



Parshas Chukas

For the week ending 10 Tammuz 5758
3-4 July 1998

Overview

The laws of the parah adumah — the red heifer — are detailed. These laws of ritual purification are to be used when someone comes into contact with death. After nearly 40 years in the desert, Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. The people complain about the loss of their water supply which until then has been provided miraculously in the merit of Miriam’s righteousness. Aharon and Moshe pray for the people’s welfare. Hashem commands them to gather the nation at Merivah and speak to a designated rock so that water will flow forth. Distressed by the people’s lack of faith, Moshe hits the rock instead of speaking to it. He thus fails to produce the intended public demonstration of Hashem’s mastery over the world, which would have resulted had the rock produced water merely at Moshe’s word. Therefore, Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon that they will not bring the people into the Land. Bnei Yisrael resume their travels, but because the King of Edom, a descendant of Esav, denies them passage through his country, they do not travel the most direct route to Eretz Yisrael. When they reach Mount Hor, Aharon dies and his son Elazar is invested with his priestly garments and responsibilities. Aharon was beloved by all, and the entire nation mourns him 30 days. Bnei Yisrael battle Sichon the Amorite, who fights against them rather than allow them to pass through his land. As a result, Bnei Yisrael conquer the lands that Sichon had previously seized from the Amonites on the east bank of the Jordan River.

Insights

FLYING FIRST CLASS

“This is the ‘chok’ (statute) of the Torah” (19:2)

If you think about it, strapping small black leather boxes to your arm and your forehead must look pretty weird.

I remember flying on a British Airways morning flight. When it was time for me to pray, the cabin crew were extremely helpful. I was ushered right up to the front of the first class, just behind the cockpit door, and given as much room as I needed. Some of the first class passengers gave me some strange looks though. I guess they weren’t expecting live, in-flight entertainment.

There’s an interesting contradiction between this week’s Parsha and *Parshas Va’eschanan* in the Book of *Devarim*. In *Va’eschanan* it says that the nations of the world will see us observing God’s decrees such as wearing tefillin and will say “Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!” (4:6) However in this week’s Parsha, Rashi notes that the nations of the world laugh at the Jewish People for observing the *mitzvos* which seem to have no logic.

So which is it? Do the nations look at the *chukim*, the supra-logical *mitzvos*, and scoff? Or do they look at them and think that we are a wise and discerning people?

Flying never fails to amaze me. A huge metal contraption hurtles down a narrow concrete path at over a hundred miles an hour, and then suddenly you’re in the air, looking down on match-stick people and houses. I have no doubt in the incredible skill it takes to design and build a plane. If I had any doubts, I wouldn’t be on the plane in the first place. However, I have no idea *how* or *why* a plane works. *That* it works is beyond argument. *How* it works is beyond comprehension — at least beyond my comprehension.

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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The same is true of the *chukim*. When the Jewish People do the *mitzvos* properly, the nations of the world look at tefillin, or any of the supra-logical *mitzvos*, like an airplane. They don't know how they work — but they ascribe their lack of comprehension to themselves.

If however, we don't do the *mitzvos* properly — then the world looks at the *mitzvos* as weird. They won't blame it on their lack of knowledge; they will scoff at the *mitzvos* themselves.

It all depends on whether we make the *mitzvos* "fly" or we treat them like a dead weight hurtling down to the end of the runway.

SO FAR — SO GOOD

“For Cheshbon — it was the city of Sichon, king of the Emori; and he had warred against the first king of Moav and took all his land from his control until Arnon. Regarding this, the poets would say ‘Come to Cheshbon — let it be built and established as the city of Sichon.’ (21:26-7)

A man once jumped off the Empire State Building. As he reached the thirteenth floor, someone stuck their head out the window and shouted "Are you okay?"

"So far, so good!" he replied.

The Talmud takes the above verse and extrapolates the subtext: Regarding this, the poets (*moshlim*) would say "Come to Cheshbon." This means that the *moshlim* — those who rule over their negative drives — say "Come and make a *cheshbon* — a calculation: Let's evaluate the eternity that we gain when we do a *mitzvah* and what we lose when we neglect it, and weigh that against the damage we do when we succumb to sin as opposed to the minor loss of not fulfilling our every appetite in this world.

Superficially, it's difficult to see how the Sages saw in this verse a hint to the eternal battle between man and his own negativity.

Moav knew that G-d had commanded the Jewish People not to attack them and therefore they felt complacent about their future. "So far, so good!" However, they didn't foresee that Sichon would conquer them and that they would thus lose

their immunity. For Hashem had placed no similar restriction against the Jewish People fighting Sichon. Thus Moav lost both its defense and its complacency.

When tragedy strikes, the natural reaction is to examine our lives and ask ourselves why these things are happening. Not so when everything seems to be going to plan. Then it's much more difficult to see where we're heading. Then it's very easy to think "So far, so good."

IN THE DOG HOUSE

“And Hashem sent the fiery serpents amongst the people” (21:6)

A dog is not a very bright animal. When you throw a stick at it, it grabs the stick in its jaws and proceeds to growl and bite it.

Who threw the stick doesn't cross its little mind for an instant; it's too busy punishing the stick for attacking it.

The Talmud describes our generation, the generation of the "footsteps" of the Mashiach, as follows: "The face of the generation is like the face of a dog."

When we find ourselves threatened and attacked by a hostile world, rather than growl and bite at the stick, maybe we should consider Who it is that threw the stick at us in the first place, and why He is throwing it at us.

Sources:

Flying First Class - Divrei David, heard from Rabbi Moshe Zauderer

So Far — So Good - Malbim, heard from Rabbi Elimelech Meisels

In the Dog House - based on Chafetz Chaim

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Haftorah: Shoftim 11:1

THE HISTORIAN

An essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to comprehend truth does not make it untrue.

If someone asked us why we eat, we would answer that we must eat in order to live. If we were questioned further as to why we eat bread and not stones, we would answer that stones don't contain the necessary nutrients to sustain life. However, *why* humans need these particular nutrients, and — that we would not be able to explain, for that only Hashem knows. The fact that we do not understand these processes in no way mitigates their manifest truth.

Even though we eat to stay alive, Hashem created the world in such a way that our food also has a pleasing taste and aroma. But that taste should never be confused with our reason for eating.

MITZVOS ARE SPIRITUAL FOOD FOR THE NESHAMA

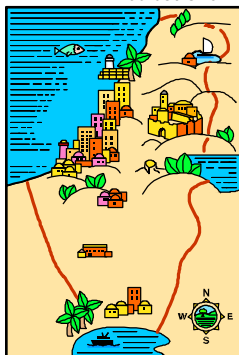
Hashem wanted the *mitzvos* to be palatable, so He infused them with taste — ideas and lessons — that we can understand. However, we should never confuse the *taste* of a mitzvah with its real reason, as we should never eat merely to satisfy our taste buds. For why or how a particular mitzvah sustains our soul, we cannot know, anymore than we know why a particular protein sustains our body.

Just as in the Parsha this week, we are left uncomprehending the law of the *parah adumah* — the workings of the spiritual world — so too are the workings of history mysterious to all except He who writes history. Thus, the Haftorah depicts the “unhistorical” rise of Yiftach to the position of chief despite his lowly beginnings.

Rabbi Zev Leff, Rabbi Mendel Hirsch

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



STONES LIKE IRON

“...A land whose stones are iron” (Devarim 8:9)

The simple meaning of this praise of *Eretz Yisrael* is that it is rich in metals. The places in it where you expect to find only stones you will find metal deposits. But the *Jerusalem Targum* offers another perspective: The land is rich in stones as solid as metal which will enable you to build stone houses, walls and towers, unlike many other lands which lack such material and must settle for flimsy structures.

Ramban, Commentary on the Torah

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