

THE GREATEST "CHOKS" OF THE CENTURY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying, "This is the statute of the Torah (chukas haTorah) which G-d has commanded you ..." (Bamidbar 19:1)

I would like to make a point, one, which I believe, is worthwhile to make in light of this week's parshah.

By now, many people are familiar with the "Bible Codes." For those who are unfamiliar with this term, it refers to hidden references in the Torah to either people or events that occurred outside the Torah's historical point of reference. If the references are in indeed what they are claimed to be, then the "author" of the Torah was very, very clever, and, he also knew the future. The implications of this statement are obvious, and, the reason why the Bible Codes are part of many outreach programs.

The truth is, some of these references were arrived at before the impact of the computer age, either as a result of tradition, or pure genius, or both. (For example, there is a reference to Hitler in the Plague of Darkness that was discovered shortly after World War II, exactly where one would expect to find it.) Many codes today, however, are quite sophisticated, and make use of modern computer technology to surface what often seem to be black-and-white references to people or historical occurrences that we would have assumed should not be there.

Unless, as we have already mentioned, one believes the Torah was Divinely written, and, as the Vilna Gaon emphasizes, all of history is embedded in the Torah on one level or another. The Bible Codes are therefore used to make this point, a point often taken seriously when the "odds" are considered about the possibility of such references existing as they do and in their context. If you can "prove" to a non-believer that the odds are too great to logically assume the references are random, then the mind obligates a person, at the very least, to check further into the Divine validity of Torah.

This has been a gross over-simplification of an important idea. However, it is enough of the discussion to mention that herein lies a major controversy, not just between the religious and non-religious "scientific" communities, but also within the Orthodox Community itself, amongst the mathematical and physics "experts" on the same side of the "line."

Simply put, some don't buy it--vehemently they don't buy it. And they worry out loud (often in publications) about the eventual damage to Torah's credibility if the Codes continue to be used as a reason to believe in Torah from Sinai. They hold (as it was explained to me), that the testing of the "codes" to mathematically ascertain the odds of the results being "random" are neither accurate nor rigorous enough. They feel, therefore, that potential belief in Torah is being put at risk, because the results are just not absolute enough to be used as a basis to convince intelligent people about the Divine authorship of Torah.

The other side, the "Presenters" of the Codes, obviously disagree, and they include big name people from the scientific community as well. They have also been successful with the Bible Codes to pique the interest of many people over the years, with varying ranges of intelligence. They also, it might be added, have leading rabbis on their side encouraging them to continue with their work and seminars.

Fine ... All that is very fine.

However, that is not the point I wish to address, nor am I coming to enter "my head between mountains" in order to discuss the merit or demerit of the Codes and the teaching of them as a basis for belief. Personally, I have found that the Torah, with all of its many facets is so awesome, so fantastic, that it is enough to convince any rational and intellectually-honest person about Torah being from Sinai. Simply put, Torah in its totality (or, at least as much of it as a person merits to grasp), is so godly that it is next to impossible to negate its divine connection. (As one rabbi once said, "If you knew what I knew, you would believe it too!")

Furthermore, when you consider the incredible gematrios (Kabbalistic-numerology, in short) found in the Arizal, and even just in the Ba'al HaTurim on the Chumash, many of the codes become more than credible--but not because of any odds or rigorous mathematical testing. Consider the following quote (not because this person is an expert-of-experts, but because he eloquently expresses a point that everyone should consider):

"... Among the causes of this scientific tunnel vision I would like to discuss two that result from the nature of scientific tradition. The first of these is the issue of methodology. In its laudable insistence upon experience, accurate observation and verifiability, science has placed great emphasis upon measurement. To measure something is to experience it in a certain dimension, a dimension in which we can make observations of great accuracy which are repeatable by others. The use of measurement has enabled science to make enormous strides in the understanding of the material universe. But by virtue of its success, measurement has become a scientific idol ..." (The Road Less Traveled, III Growth and Religion, Scientific Tunnel Vision; Simon and Schuster, 1978)

The author adds much more to this, also important and well-written. However, this is all I need to quote as a Torah-Jew to wonder out loud, "Are we making the mistake of measuring the validity of the codes according to the wrong standard of measurement? If the Talmud says that 'a finger does not go up in the air unless it is decreed in Heaven' (Chullin 7b), and, 'All is in the hands of Heaven

except for fear of G-d' (Brochos 34b), can we not safely assume that if something happens--like the Codes--it is a matter of Divine Providence?"

In other words, if the odds of something happening are even one-in-two, that doesn't bother Torah-Jews, if the concept is true according to Torah, and it strengthens a Torah idea. And if the odds are two-billion-to-one that something bad could happen to you while engaging in an anti-Torah activity, then you have to worry about the one, because in a system of belief like that of Torah, the "one" becomes none other than the "One." After all, this is G-d's "game," and He can do whatever He wants, the way He wants to do it, and whenever He wants to do it. He usually does.

There is no such things as "odds" or "coincidences" when it comes to Torah and Divine Providence, which brings us to the connection (just as you probably gave up on one) between what we have just said, and this week's parshah. At the beginning of Parashas Chukas, Rashi defines a "chok" (Torah-statute) as a mitzvah for which ...

"... The Satan and the Nations-of-the-World taunt Israel, asking, 'What is this commandment and what reason is there for it?' On this account, it writes "chukah," as if to say, it is an enactment before Me, and you are not allowed to wonder about it ..." (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:1)

The underpinning of this statement is not that there are some mitzvos that do not make sense at all, but that we Jews are good soldiers who blindly follow orders and do them anyhow. Every mitzvah, right down to the Red Heifer in this week's parshah--the ultimate Torah-statute--makes perfect sense, well, at least to G-d. Well, at least for now, for, as our tradition teaches, eventually, they will also make sense to us, when we finally come to view the world from G-d's supernatural perspective later in history.

And that's what we have to try to do everyday, and this is also the point of learning Torah: to develop a godly perception of reality, and to measure the events of daily life not by non-Jewish mathematical standards, but in terms of Hashgochah Pratis-standards. The Jewish people are not supposed to try to live within a world governed by nature (Shabbos 156a): "Ain mazel l'Yisroel" (Jews are not necessarily bound by a fixed destiny) is a standard to live up to, not into.

In fact, it has been brought forth many times, mathematically, Jewish survival should not have been. Even leaving Egypt was against all odds, and the only thing that was "rigorous" with respect to those odds was the slavery the Jewish people underwent before leaving. However, "Bris Avos" (Covenant of the Fathers) means that G-d deals with the Jewish people in a supernatural way, even in exile, and "speaks" to us through various different means and acts of Providence, and often works quietly behind the scenes instrumenting redemption.

You just have to know how to read the writing on the wall.

So, in conclusion (for now), let me reiterate that I have come to neither to defend or condemn the use of such outreach devices as the Bible Codes. That is not my job, nor am I qualified to do so.

However, what I have come to express is a concern that, in the midst of the heated debate, the most important points to emerge from all of this is getting lost in a stream of equations, computer jargon, and plain old rhetoric.

The first point? That there is wonderful Divine Providence behind all that we have been able to uncover through Torah and in Torah throughout the generations, today including, including with the help computers. The second point? That we Jews celebrate and greatly rejoice in these discoveries, even when the rest of the world questions us for doing so, and their rules of logic dictate that we ought not to.

We celebrate the chukim as well as the mishpatim--no matter how odd it appears to others.

Shabbos Day:

The entire nation of Israel reached the Tzin desert in the first month. The people camped in Kadesh, and that is where Miriam died and was buried. There was no water for the people, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon. (Bamidbar 20:1-3)

As Rashi reminds us, the juxtaposition of these two incidents is to inform us that the miraculous well that followed the Jewish people around for 40 years in the desert, supplying them with all their water-needs, was in the merit of Miriam. We have already discussed that merit in previous years.

Whatever happened to Miriam's Well in the end? Do we even know? The Talmud seems to have the answer:

Rav Nechemiah said in the name of Rav Chiyah: One who wants to see the Well of Miriam should ascend to the top of Har Carmel and look and see a rock that looks like a sieve. (Shabbos 35a)

As Rashi explains, Har Carmel is on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, and provides a tremendous viewing point of the whole area for miles around. Seemingly, according to the Talmud, the Be'er Miriam took its retirement somewhere in the sea off the shore of Eretz Yisroel.

However, there is a story that seems to indicate that the well might be somewhere in the Kinneret Sea instead. According to a tradition, when Rabbi Chaim Vital, the foremost student of the Arizal himself and who was responsible for writing down the teachings of his saintly master, had difficulty remembering what he was learning, the Arizal took him out in a small boat to the center of the Kinneret. There he had his student drink from the waters from the Well of Miriam, after which time Rav Chaim rarely forgot anything.

How serious do we take any of this? According to the "Kol Bo," "some have a tradition to draw water [from a well] Motzei Shabbos, because Miriam's Well supplies all the wells each Motzei Shabbos, and one who does so and drinks will be cured of illness" (Orach Chaim, 299:10)

The "Ramah" adds that he "never saw this" tradition actually being carried out, but it doesn't mean the idea itself is not true, especially given the miraculous nature of the well itself.

The spiritual quality of a "well" might be indicated by the Hebrew word itself: be'er--which is spelt: bais, aleph, raish. On the other hand, a "bor," which is the Hebrew word for a "pit," is spelt: bais, vav, raish, the difference between the two words being the middle letter, which is an aleph in "be'er" and a "vav" in "bor."

The physical difference between the two is that, a be'er contains water, and a pit usually does not (at least not well water). We see this in the Torah itself:

Rav Kahana said: Rav Nachman bar Munyumi elucidated in the name of Rebi Tanchum: Why does it say, "The pit [bor] was empty and was without water ..." (Bereishis 37:24)? If the pit is empty, do I not know that it was without water? Why does the Torah say that it "was without water"? [To teach that] there wasn't any water, but there were snakes and scorpions. (Shabbos 22a)

The spiritual difference is the following. The Hebrew letter "aleph" is actually a composite of three letters, two yuds and a vav running horizontally between them, connection the upper and lower yud. This has many Kabbalistic connotations, one of which is that the three letters add up to twenty-six, the numerical value of G-d's Holy Ineffable Four-Letter Name. This is one of the reasons why an aleph also symbolizes G-d, as we have discussed in the past.

Hence, in the word "bor," the middle "vav" is missing the two "yuds" to transform it into an "aleph," and the waterless pit into a water-filled well, so-to-speak. And of course, as the Talmud says, "There is no water except for Torah."

Now, the numerical value of the two yuds is twenty, and twenty is a number that symbolizes intellectual blindness (see, "Redemption to Redemption"). So, the "bor" without its water, and without its Torah, alludes to intellectual blindness, and the lack of potential to see past physical reality and to connect to G-d.

However, the be'er, on the other hand, is filled with water, Torah, and connection to G-d. Which is why, according to the Pri Tzaddik, Miriam's Well actually symbolized the Oral Law, and one's ability to retain it. This would explain, therefore, why the Arizal took his most important student on an excursion out to a point in the sea that is watered by the "springs" of Be'er Miriam.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

The princes dug the well, the nobles of the people hollowed it, by the law-giver, with their staffs. From the desert [they went] to Mattanah; from Mattanah to Nachliel; from Nachliel to Bamos. (Bamidbar 21:18-19)

When the Jewish people witness great miracles on their behalf, they like to sing about it. After the

splitting of the sea (Parashas Beshallach), they sang shirah--song of the soul. Now, after the tremendous miracle of water from the well, the souls of the Jewish people could not contain themselves, and shirah and its vocalized praise of G-d's providence again was the result.

The rabbis ask in the Talmud:

Why does it say, "From the desert they went to Mattanah"? If a man makes himself like a desert, abandoning himself to all (Rashi: he teaches Torah to everyone free-of-charge), then Torah will be given to him as a gift (mattanah), as it says, "From the desert to Mattanah." Since it is given to him as a gift, he will inherit it from G-d (nachalo E"l), as it says, "from Mattanah to Nachliel." Since he inherited it from G-d, he will become elevated to greatness, as it says, "from Nachliel to Bamos (elevated places)." (Nedarim 55a)

Hence, according to the Talmud, the last part of the verses above are really speaking about Torah. However, according to the Vilna Gaon, the first part of the above paragraph is also speaking about Torah:

"... Because a well is the Torah, as it says, 'Drink water from your own cistern, and flowing water from your own well.' (Mishlei 5:16)."

The Gaon then adds:

"It is a trait of the Torah, as we see from the verse, 'For wisdom protects as well as money ...' (Koheles 7:12), and, 'It is a tree of life for all those who grasp it' (Mishlei 3:18), that one who cannot learn Torah on his own, but 'grasps' it through those who can learn Torah, is rewarded as if he learned Torah on his own, because 'wisdom protects as well as money' ..."

In other words, the Zevulun-Yissachar relationship really works. The former were sea-merchants who lacked the ability to learn Torah like their fellow Jews, Yissachar, who only had a drive for Torah, and nothing else. Hence, Zevulun financially supported Yissachar, who learned on behalf of both of them.

(What a shame it is today that the attitude has changed so dramatically, and therefore, the opportunity as well. There are Torah scholars who have little desire but to learn Torah all day long, with tremendous self-sacrifice yet. On the other side of the "table," there are Jews who have tremendous financial resources, but little or no desire to learn Torah, or to financially support those who do. The "shidduch" is therefore not made, and the result is less Torah learned by the scholars, and less reward earned by the people who could support them! Then again, as the Zohar predicted, this is the result of the reduced respect for Torah just before Moshiach's arrival.)

The Gaon continues:

"And this is what it means: the well is the Torah 'dug by the princes,' that is, the 'princes' of Torah who learn it and 'dig' out and deepen their knowledge from learning it and its mysteries."

Learning Torah, explains the Vilna Gaon, is comparable to digging an intellectual and spiritual well ...
" 'The nobles of the people hollowed it ...' refers to the people who give gifts and the wealthy people, who are constantly involved in business, acquire Torah with their money ... when they support Torah." (Kol Eliyahu, Chukas 94)

In the past, this may not have been easy to do because of the lack of wealthy Jews amongst the Jewish population as a whole. The willingness to financially support Torah institutions and Torah scholars might have been there, but the money just wasn't.

Ironically, as is often the case with Divine Providence, the situation has reversed itself: currently, the money is there; however, the willingness, as a result of assimilation and the times we live in, has become diminished, just as the angel had precipitated. For, as the Zohar points out, when the angel "grabbed" and damaged the leg of Ya'akov that fateful night he became "Yisroel," he was, in fact "attacking" the supporters of Torah, in the "End-of-Days."

This is something to think about next time you feel resistance to write that check to strengthen Torah, and all those who uphold it.

Melave Malkah:

Yiftach the Giliadite was a mighty man ... Giliad's wife gave birth to sons for him; his wife's sons grew up and drove Yiftach away, and they said to him, "You shall not inherit in our father's house for you are the son of another woman." Yiftach fled from his brothers ... (Shoftim 11:1-3)

The story of Yiftach is a moving story about a man who was rejected by his people, left alone to his own devices for survival. He was sent away for the wrong reasons, and justice did not work on his behalf. And, even though he possessed the physical prowess to take revenge on his own and avoid expulsion, instead, he chose to be patient with G-d, trusting that the day would come when he would be vindicated, the right way.

The day came. It was "after many days that Ammon made war with Israel," and this forced his people to seek out Yiftach as a leader. After the elders humbled themselves to Yiftach, who had not been a Torah scholar, he consented to be their leader in war against Ammon. Such is the power of belief in G-d and His ways (Bava Kamma 92b). When it came to the "chok" (the unclear-and-difficult-to-understand) aspect of G-d's Divine Providence, Yiftach was a patient, loyal servant.

However, this week's parshah starts off with the words, "This is the statute of the Torah ..." as if to say, you have to have both aspects: faith in G-d and Torah background. Because Yiftach did not, he stumbled into a tragic mistake that cost his daughter the chance to get married and have children like other eligible women, his own life, and the great Pinchas his prophecy. A vow made to express

his gratitude to G-d for his success in battle ended up undoing other important things in life, and souring his success.

The understanding of chukim may be "distant" from us, but that of the mishpatim is not. And if we devote ourselves to understanding and relating to the parts of Torah that G-d has made available to us, it is bound to result in insights into the chukim as well.

Have a great Shabbos,
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