

The Shovel and the Red Heifer

Chukas, 5781

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Our portion this week, Chukas, begins with the phrase, “zos chukas hatorah, this is the law of the Torah” (19:2). Onkelos (ca. 35-120 CE) translates this phrase into Aramaic as, “da gezeiras oraita, this is the decree of the Torah.”

The word used by Onkelos, *gezeira*, often connotes a harsh decree from Hashem. There is a sad tradition that connects this translation of Onkelos to a terrible event in Jewish history that took place on the eve of parashas Chukas, on June 17, 1242. On that date, as part of the Church’s effort to convert the Jewish people, 24 wagonloads of sacred books were burned in Paris. Some estimate that this consisted of over 10,000 sacred texts and some scholars maintain that the medieval Jewish community of Northern France never fully recovered from this tremendous loss.

In his gloss to the Shulchan Arukh, R. Avraham Gombiner notes that to commemorate this tragic occurrence it is a practice for some individuals to fast on the Friday before we read Chukas:

“The Tania writes, that on the Friday before we read Chukas, there are some individuals that have the custom to fast. For on this day, 20 wagons of books were burned in France. The fast was connected to a Friday and not to a specific date in the month because from a dream it was revealed that the day of the week caused this decree of the Torah, as Onkelos translates, ‘this is the decree of the Torah’” (Magan Avraham, 580:9). (The rabbinic tradition is that the Jewish books were burned in Paris on Friday.)

Onkelos’ translation of “chukas” as “decree” is in line with the concept that the word “chok” means a rule from Hashem that is commanded to us without logical explanation.

The concept that Hashem commands us to do certain rules that have no explanation is something we encountered in our daf yomi studies this week:

The Sages taught with regard to the verse: “You shall do My ordinances (mishpatai), and you shall keep My statutes to follow them, I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 18:4), that the phrase: My ordinances, is a reference to matters that, even had they not been written, it would have been logical that they be written. They are the prohibitions against idol worship, prohibited sexual relations, bloodshed, theft, and blessing God, a euphemism for cursing the Name of God. The phrase: And you shall keep my statutes (chukotai), is a reference to matters that Satan and the nations of the world challenge because the reason for these mitzvot are not known. They are: The prohibitions against eating pork; wearing garments that are made from diverse kinds of material, i.e., wool and linen; performing the ḥalitza ceremony with a yevama, a widow who must participate in a levirate marriage or ḥalitza; the purification ceremony of the leper; and the scapegoat. And lest you say these have no reason and are meaningless acts, therefore the

verse states: “I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:4), to indicate: I am the Lord, I decreed these statutes and you have no right to doubt them (Yoma, 67b).

This text of the Talmud lists those laws of the Torah which are called *chukim*—decrees of the Torah that defy logical explanation. Although this text surprisingly does not list the opening subject of our parasha – the red heifer (*parah adumah*) -- the text of our portion clearly calls *parah adumah* a *chok*, and Rashi in his commentary (19:2), directly connects this passage from the Talmud to the ritual of the *parah adumah*. (See Maharsha for a discussion of why *parah adumah* is omitted from this list of *chukim* in the Talmud.)

Not only does the Torah call *parah adumah* a *chok*, it is perhaps **the** paradigmatic *chok*. For example, Shlomo Hamelekh said that he could explain the entire Torah except for the unexplainable ritual of the *parah adumah* (see below, and see Yoma, 14a).

What is the purpose and process of this ritual known as *parah adumah* or, alternatively, *mei chataas*?

The purpose of the ritual is to purify a person who has come in direct contact with a dead body. If a person has contacted the dead body then he or she is considered, *tamei mes*, ritually impure from a dead body, and is unable to eat sacred food and is not permitted to enter into the courtyard of the Beit Hamikdash. In order to remove this severe *tumah*, the ritual of *parah adumah* is required.

This ritual requires the court purchasing a cow and sprinkling its ashes on the *tamei* person. The cow must:

- a) Be entirely red by the time it is three years old;
- b) Never have had a yoke on its back
- c) Have no disqualifying blemishes.

The cow was slaughtered outside of the Temple on the Mount of Olives by a non kohen under the watchful eye of the deputy Kohen Gadol (Rashi, 19:3). The blood of the cow was then sprinkled by a kohen 7 times towards the Beit Hamikdash. After that, the cow was burned in a fire along with cedar wood, hyssop, and a crimson thread. The ashes of the cow were then collected, stored, and eventually mixed with spring water and sprinkled on the person who is *tamei* on days three and seven of the purification week.

Although Rashi calls this mitzvah a *chok*—i.e. a mitzvah without explanation—he himself shares a symbolic explanation of the ritual in the name of Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan:

A Midrashic explanation I have copied from the work of R. Moses the Preacher, and this is: AND THEY SHALL TAKE UNTO THEE — They shall take from that which is their own: just as they divested themselves of their golden earrings for making of the calf — i.e., of that which was their own, so shall they bring this calf-like animal as an atonement from that which is their own.

A RED COW — Why this rite was performed with a cow may be exemplified by a parable it may be compared to the case of a handmaid's child that defiled the king's palace. They said: Let the mother come and wipe up the excrement. Similarly here: since they became defiled by a calf, let its mother (a cow) come and atone for the calf.

RED — It had to be red in allusion to the idea contained in the text (Isaiah 1:18): "Though they (your sins) be red as scarlet [they shall become as white as snow]" — so you see that sin is termed red.

PERFECT — in allusion to the Israelites who were perfect but through it (the calf) became morally maimed: let this perfect animal come and atone for them so that they may regain their state of perfection.

[A COW] UPON WHICH NEVER CAME A YOKE — just as they cast off themselves the yoke of Heaven.

TO ELEAZAR THE PRIEST — just as they gathered together against Aaron who was a priest to force him to make the golden calf. But because Aaron had made the calf this rite was not entrusted to him that it should be carried out by him, because the prosecuting counsel cannot become the defending counsel (Rosh Hashanah 26a; cf. Rashi on Leviticus 16:4; Aaron who had caused the sin was not a fitting person to atone for it: therefore the rite had to be performed by another priest, viz., by Eleazar).

AND ONE SHALL BURN THE COW, just as the calf was burnt (Exodus 32:20).

CEDAR WOOD AND HYSSOP AND CRIMSON — These three species correspond to the three thousand men who fell by the edge of the sword on account of the golden calf. The cedar is the loftiest of all trees and the hyssop the lowliest of all — a symbol that the man of high position who displays pride and on that account falls into sin should make himself as lowly as the hyssop and the worm (תולעת), and he will then gain atonement.

[IT SHALL BE] KEPT [FOR THE CONGREGATION OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL], just as the transgression of the calf is kept in remembrance for all future generations for punishment, for there is no visitation of Israel in which there is not something of the visitation of the sin caused by the calf, as it is said, (Exodus 32:34) "On the day when I visit I will visit [their sin upon them]" (cf. Rashi on that verse, and Sanhedrin 102a; Yerushalmi Taanit 14). And just as the calf rendered unclean everyone who busied himself with it (cf. Avodah Zarah 32b), so, too, does the cow make unclean all who busy themselves with it. And just as they (Israel) were purified by its dust (Exodus 22:20), similarly it states, (v. 17) "And for an unclean person shall they take of the dust of the burnt cow of purification, etc" (Rashi, 19:22).

Since there are standard symbolic explanations of this mitzvah, why does the Torah call it a *chok*?

The answer to this question appears in a discussion that we recently encountered in our daf yomi studies. The Talmud records that when Shlomo Hamelekh says in Kohelet, "I said I am wise, but this eludes me," he was referring to the ritual of the *parah adumah* (Kohelet, 7:23). In other words, the wisest man of all, Shlomo Hamelekh, understood the whole Torah, except for the *parah adumah*. However, the Talmud points out that this does not mean that the whole ritual was a complete riddle to him. It just means that there was one specific aspect of the

ritual that he didn't understand. The Talmud records a dispute between the Rabbis and Rabbi Akiva as to what exactly was the one aspect that Shlomo Hamelekh did not understand:

What is taught by the phrase: Upon the impure person? Learn from it that if he sprinkled on the impure person, that person becomes pure; but if he sprinkled on the pure person, that person becomes impure. And the Rabbis say with regard to that phrase: It comes to teach that it is only considered sprinkling if it is performed on items susceptible to impurity. However, here, with regard to sprinkling purification water on a pure person, it is derived through an a fortiori inference that he remains ritually pure: If the water falls on the impure person, he is pure; if the water falls on the pure person, all the more so is it not clear that he remains pure? And Rabbi Akiva would respond to that a fortiori inference: That is what King Solomon said: "I said I would become wise, but it eludes me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). According to tradition, even Solomon in his great wisdom could not understand the contradictory nature of the sprinkling of purification water that purifies an impure person and impurifies a pure person. And the Rabbis ascribe Solomon's bewilderment to a different aspect of the halakha: The one who sprinkles the water and the one upon whom one sprinkles the water are pure; but one who touches the water unrelated to sprinkling is impure (Yoma, 14a).

As part of our daf yomi studies, I noticed one more symbolic aspect of the *parah adumah* ritual.

The Talmud tells us that slaughter of the *parah adumah* had to take place outside of the Beit Hamikdash, and indeed outside of Jerusalem (Yoma 68a). We often think of the *parah adumah*, as a sacrifice, but there are clearly elements of it that distinguish it from a typical sacrifice. In addition to the fact that it was done outside of the Temple, it is also noteworthy that the service was not supposed to be done by the Kohen Gadol. Normally the Kohen Gadol could choose to do whatever sacrificial service he wanted. In this case he was not supposed to be involved in the *parah adumah*. Furthermore, typically the blood of the slaughtered animal was applied to the altar. Not so in this case. The blood of the *parah adumah* never enters Jerusalem.

The key point of the *parah adumah ritual* is that this entire purification process must take place outside the Beit hamikdash and even outside Jerusalem. We might have thought that the purification process can only occur in the holiest of places—the Beit Hamikdash. That is not the case. The opposite is true.

There is a story told about my zeydie, the holy Noam Elimelech, that explains why the ultimate ritual of purification can only take place outside of the Beit Hamikdash.

One time there was a man named Avraham who after spending most of his adult life in business, decided he wanted to devote himself to studying Torah on a full-time basis. He discussed the matter with his wife and she agreed to run the family business while he studied Torah. The next day, Avraham, showed up to study Torah with the great Reb Elimelekh. He heard Reb Elimelekh say that sometimes even an accidental sin can cause a great spiritual hole in one's heart. On the other hand, Reb Eliemelekh ALSO said that if someone can somehow go

24 hours straight without telling a lie, that person will surely be guaranteed a place in the World to Come.

When Avraham heard this, he rushed home and told his wife and family that he needed to go 24 straight hours without telling a lie. He said he was going to lock himself in his room for the next 24 hours and therefore he asked that his family members deliver his meals to him by placing them outside his door. Avraham was so intent on not telling a lie that he refused to even go to sleep, lest he tell a lie in his dreams.

The next morning, before his family had awakened, Avraham heard a knock on the front door. Not wanting his family to be awakened by the knocking, he rushed to see who was at the door. It turned out that a local peasant was at the door. The peasant looked at the surprised Avraham and asked: "Can I please have my shovel?" Avraham responded that he didn't have his shovel. The peasant kept pressing the matter and Avraham kept insisting that he had, in fact, no shovels at all in his house. The peasant said, "You are a lying Jew. My shovel is in your house. Last night I was on my way to the tavern and I needed to borrow money, so I gave your wife the shovel as a deposit." Just then Avraham's wife came running out with the peasant's shovel to return it to him. Indeed, the peasant had been telling the truth.

Avraham was devastated to learn that he had had accidentally lied. He returned to Reb Elimeleh notably shaken. Reb Elimelekh said to him, "When we sin accidentally, sometimes Hashem is sending us a message that we are acting improperly. Please tell me what has made you so upset."

After Avraham told Reb Elimelekh the story, Reb Elimelekh told him that the message was clear. He said, "When the tradition teaches that you have a share in the World to Come if you go 24 hours without lying, that doesn't mean that one should seclude themselves for those 24 hours. It means that one must live in the world and still not lie. You should not have quit your job in order to study Torah full time and thereby burden your wife with extra work. You should return to your business at once and continue to study Torah when you are not busy working. If you had not secluded yourself from life then you would not have lied about the shovel!"

The concept of the *parah adumah* teaches us that in order to truly achieve purification we need to be immersed in the world. It is for this reason that the ultimate purification process of our faith takes place outside the Temple and on a mountaintop outside the city. The purification we seek is not a purification of isolation and seclusion, but rather a purification that comes from immersion in the world. It is only by leaving the confines of the Temple and Jerusalem that we can achieve the ultimate path to purification.

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