



Parshas Chukas

For the week ending 7 Tammuz 5757
11 & 12 July 1997

R. Gedaliah Dovid Ben Isser Henry of Manchester England on the occasion of his Yahrzeit 7 Tammuz

Overview

The laws of the Parah Adumah — the red heifer — are detailed. These laws of ritual purification are to be used when someone has come into contact with death. After the nation “wanders” for nearly 40 years in the desert, Miriam passes away and is buried at Kadesh. The people complain about the loss of their water supply which until then has been provided for them miraculously in the merit of Miriam’s righteousness. Aaron 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 from it. 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 power over the world which would have resulted if the rock had produced water as a result of him only speaking to it. Therefore, Hashem tells Moshe and Aaron that they will not bring the people into the Land. The 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 Mt. Hor, Aaron passes from this world and his son Elazar is invested with his priestly garments and responsibilities. Aaron was beloved by all the people, and they observe a national mourning period of 30 days. The 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

THE RIGHT CLUB

“Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice.” (20:11)

If you’ve ever played golf, you’ll know how important it is to choose the right club. By ‘club,’ I don’t mean what sort of society to mix in; rather the tool of preference to move the ball from the tee to the hole most accurately and efficiently.

If you’re on the fairway, you probably need a wooden club. If you use an iron club, you’ll be wasting your energy, because the power of your swing will not connect with the ball to its maximum efficiency.

On the other hand if you are in a sand trap, you’ll need a heavily angled iron to chip the ball back onto the grass fairway. If you use a wood, it will be next to useless. It all depends on using the right tool for the job.

A Jew’s ‘club’ is his voice. So much of what we do, we do with our voices: Prayer, Torah study, blessings.

As Yitzchak said when he felt Yaakov’s arms covered with goatskins, **“The voice is the voice of Yaakov, and the hands are the hands of Esav.” (Bereishis 26:22)**

The Voice is given to Yaakov. And the Hands, to Esav. The internal power which emanates from the heart — that’s the Voice, the external power of action. The Hand is the domain of Esav.

In our times, it is Esav who sends men to the moon, who builds cities of glass and steel that scrape the sky, who plumbs the depths of the ocean trenches. Esav knows how to use his hands. And while Yaakov can also vie with Esav in these fields, when he does, he’s really not playing with his ideal ‘club.’

When Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, he was sending out a message which contradicted the fundamental essence of the Jewish People. It was as if he was saying: “The voice isn’t adequate. You need to use Esav’s skills, Esav’s hands.”

The power of the Jewish People is not in its arms. It is in its voice.

The voice lifted up in prayer. The voice of concern and brotherhood. The voice of Torah ringing from the halls of study.

That’s the only ‘club’ of which we need to be members.

A WING AND A PRAYER

“This is the decree (chok) of the Torah...” (19:2)

The mitzvah of the Parah Adumah (red heifer) is the quintessential ‘chok’ or decree which defies human understanding.

The world is like a 747. No pilot would dream of getting behind the control column of a 747 until he knows how to fly his craft in all kinds of weather and under all conditions. He has to know how to take off, to land, to trim the ailerons. He has to know what every button and switch in front of him can and cannot do. He has to be a professional. The lives of 500 people are hanging on his judgment and experience.

In much the same way, every Jew is a ‘pilot.’ We have to know how to fly the 747 of life. Every halacha is like a switch in that 747 cockpit, and only with the guidance of the Torah can we navigate life’s airways without nose-diving into the sea.

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We can never understand the depth of a mitzvah, for a mitzvah is an expression of the Will of the Creator, and transcends the knowledge of His creations. But we know that the *mitzvos* are the control panel to the spiritual world.

We can never know how a mitzvah works, but this mustn't interfere with our precision and care in doing them. A pilot does not have to know *why* his plane flies through the sky. But he has to know *how* to fly the plane. The fact that he cannot explain *why* the air passing under the wings should cause the plane to fly in no way detracts from his diligence as he sits on top of two tons of metal hurtling down the runway at over 100 mph. At that moment he's not the slightest bit concerned that he doesn't understand how flight works. He knows that unless he performs flawlessly, *this flight* will certainly not work!

THE LAST OF THE KIDDUSH WINE “...pure red heifer” (19:2)

It's difficult for us to imagine, but not so long ago, there were ordinary-looking people who displayed extraordinary powers.

There are literally hundreds of stories of Jews in the Second World War who risked and surrendered their lives, rather than transgress the smallest commandment of the Torah. One of these holy souls was Rabbi Shmuel David Ungar, the spiritual leader of Nitra. Rabbi Ungar had a reputation as a holy person and a great teacher that reached far beyond his native Slovakia.

In early 1944, Rabbi Ungar fled to the woods around Nitra to escape deportation by the Fascists. Even though he faced acute hunger, he refused to make the smallest compromise in his observance of Jewish Law.

As the weeks went by, he became weaker and weaker. A friend managed to find some grapes (Heaven only knows from where) and begged him to eat them. He replied “How can I eat them now? If I use them now, I won't have wine to make Kiddush on Friday night. Should a Jew enjoy grapes if he has no wine to sanctify the next Shabbos?” When winter came, his health started to fail. Nevertheless, he still spent hours learning Torah at the mouth of his bunker, despite the heavy snow and the bitter cold. Suffering from starvation and exposure, Rabbi

Ungar passed from this world a few weeks before the fall of the Third Reich.

The Talmud relates the story of a non-Jew, Dama ben Nesina, who possessed a precious jewel needed to replace a stone missing from the breastplate of the *Kohen Gadol*. The Sages came to him and offered him a fortune for the stone, but he would not sell it to them because the key to the safe in which the jewel was kept was under the head of his sleeping father. He would not wake his father, even for a king's ransom.

Because he was prepared to give up so much to honor his father, he was rewarded that a red heifer was born into his flock, and he sold that animal to the Sages for the same amount that he had forfeited.

Why was Dama ben Nesina rewarded specifically by a *Parah Adumah* being born into his flock?

The role of the Jewish People is to be a “Nation of priests and a holy people,” singled out from the rest of the nations by their exemplary behavior. So, when Dama ben Nesina, a non-Jew, demonstrated such self-sacrifice to honor his father, it awakened an accusation in the Heavenly courts against the Jewish People. For here was a non-Jew whose devotion to the mitzvah of honoring his father was at least equal to that of the Jews, and where was the exemplary difference of the Jewish People?

Thus, the red heifer which was bought from him by the Sages demonstrated that even though Dama ben Nesina was capable of giving up a fortune for a mitzvah that *logic* dictates, the Jewish People are prepared to give up an equal fortune for a mitzvah *that is infinitely beyond the grasp of human logic*, merely because it is the Will of Hashem.

And a holy Jew, freezing in a Slovakian winter, to whom logic says eat the grapes and worry about Shabbos later, has the power to ignore the gnawing pains of hunger in his stomach. All, so that he will not miss the chance of sanctifying the day of Shabbos and He who created it.

Sources:

A Wing And A Prayer - Rabbi Simcha Wasserman, zatzal
The Last Of The Kiddush Wine - Mayana shel Torah, “The Unconquerable Spirit”

Haftorah: Shoftim 11:1-33

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 nutrients, and *why* we can't extract them from stones — *that* we would not be able to explain, for that only Hashem knows. The fact that we don't understand these processes does not in any way mitigate 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 (soul).

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, just 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.

In this week's Parsha, Man is 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 beginning in life.

Rabbi Zev Leff, Rabbi Mendel Hirsch

Fatherly Advice - tidbits from the Ethics of the Fathers traditionally studied on Summer Sabbaths

Let your home be a gathering place for the Sages.

Rabbi Yossi ben Yoezer, Avos 1:4

Do not attach yourself to a wicked man.

Nitai HaArbeli, Avos 1:7

The impact of environment is the common denominator of these two bits of fatherly advice. When sages seek a place to confer make your home available to them for it is inevitable that you will pick up some wisdom from them just as it is inevitable that one who enters a spice shop must carry out some fragrance with him even if he makes no purchase.

In similar fashion we must avoid the company of the wicked even if we do not behave like them, because one who enters a tannery will carry out an unpleasant odor even if he makes no purchase.

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