

BECAUSE HE SAID SO

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

We know that in a general sense, mitzvos can be divided into two categories: Mishpatim - mitzvos that appeal to our sense of morality, ethics, etc., and Chukim - mitzvos that ostensibly defy logic. The mitzvah to honour one's father and mother is a mishpat - it makes sense, and is something we might have thought of on our own. The mitzvah of tzitzis - placing knotted strings on a four-cornered garment, is an example of a chok. Rashi explains that the reason the Torah begins its description of the mitzvah of the Red Heifer by stating, "Zos chukas Ha-Torah - This [mitzvah] is a chok (19:2)," is because the Red Heifer defies all logic and sensibility, more so than all other chukim. While chukim aren't intuitive, they're not counter-intuitive either. In fact, if we delve deep enough into most "non-logical" mitzvos, we're likely to find many very appealing reasons. Wearing tzitzis, for example, serves as a constant reminder not to stray "after our hearts and after our eyes (Bamidbar/Numbers 15:39)." Its blue wool reminds us of the blue heavens, which conjures up images of the holy Throne of Glory (Menachos 43b). The combined numerical value of its strings (8), knots (5), and name (600) equals 613, reminding us of the 613 mitzvos. But Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, goes beyond defying logic - it turns it on its head! One who is impure (through having had contact with a corpse) must be sprinkled with its ashes, thereby removing his state of impurity. Yet one who is not ritually impure and has contact with its ashes is rendered impure, and must undergo ritual immersion!

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) expended tremendous effort in an attempt to understand the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, yet ultimately it was withheld from him. "I said, 'Let me become wise!' Yet it was distant from me (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:23)" - this refers to the mitzvah of Red Heifer (Yoma 14a).

Yet in all its complexity and mystery, the deepest secrets of this mitzvah were revealed to one man: Moshe. "To you will I reveal the reason behind the Red Heifer - for everyone else it is a chok. (Midrash Rabbah, Bamidbar 19:6)" If the Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, decreed that Parah Adumah must be a chok - the chok to beat all chukim - the very "chok of the Torah," then why was Moshe exempted from this rule?

The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 21b) contrasts the wisdom attained by Moshe to that of Shlomo:

Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world. All of them were given to Moshe, except one, as it is written (Tehillim/Psalms 8:6) "And You have given him (Moshe) slightly less than the angels." Koheles (Solomon) tried to reach the level of Moshe. A Heavenly voice called out, "It is

written in the Book of Truth (Koheles 12:10), 'There will never be another prophet like Moshe! (Devarim/Deuteronomy 34:10)'"

Why does the Gemara refer to Moshe attaining "Fifty gates less one" instead of "forty-nine gates"? And why does the verse in Tehillim, honouring the deep wisdom of Moshe, do so not by stating what he attained, but rather by what he was missing?

What is the idea of a chok? Why should Hashem demand we do things without letting us in on their underlying reasons?

"The purpose of all knowledge," say the Sages (Bechinas Olam 13:45), "is to realize we know nothing (of the Almighty/the Torah etc.)." The pinnacle of all wisdom is to come to the recognition that all the spiritual insight we imagine we've attained has not so much as scratched the surface. "[The Torah] is longer than the lands and wider than the seas (Iyov/Job 11:9). Deep, deep, who can reach it (Koheles 7:24)."

This is a hard pill for us humans to swallow. The whole idea of being human, the defining point that separates us from the animals and the plants, is our ability to understand and discern. Indeed, most of us mortals never reach "the pinnacle of understanding" which is to know we know nothing. Seemingly a simple concept (and one which is easy to pay lip service to), attaining "nothingness," as it is known in kabbalistic writings, is indeed the purpose of all wisdom. It recalls the verse (Iyov 28:12), "And (true) wisdom is found from nothingness."

Because by nature we have a hard time conforming to something we don't understand, Hashem gave us certain mitzvos, chukim, which force us against our will to comply with ordinances we don't understand, and don't even make sense. By way of these chukim we overcome our need to "be in charge," and attain the ability to submit to Hashem's greater wisdom, and to the fact that we may never understand many things, both in the Torah and in life.

The one individual in the history of mankind who was not in need of such a lesson was Moshe. "And the man, Moshe, was extremely humble, [more so] than any man on the face of the Earth (Bamidbar 12:3)." Moshe didn't need to be told, "Do it because I said so!" Moshe could understand everything, and yet still recognise the frailty of his own intellect, something no one else could do. Thus, "To you, Moshe, I will reveal the meaning of the Parah Adumah - to everyone else it must remain a chok." [This simple yet elegant thought was for the most part told to me by a good friend; I have adapted it somewhat.]

If there are fifty gates of understanding, and the purpose of all knowledge is to know we don't know, then it stands to reason that the "fiftieth gate" is the gate of nothingness. [Fifty in Hebrew is the letter nun, which means malchus (see Rashi, Tehillim 72:17) - the final of the ten sefiros or emanations. The Zohar writes that of all the sefiros, malchus is the only one that receives yet does not emanate, and compares it to the moon which receives its light entirely from the sun.] Thus, in a sense, the fiftieth gate is never attainable, for one who reaches that level in fact has nothing. Perhaps Moshe did

indeed reach the fiftieth gate, yet there found he knew nothing at all. This could be why the verse describes the exceptional wisdom of Moshe as, "And he was lacking." And it would also explain why the Gemara refers to the "gates" given to Moshe as, "Fifty minus one," and not forty-nine, for the fiftieth gate can never be given; attaining it is not having it.

Most of us still have a long way to go before we reach the point where all there is left for us to know is that we know nothing. In today's society where everything is laid out for all to see, everything is questioned and challenged, and nothing is sacred, it is harder than ever to serve Hashem out of simple surrender to His greater will, and not based on what (we think) we understand.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by Mr. Henry Fenig, in memory of his father, R' Elazer ben R' Moshe alav ha-shalom.

Text Copyright © 2003 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Project Genesis, Inc.](#)**