



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Chukat - Balak

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The Importance of the Hidden Commandments

By Josh Dressler

זאת חקת התורה אשר צוה יהוה לאמר דבר
אל בני ישראל ויקחו אליה פרה אדמה תמימה
אשר אין בה מום אשר לא עלה עליה על:
(Bamidbar 19:2)

*This is the statute that God has
commanded: Instruct the Israelite people
to bring you a red heifer without blemish,
in which there is no defect and on which
no yoke has been laid.*

זאת חקת התורה. לפי שהשטן ואמות העולם
מונין את ישראל, לומר מה המצוה הזאת ומה
טעם יש בה? לפיכך כתב בה חקה — גזרה היא
מלפני, אין לה רשות להרהר אחריה
(Rashi, Yoma 67b; cf. Midrash Tanchuma,
Chukat 7)

*THIS IS THE STATUTE OF THE TORAH
— Because Satan and the nations of the
world taunt Israel, saying, "What is this
command and what reason is there for it",
on this account Scripture writes the term
statute about it, implying: It is an
enactment from before Me; you have no
right to criticize it.*

God instructs *Moshe* to tell the Jewish people the commandment of the red heifer. *Rashi* seems to question why the Torah uses the word "statute" instead of other wording more commonly used and explains that a statute means there is no logical reason to it. He continues to note that, despite the fact that the nations of the world will mock you for observing it, you do not have the right to question God's commandments. It might feel a bit unsettling to be instructed to observe a commandment that doesn't have a logical reason or make sense, yet we are instructed to do so and don't have the right to criticize it, all this while the other nations of the world taunt us.

With this in mind, it is fascinating to consider how this *Rashi* appears to contradict a verse in *Devarim*.

ראה! למדתי אתכם חקים ומשפטים כאשר
צוה יהוה אלהי לעשות פן בקרב הארץ אשר
אתם באים שמה לרשתה:

*See, I have imparted to you statutes and
rules, as my God has commanded me, for
you to abide by in the land that you are
about to enter and occupy.*

ושמרתם ועשיתם כי הוא חכמתכם ובינתכם
לעיני העמים אשר ישמעו את כל החקים האלה
ואמרו רק עם חכם ונבון הגוי הגדול הזה:
(Devarim 4:5-6)

*Observe them faithfully, for that will be
proof of your wisdom and discernment to
other peoples, who on hearing of all these
statutes will say, "Surely, that great nation
is a wise and discerning people."*

This verse states that the nations of the world will hear of the statutes and say the Jewish people are a "wise and discerning" people, an apparent contradiction to *Rashi*, who said they would taunt us.

Rabbeinu Bahya's analysis of this verse provides an answer.

"ALL THESE STATUTES." —We would have expected Moses to say אֵת כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה, — *all these commandments*. Why did he mention only the statutes? The fact is that not only do the Gentile nations not praise the Jewish people for these statutes they observe, but they make fun of us for performing laws the value of which we do not comprehend. However, when the nations observe that by performing the commandments which do make sense to us, the Jewish people have achieved a position of great prominence and conduct themselves in an organized and correct fashion that is appropriate and straight, they reason that there must also be hidden values to the statutes even though such meanings defy our logic. They realize that the Torah does not contain any meaningless laws, כִּי לֹא־דָבָר רַק הוּא, — *it is not something empty, devoid of meaning and value*. This is why the Torah quotes the nations as saying: "this must be a wise and learned discerning people." The words רַק, — *only*, is their admission that the Jewish people are the only people qualifying for such a compliment.

Rabbeinu Bahya's explanation sheds light on this apparent contradiction. The nations will taunt us over the statutes, but once they see how by observing the logical commandments, the Jewish people conduct themselves in an appropriate and proper fashion, they will say even the statutes that seemingly make no sense must have inherent value and meaning.

What a lesson for us to take to heart!

God has our best interest in mind with all commandments, even those that seemingly defy logic, and therefore must have a deeper meaning. The commandments condition us as a people and as individuals to act appropriately and righteously, and they can change the gentile's perspective from taunts to praise.

Josh spent several years post-high school learning in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim. He is an accountant at Chestnut Holdings in Riverdale and has lived for 6 years in Scarsdale with his wife, Miriam, and their two children, Noah and Liana.

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