

PARSHAS CHUKAS

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Chukas

The Sfas Emes begins this m'amar with a quote from the Zohar. The Zohar notes that our parsha starts: "Zos chukas haTorah" ("This is the Torah's decree ... "). By contrast, in Sefer Devarim (4:44-45), the Torah communicates the same message, but does it with very different language and a very different tone. The pasuk in Devarim phrases the message as: "Vezos haTorah asher sahm Moshe lifnei B'nei Yisroel. Eileh ha'eidos, vehachukim, vehamishpatim ...". ("And this is the Torah that Moshe presented to the Jewish people. Here are the testimonies and the decrees and the statutes ... ")

The Sfas Emes does not explain why he -- and the Zohar -- quote the pasuk in Sefer Devarim in the present context. Apparently he took it for granted that we would know why he -- and the Zohar -- cite the other pasuk. This question -- why introduce the pasuk from Devarim -- is important. For, if it were not trying to teach us something, the Sfas Emes would not have given the pasuk from Devarim the first place in his ma'amar. Accordingly, I suggest that we attempt to answer an obvious question. What are the Sfas Emes and the Zohar trying to teach us by giving such prominence to a pasuk whose message is virtually the same as the pasuk in our parsha?

The answer, I suggest is that style and nuance are vital for the tone of a message. Tone, in turn, is crucial for how a person relates to the message. Chazal have taught us -- by example -- to be sensitive to the Torah's stylistic nuances. In that spirit, note some important differences in style and nuance between the two texts. Thus, the initial phrase in Devarim -- "And this" -- comes in sharp contrast to the abrupt "This is ..." in our parsha. Likewise, the apparently unnecessary clause "asher sahm Moshe" in Devarim strikes a noticeably friendly note. By contrast, the tone implied by the presentation in Chukas comes across as a stark -- "take it or leave it". Note one more difference. The phrasing in Devarim presents the Torah in terms of laws which have varying degrees of accessibility to human intelligence. By contrast, the text in Chukas presents the Torah as a "Chuka" -- totally inaccessible to our rationality.

I suggest that what the Zohar and the Sfas Emes are telling us by quoting the two pesukim with their marked differences in nuance is a basic yesod (principle). They are pointing out that there are different ways of viewing the Torah, or of presenting it (to other people and/or to ourselves). As long as we observe Halacha, each of these modes of presentation is valid. They may speak to different people. Different perspectives on the same issue may speak to the same person at different points in his/her life (or even to the same person at different points in the same day). If we are aware of this

yesod concerning equal validity, we can spare ourselves much fruitless argument (including arguments with oneself).

Moving on, we find the Sfas Emes's reading of the word "Chok." We are used to seeing "Chok" as a "decree". A decree is: something external to us, something imposed on us with no apparent reason; something that we must somehow muster the strength to swallow. The Sfas Emes views Chukim very differently. He sees the word Chok as coming from the root CHaKoK: to engrave. Thus, he views Chukim as behavior that -- far from being extrinsic to us -- is, in fact, engraved in our psyches. In today's parlance, he might express this idea by saying that HaShem has "hard-wired" us to observe even the most difficult chukim. Note that "Chakok" has the connotation of being carved into the material -- in this instance, carved into us - and hence, indelible.

The Sfas Emes continues with a thought that we have seen before: That our mission in life is to extend the light of the Torah to all Creation. In reality, the whole cosmos contains the light of the Torah; for HaShem used the Torah to create the world. However, HaShem chose to put away (to be "goneiz") the light of His Omnipresence. And we have been given the task (and the responsibility) of finding and making contact with HaShem's Presence in all creation.

How can a person accomplish that momentous task? The Sfas Emes proposes two complementary approaches. First, he notes an alternative meaning of the word "chok": namely, "a fixed, daily portion." (For an example of this usage, see Mishlei 30:8: "Hatrifeini lechem chuki.") Mention of a "fixed portion," in turn, evokes for the Sfas Emes a passage in Gemara Brochos (32): "Chassidim harishonim ahsu Torah'sam keva ... " ("The chassidim of earlier generations made their Torah learning the fixed point in their lives ... ") The Sfas Emes takes this alternative meaning of "chok" -- fixed, immovable -- as an injunction to have knowledge of the Torah fixed and immovable within us. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that knowledge of the Torah will enable us to find -- and maintain contact with -- HaShem in the physical world.

The second approach that the Sfas Emes proposes to keep close to HaShem's Presence is harder. The Sfas Emes tells us that if we go about our everyday, mundane activities with an awareness of HaShem and a desire to do retzon HaShem (HaShem's will), we can in fact transform those activities into a source of contact with HaShem. He proceeds to elaborate on the idea that a person can -- and should -- look behind "reality" to see Reality, i.e., HaShem's Omnipresence.

The Sfas Emes recognizes that some of us may not (yet) have the capacity to see HaShem -- the Source -- in the midst of the world (= "olam"= hidden) in which He is hiding. To help us, the Sfas Emes offers a meta-pshat on a pasuk in Koheles (2:14). The pasuk says: "He'chacham einav berosh ... ". This pasuk is conventionally understood as saying: an intelligent person uses his eyes and his head to anticipate the likely consequences of events that are occurring now. The Sfas Emes reads this pasuk very differently. Working with the word "rosho", the Sfas Emes sees this pasuk as telling us: "An intelligent person sees HaShem -- the Raishis -- as the Source from which all existence flows."

The Sfas Emes goes even further. Not only is HaShem's Presence not easily apparent, but to the naive observer the world seems to be full of autonomous forces that are distant and, indeed, antagonistic to Kedusha (sanctity). Don't let superficial appearances mislead you, says the Sfas Emes. Those phenomena, too, draw their existence from HaShem. Why is the world like this -- confusing and misleading? Because it is HaShem's will that He be nistar (hidden). As we have seen, this is a fact of life to which the Sfas Emes returns, and confronts time and time -- and time -- again.

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