

A MATTER OF DECREE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them; then I will provide your rains in their time... (Vayikra 26:3-4)

As is well known and well discussed, a "chok" - a decree - is a mitzvah whose logic defies us. Many mitzvos make sense to us, meaning, that even if we don't want to perform them, we can see the benefit in everyday life in doing so. Not so when it comes to chukim.

Not eating milk and meat together is a chok. What spiritual or physical benefit is there in not cooking milk together with meat? Gentiles do it, and they seem to survive just fine. Not only that, but if treif meat and/or treif milk is used in the combination, it is no longer a Torah prohibition of cooking milk and meat together (though a Jew couldn't eat it for other kashrus reasons).

And, what difference does it make to the world if clothing is made from a weave of wool and linen - shatnez? Obviously not that much, because 99 percent of the world can do it with G-d's blessing. Only a Jew can't wear it, unless, of course, the techeles of his tzitzis is wool and the garment itself is made from flax.

The ultimate paradigm of a chok is the Red Heifer, used in the process of purifying someone who has come in contact with a dead body. Aside from the details of the actual ritual itself, there is a quirk in as much as the priest who does the purifying becomes defiled in the process. How, and more importantly, why?

One thing about chukim - they remind us that we don't fully understand G-d, and THAT'S an understatement. And, as an extension of this idea, they also remind us that we do not live in the real, or rather ultimate reality, something that we human beings obviously have difficulty recalling.

Even Gan Aiden had not yet become the ultimate, Ultimate Reality, evident by the fact that Adam HaRishon had free-will, could, and did sin. As we enter the phase of history called "Techiyas HaMeisim" - Resurrection of the Dead - we will already return to Adam's state before his sin, as will the rest of the world. The World-to-Come, however, will go far beyond that level of existence.

Expelled from Gan Aiden, we ended up in this world - no paradise for sure. And, we might have remained cognizant of this important fact had the physical world not contained elements that allow

us, through manipulation, to mimic ideal realities, or at least what we imagine them to be. By striving to make life "just a little bit more comfortable," we are, in fact, trying to fashion our own personal version of Gan Aiden.

There is nothing wrong in striving to get back to the Garden. Indeed, it is trying to do so that we actually trigger all kinds of processes that can make it happen. However, the problem comes when trying to artificially create "paradise;" like most artificial things in this world, it tastes "sweet," but in the end it is dangerous to one's health.

Shlomo HaMelech, with all of his great G-d-given wisdom was able to understand all the chukim, except for the Red Heifer. However, Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the greatest prophet to ever live, even understood that chok, but could not comprehend why the great Rebi Akiva had to die so violently at the hands of the evil Romans (Menachos 29b). Why? Because, as G-d told him:

No one can see My face because no man can see Me and live! (Shemos 33:20)

Fine, but who was talking about faces - especially G-d's? (Does He even have one?!)

Shabbos Day:

But the righteous person shall live through his faith. (Chavakuk 2:4)

I heard a beautiful analogy on one of Rabbi Yissachar Frand's tapes some time ago. The topic of the tape was, "Why bad things happen to good people," a chok for sure - right up there with the Red Heifer.

On the tape, as always, Rabbi Frand makes excellent and beautiful points. However, he also provides an analogy that best describes our relationship to G-d's truth at this stage of history, which he compares to a wool tapestry.

There are two sides to a tapestry, the side with the picture, and the backside where all the threads are cut and tied. Even though the exact same threads are used for both sides of the tapestry, they still produce incredibly different "pictures" on each side of the tapestry.

On the "good" side, there is the actual design itself, perfectly drawn to make perception and understanding straightforward. On the "bad" side, however, the picture that results is one of confusion and apparent destruction, with threads being different sizes and different colors for no perceptible reason.

In this analogy, the good side of the tapestry, the one with the perfect and clear picture, represents G-d's version of history, the totality of all that G-d ever planned to do with what He brought into being. Nothing is out of place, and every thread is where it ought to be to produce a picture that, not only can we agree to, but we actually love it! This is the side we can call "G-d's face."

The bad side, however, are all the events of 6000 years of history necessary to bring about the spectacular denouement we call the World-to-Come. And, much to our chagrin and test, it is the side that we see throughout our lives and history, and which makes us wonder, "What in the world does that accomplish?"

When Moshe Rabbeinu asked G-d on Mt. Sinai after the sin of the golden calf:

"Please show me Your ways..." (Shemos 33:13)

he was really asking G-d for a glimpse of the tapestry from the other side, so he could understand, and perhaps explain to others, such critical issues as the suffering of the good, and the prosperity of the evil (Brochos 7a). However, G-d told him, nothing doing, not if you want to live longer.

So, why didn't Moshe just answer back, "I don't mind if I die, because You can revive me, just as you did to the Jewish people during the presentation of the Ten Commandments. If you can bring them back to life, then you can bring me back to life after You reveal Your glorious way of thinking."

Moshe Rabbeinu didn't answer that to G-d because it was irrelevant, because just knowing the information Moshe requested would have made him irrelevant. Why? Because it would have caused Moshe's consciousness to shift from the world he was presently living in to that of Yemos HaMoshiach, which was contrary to his role as the Jewish leader at that time.

To properly assist the Jewish people in the direction of their ultimate destiny, Moshe Rabbeinu too, had to remain on the side of the tapestry with all the wild and disorderly threads. He had to remain an example of the righteous person to whom Chavakuk referred when he wrote:

But the righteous person shall live through his faith. (Chavakuk 2:4)

For, what is faith but the ability to look at the tapestry from our side and say, "Yeah, but I know with certainty that on the other side, it all makes perfect sense and the picture is beautiful." According to Chavakuk, this idea is the main concept to focus on regarding Torah and mitzvos as we make our final descent, both spiritually and historically, on the way to Yemos HaMoshiach. (Makkos 24a)

The reason for this is found in the classic work that addresses this issue: The Book of Iyov.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

"Did you ever in your life command the morning, or teach the dawn its place, to grasp the edges of the earth and shake the wicked from it...?" (Iyov 38:13)

This posuk is towards the end of Sefer Iyov. Iyov had given up on trying to understand what he had done to deserve the evil that had befallen him, when he knew with certainty that he had lived righteously. His friends had provided little comfort for him, if any at all, and his own consciousness

failed to be able to grasp that which G-d had denied Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

Nevertheless, though G-d did not provide the answer, He did provide comfort in the form of an allusion to the answer. Basically, in short, He told Iyov, "Trust Me, your suffering makes sense and was well worth it. However, that is something that will only become clear to you when you can see life from My perspective, a perspective that takes into account every single detail of creation and life - past, present, and future."

However, Rashi, upon commenting on this posuk, says something that is both fascinating and frightening:

TO GRASP . . . SHAKE THE WICKED: Furthermore, have you ever commanded that the corners of the earth be taken hold of the way a person takes a garment? "In the future, I will grasp her (the earth's) edges and shake out the evil," as it says, "G-d will stretch out His hand and the helper will stumble and the helped will fall" (Yeshayahu 31:3), like a man who grabs onto something, and leaning on it, falls over. (Rashi)

What imagery! In the future, G-d will take hold of the edges of the earth, and like a person shakes the dirt from his clothing, G-d will shake the evil from creation. And, how does He plan to do that? According to Chavakuk, with tests of faith, and only the "righteous" who have enough of it will hold firm to the earth, and will not fall off like the wicked.

And, who are those who will fall off? Those about whom Rashi writes regarding chukim:

THIS IS THE DECREE OF THE LAW: Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel saying, "What is this commandment and what reason is there for it?" Therefore, the term "chukas" is employed regarding [this mitzvah of the Red Heifer], to say, "It is a decree from Me, and you have no right to question it." (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:2)

In other words, whether it is a mitzvah that is incomprehensible to us, or an event whose meaning and good we cannot fathom, it is all the same thing: it is something that pits human logic against Divine logic, and it is a moment of truth for the person. The harder G-d shakes the earth - that is, human history - the more difficult G-d's logic will be to relate to, and a greater test it will be for everyone.

In a way, it is like riding a crowded subway train. Those who do not get seats may find a pole to hang on to, but those who fail to grab onto a stabilizing pole may have nothing to hold when the train starts and stops, but their own sense of balance. That could mean being thrown from one's feet at a moment's notice, and falling.

In life, the one sitting down with security is the righteous individual who can look at G-d's tapestry from the backside and imagine the other side. It is through the lens of this image that he views all the events of his life and history, the good and the bad ones, and as a result, never loses hope or faith.

The person holding steadfast to the pole is the man of limited faith. He too can be thrown from his position of security if the train stops sudden enough. Movement alone causes him to have to shift his position around the pole he holds onto, in order to remain balanced.

The person standing up without a pole is the man who has given up on G-d and His logic, and has decided to go it alone. As long as the train moves along at a smooth and comfortable pace, he remains confident and steady. He may even take pleasure in using the flexibility of his own legs to absorb the smaller bumps along the way.

However, as G-d told Iyov, a time will come when the train will have to stop, and at a time and in a way that no human being will know or recognize until after the fact. And, when that moment in time comes, some people will fall to the ground, never to rise again. Some will remain on their feet, but sustain a few bruises here and there, while the last group will simply rise and leave the train for the next world in total calm.

MELAVE MALKAH:

I will provide peace in the land, and you will lie down with none to frighten you. (Vayikra 26:6)

So, then, what is a chok?

It is more than just a reminder that we have yet to make it to the perfect reality, as hard as we may try to convince ourselves and others of just the opposite. In fact, a chok is like a special tube of light that extends downward from its higher and more sublime reality into our everyday mundane world. It is a glimpse, so-to-speak, of the perfected reality for which we yearn.

Actually, it is less than that. It is really only a glimpse at the "door" to that higher, perfect reality; we don't actually get to see inside it, because if we could, then our lives down here would become academic. Who could sin anymore knowing what awaits those who don't sin?

Nevertheless, it is enough. It is enough to know that the door exists to the other reality to provide the basis for the faith about which Chavakuk spoke. A chok says to a Jew: "I may not make sense to you where you are living now, but I will make perfect and beautiful sense to you when you are up here."

The peace spoke about above is not a reward for obedience, but the consequence of living with the reality of the world of the chukim. Faith, of the type the Torah speaks, based upon knowledge of G-d's love for the Jewish people and His irreversible covenant with Avraham Avinu, can only result in a sense of peace and calm - even in the face of calamity, G-d forbid.

However, the deteriorating reality spoken about during the many verses of curses that follow are the result of taking this world too seriously, and trying to pretend that it is already Gan Aiden, when in

fact, it is far from it. They are the result of trying to ride this subway train we call "life" without getting a seat or holding onto a safety pole.

Ultimately, as the Talmud teaches, it is all for the good. However, comfortable and easy it has not been, because when G-d shakes the world, He really shakes the world. According to some of the more famous prophecies, though negative prophecies don't have to come true, the most unsettling part may be yet to come.

In fact, there is no question that with science, and business, and anti-Semitism - all the things that tend to draw the heart of the Jew in the wrong direction, the shaking has been going on now for quite some time. The question a Jew has to ask himself these days is, "Have I fallen? And, if I have not fallen, am I falling?"

It's a hard question to ask when living amongst people who insist that they have found their way back to Gan Aiden. It is an even harder question to answer if you believe that they, and you, have found your way back to Gan Aiden.

CHAZAK!

Have a great Shabbos,
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