

David Schiller - DVAR TORAH : CHUKAT – BALAK

Harvey Schiller's 95th Birthday

Shabbat Shalom, Happy Birthday Dad, and welcome to friends and family from near and far.

This week's Parsha was long and loaded with compelling topics for a dvar Torah. We never had a talking donkey, therefore I discarded that topic.

A sidenote: we lived in Israel in the shadow of the Bashan, mentioned in this Parsha. Bashan's king was named Og, also named in the Parsha. He was a very large man. A dog on our Kibbutz was named Og. It was the largest dog I've ever seen. The kibbutz was non-orthodox and very secular. It is special in Israel that non-orthodox modern Israelis live and breathe the history, from the places on which they walk right down to the names of their dogs. Biblical!

Now to the main topic:

The puzzling rule about the red heifer for purification is a "chok" in today's reading in the Torah. Why not a purple pigeon? Why not a chartreuse cheetah?

Why must there be a red heifer for purification and why do we need under certain circumstances purification anyway? Chokim in the Tanach have no rational explanations. Some translations use the word statute, but "statute" is a word we use for a rule that is discussed, debated, then legislated.

The better translation of the Biblical Hebrew word "chok" is "decree." A decree is an official order from an authority that may have no rational basis in human reason.

It is arbitrary.

Driving on the right side of the road in the United States is an example. Our democratic cousins in the British Isles decreed "left." Why different? Did Isaac Newton prove that horse drawn carriages moving on the left of a road is as immutable as his law of gravity?

Both arbitrary decrees create orderly traffic patterns.

The answer from the authority for why there is any particular decree is: **"because I said so."**

"Chokim" give us orderly traffic patterns, or "guidelines" to live and find balance in this infinite universe. They enable us to navigate a chaotic world in which we are bombarded by events beyond our control and beyond our understanding.

Each time a human enters the world, he or she can't invent a path. It is helpful and instructive to have guide rails, like in a bowling alley to help the young or the physically challenged. Without the guide rails, even a perfectly healthy human specimen can suffer a gutter ball. We don't want gutter balls. And if we are dealt a gutter ball playing without the guide rails, there is a "Chok" to help us through the crisis: Shabbat on the seventh day is a "chok." Shabbat is a respite that helps us through tough as well as good times.

The rules of Kashrut are chokim, too. God might have decreed "you may not eat fish with scales, and you must eat meat with milk, and no beef for you, only ham sandwiches." Of course, then we Jews in America would be making jokes about secretly savoring prohibited flanken and gefilte fish. But such was NOT the decree.

Kashrut is about limits to our human authority. Rabbi Eisen from Beth El explained years ago on Rosh HaShana that “the Earth is NOT ours...we lovingly acknowledge God’s decree to eat those things God created and allotted for us to kill for our nourishment. There are limits. We did not create the food. We can’t take whatever we want. We are not masters of the universe.

Did any of us have rules about taking from the cookie jar? Mom baked them, but she decreed a “chok” about how and when the cookies may be enjoyed. Why not a cookie for breakfast? Most responsible parents would answer: **“Because I said so.”** (*My dear wife still enforces that rule for me.*)

A second highlight from today’s Torah portion is about following instructions. We read this morning about a few hundred thousand Jews in the desert complaining (now **THAT IS A TRADITION!!!**) to Moshe. They are in the desert and they are thirsty. They demonstrate.

God gives Moshe and Aharon clear instructions for the solution. Moshe takes his rod as instructed, but scoffs at the thirsty Jews then strikes the rock twice. Moshe was instructed to **speak** to the rock as God’s emissary, which was all that was necessary to cause the water to flow. God had no intention to not provide water, but Moshe appeared to be grandstanding and inadvertently made it look like he, Moshe, caused the water to flow. Moshe did not do as instructed, therefore was severely punished by the “Higher Authority” he carelessly upstaged.

Maimonides commented: Moshe failed to respect the people and might have demoralized them. The people might have concluded that if Moshe was angry with them, so too was God. They merely asked for water. Moshe may have conveyed to the people an impression that God was angry with them, therefore Moshe failed to sanctify God’s Name.

Follow instructions, Moshe!

The Chokim we discussed AND the Mishpatim (the ethical and legal rules in the Torah) detail instructions that inform us, make us stronger, and guide us in an uncertain world.

With apologies to both Isaac Newton and to Maimonides, allow me to demonstrate the balance that Chokim and Mishpatim give us in our Lives:

(BALANCING A POTATO DEMONSTRATION)

Can’t balance the potato on this stick.....but if we add Chokim (one fork) on this side of the potato and mishpatim (a second fork) on the other, even the potato can find balance, before it becomes a latke!

https://www.google.com/search?q=balancing+potato+on+a+stick+two+forks&rlz=1C1ONGR_enUS952US952&oq=balancing+potato+on+a+stick+two+forks&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRigAdIBCTEzMTUzajFqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:913f13a5,vid:xx5DTyScRj4

In the matter of instructions, we know Dad would have followed G-d’s instructions to speak to the rock.

To chronicle the – so far - 95 years of Dad’s life would require, well, a new Book of Chronicles! The “SparkNotes” version follows, and all these activities required detailed instructions.

Nobody I know reads, understands, and follows instructions like Dad.

- 1. Newspaper delivery boy (must be on time),**

2. Boy Scout (lots of instructions through his Eagle Scout)
3. Hebrew school, expelled because did not follow an instruction Go ahead - ask Dad about THAT during the Kiddish!
4. Soldier
5. Pharmacist
6. Photographer
7. Martial arts student
8. Runner
9. JCC volunteer
10. Israel volunteer
11. Bicyclist
12. Cartoonist
13. Sailor
14. Freemason (lots of instructions here!)

All these activities with so many instructions and guide books gave him the experience and authority to share and apply useful instructions to us, too.

His instruction to us all today is, enjoy the Kiddish to celebrate with him!

Shabbat Shalom.

David Schiller davidLschiller@gmail.com