

MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "This is the statute (chukas) of the law which G-d commanded to be told ..."(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

There are many ways to try and describe the essence of the Jewish people. Perhaps one of the most important ways is in terms of the emunah -- faith in G-d -- we are supposed to have and exhibit to the world. It is our emunah in G-d and His master plan for creation that is the basis of all we are supposed to be doing and all we are prepared to sacrifice for Him.

Anyone one can have emunah. But only the Jewish people have emunah in the Torah revelation of G-d, and the mandate it expresses. ALL human beings sacrifice themselves for SOME cause; it is only human to put ourselves out for something in order to feel meaningful, to feel alive. But only Jews are willing to put themselves out for a Torah lifestyle, and even many of us have difficulty making that supreme sacrifice as well.

This week's parshah can be called "Parashas HaEmunah" -- the "Parshah of The Faith," because it deals with chok, statute -- mitzvos whose logic seems to be beyond us at our present stage of history. Whereas, with respect to Mishpatim (Judgments) -- such as "Do not murder" and "Do not steal" -- the societal benefits are clear, when it comes to "Chukim" -- such as do not wear clothing made from a mixture of wool and linen -- it is not readily apparent TO US how society benefits from abeyance of such Divine directives.

We Jews simply have to take it ON FAITH that the world is a better place when we adhere to ALL mitzvos -- Mishpatim AND Chukim -- with complete devotion. However, within the word "chok" is a hint to another important concept, something the Pri Tzaddik, on this week's parshah, alludes to. It has to do with serving G-d "with all your heart," as we are commanded to do in the "Shema."

Even though the word "chok" is translated as "statute," it is also related to the word "l'chakeik," which means "to engrave," or, "impress." Hence, the point of a chok is to "engrave" the heart of a Jew's. Engrave what on the Jewish heart? That G-d is our first and foremost priority in our lives, and, that nothing is more important to us than performing His will.

In fact, the heart is often compared to a "slate" upon which an "impression" can easily be made.

Anyone who has ever fallen in love with someone or something they did not previously know has experienced how easy it is to make an impression on a heart. (I know that, personally, if I witness something that, emotionally, does not go well with me, it can stay with me for days, even weeks, before it fades into my subconscious memory.)

Therefore, within the concept of chok is also a warning: Protect your heart (and the hearts of your loved ones) from that which can leave a bad impression. For, bad impressions can go right to the heart, and are MUCH HARDER to remove than they are to engrave.

This is fundamentally the argument behind the discussion to limit what we, and our children as well, are exposed to, specifically via the media. "It's only a show Š" or, "They don't really know what they're watching Š" or, "I WANT my children to be exposed Š" may sound good in theory (though, the really don't), but, the damage being done to the heart and mind will always outweigh the benefits of such an "educational" experience.

We are called by the Torah, "Mamleches Kohanim" -- a "Nation of Priests" (Shemos 19:6), to tell us that, not only must our faith in G-d be strong, but, that our hearts must also be pure -- pure enough for the holy "finger" of G-d to engrave His holy Torah upon. We must accept our role as "Kohanim" -- the symbol of Torah purity -- and live up to it, by staying as distant as we can from as many adverse, profane, and unhealthy "messages" and "methods" as possible.

Yea, yea Š I know Š as Rashi points out at the beginning of this week's parshah, "they" laugh at us for our "backward" ways. But, you know how that old saying goes: He who laughs first, laughs last, or, in this case, will be forced to watch us laugh Š all the way to the purity of the World-to-Come!

Shabbos Day:

The entire assembly of the Children of Israel reached the Tzin desert in the first month. The people camped at Kadesh, and that is where Miriam died and was buried. (Bamidbar 20:1)

"She also died by "Divine Kiss"(Neshikah) -- so why doesn't it mention this outright? Because it would not be respectable for Heaven Š" (Rashi)

Why does the death of Miriam come in close proximity to the section dealing with the Red Heifer? To tell you that, just as the Red Heifer atones, so, too, does the death of the Righteous atone. (Moed Katan 28a)

This is a parshah that is occupied with death. To begin with, the parshah starts off with the discussion of the Parah Adumah -- the Red Heifer -- and the procedure for becoming purified from spiritual defilement caused by contact with the dead. Immediately following this section is the account of Miriam's death, and her burial.

Then, following this episode, there is the story of Moshe Rabbeinu hitting the rock, after being told to bring forth water from it through speech alone, which, effectively, is the cause of his death in the desert, as well as his brother's, Aharon HaKohen. The death of the latter actually occurs in the parshah itself, and quite a few words are used to describe the scene.

Not too long after that, the people come to Moshe, all in a panic, and complain:

š Why have you taken us up from Egypt to die in the desert? (21:5)

As a result, they were to die in the desert, but because of themselves, and not because of anything Moshe did or didn't do for them:

G-d sent poisonous serpents amongst the people. They bit people and many Israelites died. They came to Moshe and said, "We have erred because we spoke out against God š" (20:6-7)

There is a strong, conceptual connection between death and the idea of a "chok." In fact, one of the ultimate chukim, if you will, is death itself, for we understand so little about it, yet, we are forced to accept it as fact, and, as good for us and creation. In fact, one of the best-selling type of books today remains to be about "near-death experiences."

One of the reasons why death is like a statute is, because, once, we were immortal, before Adam and Chava ate from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah -- the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But, how does one go from being immortal, and therefore eternal, to being mortal, and therefore, finite? And, for that matter, back to being immortal again (after Techiyas HaMeisim -- Resurrection of Dead)?

The answer is in understanding what death really is. Many people understand death to be something extremely final, and those who do not believe in a soul or an After-Life, see death as the greatest recycling project ever. This is why, from their perspective, it is best to avoid the topic unless doing so can kill you.

However, from the Torah's point of view, and certainly from a Kabbalistic viewpoint, "death" is merely a technical term to describe the result of a transition. For example, according to the Arizal (and many others), this is the Torah's meaning when it says:

Moshe, the servant of G-d, died there in the land of Moav, as G-d told him to. He buried him in the glen in the land of Moav, opposite Beit-Peor, though no one knows the place he was buried even today ... (Devarim 34:5-6)

There is nothing unusual about this posuk, until one recalls that Moshe Rabbeinu was supposed to have written every last word of the Torah! And if that is true, then who wrote the last eight lines of the Torah, and if Moshe himself did, then how could he say that he had already died when, in fact, he had yet to?

This is the source of a disagreement in the Talmud between Rebi Yehudah and Rebi Shimon (Bava Basra 15a), and for the sake of pshat, a compromise is assumed: Moshe received every last letter of

Torah from the mouth of G-d in one long stream of letters. However, it was Yehoshua bin Nun, Moshe's successor, who merited to separate the last eight possukim-worth of words into actual sentences.

However, according to the Arizal and Kabbalah, one can die and still walk the face of the earth, because death is a relative concept. In this case of Moshe Rabbeinu, "death" meant stepping down and handing over the mantle of leadership to Yehoshua, which had already happened a few parshios ago. In other words, at this point in the Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu had already died; Moshe, past teacher of Israel, remained alive long enough to conclude and write down every last word of the Torah!

There are many other examples of this concept, and the truth is, we know it already. Figuratively-speaking, one might refer to the transition from adolescence to young adulthood as, "the death of my adolescence." Did anyone really die? Of course not! The person speaking is obviously still very much alive!

Well, yes and no. He is kind of the same person, and yet, he is a different person at the same time, for, to be human is to constantly undergo transformation, to become a different person. And physical death, according to the more esoteric side of our transition, is really no different.

In fact, the only reason why one MUST have all physical vital signs stop and be buried in the ground is to facilitate physical growth to the next stage of life. It is like trying to squeeze through a hole in a fence that is simply too small for your body to get through; unless, of course, you go on an extreme diet and change your physique.

The result of the snake interacting with mankind in the Garden of Eden was to impart to us a spiritual filth (zuhama; Shabbos 146a) that prevents the body from rising to the level at which the soul can bring it to a much higher, eternal level of existing. In their present state of spiritual existence, our bodies just can't make it through that "hole" in the wall of Heaven!

Physically ceasing to function, and then rotting in the ground, is the process by which the body sheds its spiritual filth in preparation for reconstruction as a far more spiritual entity. This is the way that we get back to wearing a Kesones Ohr (with an aleph) -- Clothing of Light, like Adam, before the snake, something that will begin to happen, in any case, during the time of Moshiach.

In fact, according to tradition, anyone born in this period of time who must die for the sake of resurrection, will not die a conventional death. On the contrary, all people born during Moshiach's time will die by Neshikah -- that godly death that Miriam and Aharon died in this week's parshah, the Avos died in their parshios, and Moshe Rabbeinu will die at the very end of the entire Torah.

Unless, of course, you're Ya'akov Avinu, who purified his body while living within, so much so that the Talmud can say, "Ya'akov Avinu did not die" (Ta'anis 5b). He simply transitioned from This World to the next one without the need to go through the ground.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Moshe lifted up his hand with his staff and hit the rock twice; water came out in abundance. The people and their animals drank. G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, you will therefore not bring this people into the land which I have given to them." (Bamidbar 20:11-12)

As basic to the Torah Jew as eating and sleeping are the concepts of teshuvah and kaparah -- repentance and atonement (though the latter are harder to do, but, far more meaningful, if only in the long run). Simply put, teshuvah is what we human beings do by, 1.) regretting the sin, 2.) verbalizing the admission (viduy), and 3.) avoiding the sin the next time it becomes a possibility to commit it. Kaparah, on the other hand, is what G-d gives to us if we MERIT to have the previous "slate" wiped clean.

How does one merit kaparah? Well, as the name implies, Yom Kippur itself provides an avenue if the repentant sinner takes the day seriously, and, the more this is so, the greater the kaparah (yes, kaparah is a relative concept, and often an ongoing process). However, failing this, there is always the "yesurin-track," that is, Divinely-sent personal or national suffering to help "clean" the slate.

In fact, in Kabbalah, yesurin are also called, "tziruf v'libun," or, "refinement and whitening," in the spiritual sense of the terms. Like a metal pot in need of perfecting, spiritual heat is applied, precisely at just the right temperature for every individual person, in order to "tighten" and "whiten" the person who sinned.

However, says the Talmud, there are some sins so grave for which an entire lifetime of suffering could never atone, and therefore, only death does:

... But one who has committed a Chillul Hashem (Profanation of G-d's Name), there is no power in teshuvah upon which to depend, or in Yom Kippur to atone for it, or in suffering to eradicate it. Rather, all are suspended and death cleanses. (Yoma 86a)

As to what constitutes a Chillul Hashem, Rashi simplifies the issue by writing:

"He sins and causes others to sin." (Rashi, q.v. "Chillul Hashem")

Woe. According to this definition, every sin carries with it a Chillul Hashem. Indeed, according to the Nefesh HaChaim, that is 100% true, for, the word "chillul" comes from the word "challal," which means "void." In other words, any act, word, or thought that creates a spiritual void within creation, that is, which makes it spiritually incompatible for G-d to be as apparent as He could have been to mankind, is, by definition, a Chillul Hashem! Every sin does that for sure.

There is an amazing section of Talmud that shows how serious Chillul Hashem can be, and how

much it has to be avoided, especially in public. The Talmud is discussing how, after Shaul HaMelech's death, Dovid HaMelech sought to placate the Givonim, who suffered greatly when Shaul had the entire city of Nov, a city of kohanim, wiped away for helping Dovid escape. The Givonim used to supply food and drink to the people of Nov, their main source of livelihood.

When asked their "price," the Givonim responded that they wanted nothing less than the seven sons of Shaul to execute in their father's stead. And, after trying to appease them in other ways, but to no avail, and after consulting with G-d, Dovid had no choice but to comply, for the most part.

"But," asks the Talmud, "sons are not to die for [the sins of] their fathers!" (Devarim 24:16). Answers the Talmud an astounding rebut:

Rebi Chiyah son of Ava said in the name of Rebi Yochanan: Better that one letter of the Torah should be uprooted than the Name of Heaven be profaned in public! (Yevamos 79a)

"The nations will say that this is people (Israel) is not fitting to be a part of, for, they (Shaul's kingdom) took away their food, and they (Dovid's kingdom) did not take revenge (on the Givonim's behalf)." (Rashi)

Nothing can be more destructive for creation than Chillul Hashem. It is G-d and His light that sustains creation, spiritually AND physically, and when that light is reduced, creation becomes weaker, first spiritually, and eventually, physically. Chillul Hashem kills creation, literally, and therefore, only death can atone for it, no matter how great the person is who committed the Chillul Hashem.

Or, the reduced Kiddush Hashem -- Sanctification of G-d's Name -- for, a lack of Kiddush Hashem is also a Chillul Hashem to whatever degree the Kiddush Hashem was not done. This we learn from this week's parshah, and Moshe Rabbeinu:

"Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, you will therefore not bring this people into the land which I have given to them."

There is no question that all those people standing around who watched Moshe hit the rock were duly impressed, saw it as a miracle, and praised G-d as a result. Besides, who says that they knew that Moshe was only supposed to speak to the rock and not hit it?

Rather, PHYSICALLY hitting the rock, as opposed to SPIRITUALLY speaking to it, to bring forth life-sustaining water, was a lesser a miracle on all accounts. A lesser miracle meant a lesser revelation of G-d's involvement in creation, somewhat of a spiritual void, somewhat of a Chillul Hashem. For all intents and purpose, not being able to enter Eretz Yisroel was a death sentence for both Moshe and Aharon, and tikun (rectification) for the lack of Kiddush Hashem that resulted.

Two weeks ago, someone told me a d'var Torah that is so true that it is worth repeating here and now, because of its relevance. The spies told the Jewish people, albeit quite maliciously, on their return from their mission:

They [the spies] brought back to the Children of Israel an evil report of the land which they had searched, saying, "The land which we investigated is a land that eats up its inhabitants ... " (Bamidbar 13:22)

Rashi explains this to mean:

"In every place we passed we found them burying their dead!" However, the truth was that The Holy One, Blessed is He, did this for their good, to involve them [the inhabitants of Canaan] in mourning to distract them from paying attention to the spies." (Rashi)

However, this person's pshat of a land that consumes its inhabitants was: It forces a person to make a decision about his direction in life, whether he wants to or not. Eretz Yisroel allows for no ideological fence-sitters; you're either for or against Torah. The spiritual intensity of the land forces the issue and is all-consuming Š consuming even Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon HaKohen, all the way out in the desert Š and Jews, anywhere in the world they may be found.

For, Eretz Yisroel plays a very major role in the Jewish people's capacity to sanctify the Name of G-d, by virtue of the fact that it was a gift to the Jewish people from G-d, for the express purpose of revealing to the world the potential relationship that can exist between man and His Creator. Eretz Yisroel is supposed to represent G-d's love of His people, and, our love of Eretz Yisroel and yearning for the Messianic reality of Tzion -- represented by our self-sacrifice to bring it about any one we can -- is supposed to project our love of G-d and His Torah to the rest of the world.

The Talmud writes:

We hold like Rebi Yosi, as it says in a brisa, "Š Which your fathers inherited, and you shall inherit it Š" (Devarim 30:5); a first and second inheritance they had, but a third one, they will not require. (Yevamos 82b)

"A first inheritance Š In the time of Yehoshua there was an inheritance, and a second one in the days of Ezra, since when they went into [Babylonian] exile, the kedushah of the land left Š A third one they will not require Š In other words, they will not need to re-inherit the land because the previous inheritance remains; we learn from the posuk that the holiness of the land did not disappear during the exile of Titus." (Rashi)

In other words, when the Jewish people were forced from Eretz Yisroel by Nebuchadnetzar after the destruction of the First Temple into Babylonian exile, it was as if the first phase of Jewish history came to an official halt. We had to start all over again, in many respects, after the miracle of Purim and under the leadership of Ezra, at least with respect to our relationship to the Holy Land.

However, says the Talmud, this was not the case with the fourth and final exile under the destructive hand of Rome. Eisav may have forced us from our land, and may continue to try and do so, but he was unable, and will remain unable, to sever our relationship to the land, which is ongoing to this very day. There will be no third inheritance of the land; we have inherited Eretz Yisroel for the

second and last time.

That's the good news. The unpleasant part of that is that something will have to give. Either we as a people will claim our inheritance, like long-lost relatives who happened to stumble into a windfall, or, we will have to be made to understand and appreciate just how much Eretz Yisroel means to us. That's "us," as in the Jewish people, not "us," as in, the "U.S."

When it comes to G-d, Torah, and Eretz Yisroel, there IS no fence-sitting.

MELAVE MALKAH:

To Dovid, when he disguised his sanity before Avimelech, who drove him out and he left. (Tehillim 34:1)

What's this all about? It is about the time that Dovid HaMelech was forced to flee Shaul and leave Eretz Yisroel to save his life:

Dovid arose and fled on that day from before Shaul and he came to Achish, the king of Gas Š (I Shmuel 21:11)

"In Sefer Tehillim he is called 'Avimelech.' He had two names, or, 'Avimelech' was just a name given to any king of the Philistines, just like 'Paroah' was the name for the king of Egypt Š' (Radak)

The servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not Dovid, the king of the land? Was it not of this one that they would sing out with musical instruments, saying, 'Shaul has slain his thousands, and Dovid, his ten thousands?' " Dovid took these words to heart, and became very afraid of Achish, the king of Gas. Therefore, he changed his speech before their very eyes, and he feigned insanity before them. He scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down upon his beard. Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see a man who is mad ... Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack lunatics, that you have brought this one to rave in my presence? Will this one come into my house?" (I Shmuel 21:11-16)

In other words, Dovid, after taking refuge from Shaul among the Jewish enemy, the Philistines, again sensed he was in danger. The Philistines recognized him as the great Jewish warrior of Israel, and already had a pretext to do away with him. And this time, Dovid's military prowess and cunning was not going to save his life.

Therefore, Dovid pulled a fast one on Avimelech and his people by feigning madness, until Avimelech could no longer tolerate him, and simply threw him out. He would live to regret the day that Dovid fooled so, for, Dovid survived this episode, the death threats of Shaul HaMelech, and the danger from all of his enemies, to become Dovid HaMelech, king of all Israel and champion of the Jewish people.

Later, after Dovid returned to Eretz Yisroel and had occasion to confront Shaul HaMelech, he referred to his exile in the following terms:

"... For they have driven me today from cleaving to the L-rd's heritage, saying, 'Go, worship other gods.'" (I Shmuel 26:19)

The Talmud uses this posuk to support the following:

Anyone who lives outside of the Land is like one who worships idols! (Kesuvos 110b)

-- which is based upon the following:

I am G-d, your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan to be your G-d. (Vayikra 25:38)

There are many beautiful words of praise in this tehillah; this is one of Dovid HaMelech's most inspiring compositions. Part of this psalm is found at the end of Birchas HaMazon, or "bentching," as it is commonly called:

Fear G-d, you, His holy ones, for there is no lack for those who fear Him. Young lions may want and hunger, but those who seek G-d will not lack any good. (10-11)

Two of the most important ingredients for coming to terms with life in Eretz Yisroel, for rising above the mundane and often distasteful reality of a confused Jewish people: a desire to find more of G-d, and, a willingness to trust in Him and His Providence. As one rabbi (living in America) once put it, "The difference between me living here in America and you living in Israel is that you people say, 'Let's trust in G-d,' while we say over here, 'Hey G-d, why don't you trust in me!'"

Which man desires life, who loves days of seeing good? Stop your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. (13:14)

Not only is talk NOT cheap, but, it greatly influences our behavior. It is amazing how much care one needs to exercise in controlling what he or she says, and, even more amazing how taking such care improves the moral integrity of a person. Now, Dovid HaMelech adds, it even extends one's life.

Many are the troubles of the Righteous Š (20)

Let's not be delusional; life is not perfect, even for the Righteous person who sacrifices his life for G-d in This World, in perfect faith that it will all be worth it in the end, that is, in the World-to-Come. He too has his crises, but Š

G-d rescues him from all of them. On the other hand:

The death blow of the wicked is evil, and the haters of the Righteous will be blamed. (22)

It would be nice if, every time an evil person raised a fist to a righteous person, something happened to that fist to protect the righteous person. However, that would not fare well for free-will (who

wouldn't become religious after that?). Besides, G-d has His reasons for everything that happens, including why bad things happen to good people (Brochos 5a).

However, whereas good things last forever, bad things do not:

G-d redeems the soul of His servants, and all those who take refuge in Him will not be condemned. (23)

And THAT, my friends and colleagues, is what life in This World is all about, and quite frankly, what life in Eretz Yisroel is all about too, for that matter.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
