

THE "CHOK'S" ON YOU

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying, "This is the decree of the law (chukas haTorah) which G-d commands you, saying, 'Tell the children of Israel to take a perfect Red Heifer ...' " (BaMidbar 19:1)

The concept of "chok" (statute) is not new in the Chumash (we spoke about it in Parashas BeChukosai, 5758); but it is dealt with directly in this week's parsha. Here Rashi adds another element to the discussion:

Because the Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, "What is the commandment, and what is the reason for it?"; for this reason, it (the Torah) uses the word "chukah," implying that it is a decree from G-d and you have no right to wonder about it. (Rashi)

However, did this explanation stop Rashi from later explaining the mitzvah?

Red Heifer: It is like a handmaid's child that defiled the king's palace. They said, "Let the mother come and clean up the filth." Similarly, since they (the Jewish people) became defiled through a [golden] calf, let the mother (the red heifer) come and atone for the calf.

Red: As in, ["Though your sins be as red as scarlet [they shall become white as snow]" (Yishaya 1:18); hence we see that sin is termed "red."

Perfect: An allusion to the fact that before the calf, the Jews had been morally perfect; let this perfect animal come and atone for them so they can regain perfection.

Upon which never came a yoke: just as they threw off the yoke of Heaven. (BaMidbar 19:22)

And so on.

Of course, Rashi is not being inconsistent with his previous commentary, but rather, is alluding to an important concept that is also underlying the following law of kashrus. Let's say two pieces of kosher meat accidentally become mixed up with one piece of treif meat (making it impossible to discern which is the kosher meat and which is the treif meat); what is the law?

Appreciating the difference between kosher and non-kosher meat, and not knowing the actual law, one would have to say that all three pieces should be considered forbidden from doubt. What

difference does it make if we don't know which is the treif piece; on the contrary, because we don't know we should be strict and not eat any piece, since any piece we might eat could be the treif one.

The Torah disagrees. The Torah law is that the majority rules (bitul b'rov) in such a case, and one could eat all three pieces of meat. It is only rabbinically that we don't eat all three pieces (probably because we would think that we are actually eating treif with the Torah's permission, which is not the case; see Shulchan Orach, Yorah Dayah, 109:1).

But how can this be? Is the Torah permitting the consumption of non-kosher meat? If not, then what does quantity of meat have to do with the spiritual quality of meat? Does the treif meat suddenly become kosher when mixed together with kosher meat and it is the minority? Can the meat be both kosher and treif simultaneously?

A similar law, though not of Kashrus, is the law of Yibum. Normally, a brother-in-law (Yavam) is forbidden to marry his brother's wife (Yavama) whether the brother is alive or dead. However, if his brother happened to die before having any children from his wife, then, not only does it become permissible to marry the widowed sister-in-law, it becomes a mitzvah to marry her.

This mitzvah also defies human logic. What intrinsic change occurred in the sister-in-law because her husband died leaving her childless? Had the Torah not instructed us in the law of Yibum, would we have known to permit the childless sister-in-law to the brother-in-law? Had the Torah not informed us that two kosher pieces of meat can, in some circumstances, "nullify" the non-kosher piece of meat, would we have reasoned to follow this course?

This is only the beginning of a very important discussion. However, the bottom-line is that the status of anything in this world is determined by one criterion only: what G-d thinks about it. Furthermore, any failure on our part to understand why a mitzvah is "this way" as opposed to "that way" is the result of the gap between our understanding of the purpose of creation, and G-d's (a far bigger gap than many would like to believe).

We human beings understand ideas based upon how they help to explain reality as we recognize it, and how they facilitate our living in this world. If an idea fails to satisfy either condition, our minds are left puzzled, at which point we can either admit the idea lies outside the realm of our conscious understanding, or, is false. When it comes to mitzvos whose benefit we don't perceive, the latter approach is not the Torah-approach, as the following explains:

Rebi Eleazar ben Azariah said, "... One should not say [I don't eat pig and don't wear clothing made from forbidden mixtures because] I am disgusted by the pig and I am unable to wear kelayim ...' Rather, he should say, 'I can [eat pig and wear such clothing], but what can I do? My Father in heaven has decreed for me [that I cannot] ...' (VaYikrah 20:26, Rashi)

In other words, the starting point is that the mitzvah is true, whether we see how or not. It is true because it came from G-d, and His reality is the Reality. However, as Rashi alludes, once you cross

this intellectual threshold, then one can begin to come closer to G-d's reality, and in retrospect, we can begin to understand some of the Divine reasoning behind the mitzvah. This is the meaning of:

The wise will understand these, the understanding will know them, for the ways of G-d are straight, and the righteous walk in them, while the sinners stumble in them. (Hoshea 14:10)

One path, two ways; it all depends upon what one is willing to accept when it comes to G-d and Torah.

Shabbos Day:

This is perhaps another reason why the death of Miriam is juxtaposed with the section dealing with the Parah Adumah (aside from the reason that the death of the righteous atone for the generation like a sacrifice does; Makkos 28a), as the following alludes:

A man from the House of Levi went out ... (Shemos 2:1) Where did he go? Rav Yehudah bar Zevina said: He went after the advice of his daughter. It is taught: Amram was the greatest of his generation, and when the evil Paroah decreed that all male babies should be thrown into the river, he said, "For nothing do I toil?" He then divorced his wife, and [as a result] everyone else divorced their wives too. His daughter (Miriam) questioned him: Your decree is more difficult than Paroah's! Paroah only decreed against the boys, but you have decreed against the boys and the girls! Paroah's decree is only effective in This World, but your decree has an effect in This World and The World-to-Come! When it comes to the evil Paroah, it is doubtful whether his decree will be fulfilled or not; but the decree of a righteous person is certainly upheld! [Because of her argument] he [Amram] took back his wife, as did the rest of the men ... (Sota 12a)

And of course, the result was the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu, the savior of the Jewish people. Perhaps this is also why her death acts as a segue between the mitzvah of Para Adumah and the decree against Moshe to die in the desert. After all, what was the difference between Miriam's point of view, and her father's? Amram took a look at the situation and made an analysis; his conclusion was that he didn't understand what was happening, and in an effort to maintain some kind of "damage control," he removed himself (and others) from the situation altogether.

Miriam also understood that chaos ruled in Egypt, and that bad things were happening to many very good people. The situation had moved out of the realm of the logical into the realm of the mystical, an area of understanding she admitted she could not fathom. Better yet, the situation had moved from the level of "mishpat" (mitzvos that seem logical to us) to that of "chukim" (statutes). The extent to which Egyptian enslavement had gone, though Divinely-ordained, was not logical.

However, her conclusion differed from her father's. She argued that it is not the Jewish way to

confront a "chok" by avoiding it. On the contrary, it is a bigger sanctification of G-d's Name to suffer the humiliation of the onlookers of history who mock and taunt us because we seem out of step with reality; with their version of reality.

However, as "they" say, "He who laughs first lasts last." Or maybe never again. Miriam's ability to grasp the "chok" of Egyptian torture gave rise to the Jewish Moshiach, and turned the tables so that in the end, it was the Jewish people who ended up "laughing," as they watched the mightiest nation on earth crumble before the newly freed slave nation. This is why it was Miriam who had been equipped by the sea, with timbrels and all, to praise G-d for the miracle she had obviously expected to happen!

A song of ascents. When G-d will return the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter ... (Tehillim 127:1)

It was this belief and trust in G-d that guided Miriam in risking the lives of more Jewish children, in spite of the horrible world that had unfolded around her. Therefore, this is what the birth of Moshe came to represent; unfortunately, as the parsha relates, this is also what the death of Moshe comes to teach as well.

Seudos Shlishi:

One of the most tragic incidents in the Chumash is the story of Mei Merivah, where Moshe hit the rock he was told to speak to, and was therefore denied access to Eretz Yisroel. However, in the Torah itself, the account is very short and the mistake is quite subtle. It is really only the magnitude of the Divine punishment that opens our eyes to just how major a turning point in Jewish history this event was.

The question is, why? In spite of Moshe's failure to properly execute the will of G-d, was it so bad? Why did G-d take Moshe, and the entire Jewish nation for that matter, to task for so subtle an error? A deep analysis of the verses, through the eyes of the Zohar and other holy books, reveals the acute importance of what occurred at Mei Merivah.

The Torah writes:

And G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take the staff and gather the Assembly, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock (selah) before their eyes and give from its waters; bring forth water from the rock to give water to the Assembly and their animals." (BaMidbar 20:7)

This was not the first time that Moshe had been asked to bring forth water from a rock. The first time he had done so had been back before the giving of Torah, as the Torah records:

G-d told Moshe, "Pass before the people and take with you from the Elders of Israel, and your staff with which you hit the river; take it in your hand and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Chorev and you shall hit the rock (tzur) so that water will come out from it and the people will drink ..." (Shemos 17:5)

It is the nuances of difference between the first episode and the second episode that allude to profound differences between what was to have occurred with the rock before the giving of Torah, and what was to occur 40 years later, long after the Torah had been given to the Jewish people. However, even before analyzing such differences, one must first have an appreciation of the rock itself, and the unique water it produced.

For this, another introduction is necessary.

Allegorically, we have no difficulty comparing water and light, both being crucial to life physically and spiritually. However, it is not as easy to conceive of light being the source of water, or anything physical for that matter (though we believe that G-d, who works through light, created everything in the physical world).

The word "brocha" means "blessing," which is often viewed as a spiritual means to a physical end. The actual source of the word is "breicha," which means "spring," as in a flowing body of water. This is to signify that blessing is like a flowing body of water between G-d and the recipient of His blessing, or light.

Hence, just as in the case of existence, which was created ex nihilo, that is, as "something from nothing," our physical blessing also emanates from "nothing," relatively speaking. Creation did not come from absolutely nothing, but from a level of light so sublime that, compared to what it created, it was as if it didn't exist; but exist it did in the most ultimate sense. So too does our physical blessing emanate from a similar light, which, compared to what it produces in the physical, appears as nothing, when in fact, it is the real something.

Following this train of thought, one can better appreciate that what miraculously spilled forth from the rock in the desert for 40 years as the Jewish people traveled towards their final destination wasn't simply water, but both brocha and breicha. It was "breicha" that flowed forth from the rock and which quenched their physical thirst; it was "brocha" that simultaneously quenched their spiritual thirst, for:

The entire people traveled from the Sin Desert on the word of G-d, and they camped in Refidim; there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moshe, and they said, "Give us water so we can drink!" (Shemos 17:1)

There is no water except Torah. (Babba Kamma 82a)

Rav Tzaddok explains the water that came in the merit of Miriam through the roving well had the quality of causing Torah Sh'b'al Peh (Oral Law) to become engraved on the hearts of the Jewish

people. The munn that had fallen from heaven caused Torah Sh'b'k'sav, the Written Law, to become spiritually ingested, while the well's water did the same on the level of the Oral Law (Pri Tzaddik, Chukas, 15).

Hence, what for us today may be a dual experience (drinking water to fulfill our physical needs, and learning Torah to do the same on a spiritual plain), during the 40 years in the desert, the average Jew accomplished both in a single act.

Having said this, the verses more readily reveal the story behind the story of what was one of the most important turning points in the history of the Jewish people.

"And G-d said (vay'dabeir) to Moshe, saying ..."

By the tzur it said it only said, "And G-d said to Moshe (vayomer) ..." The Talmud Yerushalmi (Makkos 2:6) says that anytime "dibur" is used it means the verse is about to say something new. Here, by the selah, they were about to see something they had never seen before, and to hear something they had never heard before: through this wondrous event the world was about to be completely rectified!

"Take the staff ..."

It only says the "staff" (whereas by the tzur it said, "your staff"; Shemos 17:5), which refers to the Staff of G-d which had the Holy Name engraved on it (Zohar 2:6b).

"Gather the assembly ..."

The entire people, because this was a new generation (throughout the 39 years after the spies, the previous generation had died out) on a far higher spiritual level of that of the Tree of Life. Their parents had been from the level equated with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which is why G-d told Moshe to gather only the elders (that is, the Sanhedrin), the first time by the tzur.

"You and your brother Aharon ..."

Aharon was not included the first time, but is included here for Kabbalistic reasons.

"Speak to the rock ..."

The Shechina dwelled in their mouths in the form of Torah Sh'b'al Peh (Oral Torah) which they had been learning over the forty years. Therefore, in the merit of their Torah learning the Light came down and dwelled on the selah, which is why only speech was necessary now, like a prince who requests from his father the king (Zohar, R"m Taitzai, 279b). As well, Miriam's death had also atone for the sin of the golden calf to a large degree.

(In the case of the tzur, the nation had yet to reach such a high level, though they had been in need

of a great miracle in terms of the water. Hitting the rock was a way to do this and to counteract the spiritual imbalance at that time. In fact, "tzur" is the name used to indicate that the rock itself had yet to become transformed to a higher spiritual level, indicated by the word "selah" used 40 years later.)

Had Moshe spoken to the rock to bring out the water, then the Light that was in the hand of Moshe would have emanated and become revealed; the light of the Shechina would have dwelled on the entire nation elevating them to the level of the Tree of Life, bringing completion rectification and the ultimate unification. The light of the Ohr HaGanuz would have flowed to them from the "well" ...

"Before their eyes ..."

This is what was so fantastically new. At Har Sinai, when anyone looked at the Shechina, they became punishable by death. But not, after having risen in spiritual stature, they were going to be allowed to witness the Shechina on the Selah!

What went wrong?

The main reason was that Moshe had seen the Shechina depart from the selah (Sefer Tziyoni, Rabbeinu Yehudah Chassid). He had seen the Shechina by the rock from the distance, and that's why he gathered the people there. However, once he approached the selah, the Shechina had departed; he did not know what to do at that point.

It could be that the Shechina had departed because it had been G-d's desire to bring water from any rock they had chosen. Whatever rock Moshe would have decided upon, it would have been upon that rock that the Shechina would have dwelled. The Shechina, so-to-speak, was simply in waiting for Moshe's word before performing the miracle. That would have been a tremendous sanctification of G-d's Name.

However, Moshe had assumed otherwise, thinking that the leaving of the Shechina was a bad sign, especially since groups had formed to complain. This is why the parsha makes another subtle change: first Moshe gathered together the entire "Assembly" (eidah) which usually means the Sanhedrin, alluding to the greatness of all the Jews. After they are referred to only as a "kahal," a lower level of the same idea.

This is why Moshe says, "Listen you rebels ..." as if to say, "See what you have caused through your complaining! The Shechina has departed on your account! Are we able to draw water out from a rock if the Light is not on it?!" This is why:

Moshe lifted his hand and struck the rock with his staff ... (BaMidbar 20:11)

Every "lifting of the hand" for the sake of Heaven is a major rectification to draw down holy Light and to elevate the world [from the level of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to the level of the Tree of Life]. (Zohar, Parashas Yisro)

The truth is, even after Moshe had doubted the level of the nation gathering before him, his doubt

was reduced when he saw another miracle happen. According to the midrash (BaMidbar Rabbah 9), the entire nation was able to fill a tiny space without difficulty, and that confirmed to Moshe that the Shechina was still amongst them. However, he did still sense somewhat of a change from the ideal situation, and sought to rectify it by hitting the rock.

In the end, Moshe's misunderstanding of G-d's intention resulted in just the opposite of what he intended. Even the water that eventually came out was less holy than it was supposed to have been (after the first hit, blood emerged, and after the second hit, water finally emerged).

Subsequently, hitting the rock and lowering its level (and the staff's) resulted in his failure to enter the land he dreamed of settling. More importantly, it greatly reduced the revelation of G-d's presence in creation and the eternal spiritual rectification it was meant to cause:

"Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this assembly (kahal) into the land which I have given them." (BaMidbar 20:12)

However, had the people been worthy and appreciative of Moshe Rabbeinu, and the spiritual opportunity he had presented; had they recognized the crucial turning point in history the moment represented, Moshe's misunderstanding would never have occurred. That is a story unto itself.

Melave Malkah:

They traveled from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom.; the spirit of the people (ha-umm) became discouraged along the way. The people spoke out against G-d and Moshe, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread, or water; our spirit is lessened because of this light bread!" (BaMidbar 21:4)

Talk about broken records! How many times were they going to complain about the desert, the munn, and the need for miraculous sources of water?! When would they finally learn to wait and see what would happen next ... to see which miracle was about to solve the crisis, as in the past? Didn't they learn that only people who doubted G-d's kindness ever died in the desert?!

First of all, the clue is in the verse itself. According to tradition, "ha-umm" ("the people," as opposed to "umm," i.e., "people") always alludes to the Erev Rav, or, the Mixed Multitude. The rest of the Jewish people were not involved in this instigation, but that is not to say that they weren't affected by it either. That is why the whole nation was attacked by the poisonous snakes.

According to tradition, we know that snakes allude to the yetzer hara, that inclination of ours to do evil (or, at least not such nice things). The snake may be an animal within the animal kingdom, but he also represents a negative force within creation, as he did in the Garden of Eden as well.

This is why the Mishnah states:

G-d told Moshe, "Make a 'burning' serpent, and put it on a banner; when one bitten looks at it, he will live ..." (BaMidbar 21:8) Does a serpent kill, and can a serpent revive? Rather, when they looked heavenward and committed their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were cured. (Rosh Hashanah 29a)

In other words, though the Jewish people themselves may not have complained about G-d or Moshe, still, the complaints from the Erev Rav weakened the nations connection and commitment to G-d. The Erev Rav "inflamed" their yetzer haros, activating them to interfere with their faith and trust in G-d. Being bitten by the snakes warned them about this, and using Moshe's device as a vehicle to elevate the sights of the Jewish people was the cure.

It just goes to show how important it is to make sure that one is always in the best spiritual environment possible at all times; when it is impossible to do so, one should bring along a sefer (Torah book) or the like to help "insulate" against the insidious influences of the world-at-large. Otherwise, one becomes defenseless against such influences, and vulnerable to the attack of the "Erev Rav" and the snake, that is, the yetzer hara. They traveled from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom.; the spirit of the people (ha-umm) became discouraged along the way. The people spoke out against G-d and Moshe, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread, or water; our spirit is lessened because of this light bread!" (BaMidbar 21:4)

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Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston

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