R' Rubman explains: Moshe Rabbeinu must have been as thirsty as everyone else, but he did not complain. He understood that Hashem is always present and that Hashem can supply water in an instant. Thus, Moshe felt as if he had water; he just could not drink it at the moment. This is how all of Bnei Yisrael were expected to have felt after they experienced the miracles that they experienced. (Zichron Meir)

Letters from Our Sages

This letter was written by R' Yoel Sirkes z"l (1561-1640), rabbi of Belz, Brisk and Krakow, Poland. He is commonly known as the "Bach," after his important halachic work Bayit Chadash. The subject of the letter from which this excerpt is quoted is whether rabbis and teachers of Torah may receive a salary and whether the community is obligated to make them wealthy so that their words will be heeded by other wealthy members of the community.

... One cannot bring a proof from Hillel the Elder or Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa [both of whom performed physical labor for their livelihoods] because they had enough for their needs and people respected them, so they had no need to take money in order to become wealthy. Furthermore, there is no proof from Hillel, for at the time he was a woodcutter he had not yet been appointed the nasi / president [of the Sanhedrin]. Likewise, one cannot bring a proof from the stories of Abba Chilkiyah (Ta'anit 23b) and Rav Yehuda (Nedarim 49b), who had no clothes to wear and yet they did not take money from others; at the time of those events, they had not been appointed to leadership positions. Furthermore, they may have gone beyond the letter of the law. According to halachah, however, a rabbi has to be paid enough that people will respect him.

As for the mishnah (Avot ch.4), "Do not make them [the words of Torah] a crown for your head"--that refers to someone whose entire goal in learning Torah is to receive glory or to earn a living as a result of his learning. However, one who studies Torah out of love for it and in order to fulfill it, and for no other purpose, may also receive pay for it--even to the point of becoming wealthy as a result so that people will be more likely to listen to his words. Regarding this it is written (Mishlei 3:16), "In her left hand is wealth and honor," i.e., it is not his primary intention. One's primary intention, i.e., that which one holds with his stronger right hand, should be to attain that day which is never-ending [i.e., Olam Haba]. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Ha'Bach Ha'chadashot No. 52)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

Hamaayan needs your support! Please consider sponsoring Hamaayan in honor of a happy occasion or in memory of a loved one. The low cost of sponsorship is \$36. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-

deductible.