**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Rashi, in his famous comments to the opening of Parashat Chukat, notes that the Torah introduces the law of *para aduma* – the red heifer, whose ashes were used for purification – with the phrase, “*Zot chukat ha-Torah*” – “This is the statute of the Torah.” The term “*chok*,” as the Gemara (Yoma 67b) teaches, refers to commands whose underlying reasons elude our comprehension, and must be observed as an immutable decree of God despite our inability to understand their value. The term is used in reference to *para aduma*, Rashi writes, because “*Satan* and the nations of the world pressure Israel, saying, ‘What is this command?’” (In some versions of Rashi’s commentary, this passage continues, “What reason does it have?”) The Torah emphasizes that the command of *para aduma* is a “*chok*,” a law whose reason eludes our understanding, and must be observed despite the pressure exerted by our natural inner resistance (“*Satan*”) and by our religious adversaries.

Many later writers raised the question of how to reconcile this remark with Rashi’s comments later, in concluding the section of the *para aduma* (19:22), bringing a comprehensive symbolic approach to the *para aduma* ritual in the name of Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan. This approach explains that this *mitzva* serves to atone for the sin of the golden calf. The use of a cow – the mother of a calf – for a *mitzva* is a symbol of a mother cleaning the mess left by her infant. Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan proceeded to explain several details of the *para aduma* ritual as symbolic of various aspects of the sin of the golden calf. For example, the requirement that the *para aduma* must have never been harnessed to a yoke of any kind represents *Benei Yisrael*’s removal of their yoke of submission to God at the time of the golden calf. The question thus arises, if Rashi himself brings a thorough explanation of the symbolic meaning of the *para aduma*, then why does he consider it a “*chok*,” a law whose reasoning eludes us and to which we therefore might have some trouble committing ourselves?

One answer that has been suggested is that *para aduma* is an inscrutable “*chok*” precisely in the sense that it provides atonement for the golden calf. Both our rational instincts and our adversaries tell us that we are forever victims of our past mistakes, that a sin as grave as the golden calf – when we betrayed God just weeks after He revealed Himself at Sinai – leaves an indelible stain. More generally, we often find it difficult to move on after making a serious mistake, or after a grave failure. We are convinced that our “mess” can never be “cleaned,” that the effects of our mistake are destined to remain with us forever. We think this way because it makes sense. After all, the past cannot be undone, and everything we experience has some effect upon us, discernible or otherwise. However, the “*chukat ha-Torah*” establishes that all “messes” can be “cleaned,” that our grave mistakes can be corrected, that we can change course and thereby erase the stains on our record. The *para aduma*, appropriately, is used for purification – to restore the purity of a person or article that had become defiled through contact with a human corpse. The message of this *mitzva* is precisely the notion of “purification,” that we can recover from “impurity” and undergo significant change. We don’t have to understand how or why this works; we need simply to trust in this “*chukat ha-Torah*,” in the power of positive change, in our capacity to free ourselves from our past mistakes and move forward with confidence and conviction.

Sunday

The opening section of Parashat Chukat discusses the basic laws of the *para aduma*, the red heifer which was burned to prepare ashes that were used for purification. Masekhet Para, the section of the Mishna which presents the detailed *halakhot* of the *para aduma*, begins with a debate among the *Tanna’im* regarding the minimum required age of the cow used as the *para aduma*. Rabbi Eliezer maintained that once a cow reaches its second year of life, it is considered a “*para*” – adult cow – and is no longer an “*egla*” (young calf). The majority view among the *Tanna’im*, however, maintained that the Biblical term “*para*” refers to a cow that is past its second year, and thus only at this point does a young cow become qualified to be used as a *para aduma*. As we would have expected, the Rambam follows the majority opinion, and rules that the *para aduma* must have completed two years of life (Hilkhot Para Aduma 1:1).

However, the *Mishneh Le-melekh* advances the theory that at least according to one view among the *Rishonim*, Rabbi Eliezer’s view is the accepted position. The basis for this theory is the second Mishna in Masekhet Para, which discusses the definition of the term “*par*” (“bull”) with respect to sacrifices. The Mishna cites the view of Rabbi Yossi that once a male bull has completed his first year, it is considered a “*par*” and thus qualifies for sacrifices that require a “*par*.” Then, the Mishna cites the majority view among the *Tanna’im*, but the precise text of the ruling is subject to some controversy. In many common editions, the majority view comments, “even in the third year” – indicating that they agree with Rabbi Yossi that a bull in its second year qualifies already as a “*par*.” According to this version of the text, the majority view simply clarifies that the bull can be older than one year old, and can even be already in its third year. If so, the *Mishneh Le-melekh* observes, then we must seemingly conclude that the majority view in this Mishna follows Rabbi Eliezer’s view in the previous Mishna, that a young cow becomes a “*para*” already after its first year. This might indicate, then, that whereas generally *Halakha* does not follow Rabbi Eliezer’s rulings in his disputes with the other Sages, in this instance, as evidenced by the second Mishna, *Halakha* indeed accepts his position, that a young cow qualifies as a *para aduma* already in its second year.

By contrast, the Rosh and the Vilna Gaon, in their respective commentaries to Masekhet Para, claim that the correct editions of the text omit the word “*af*” (“even”) from this Mishna. According to this version of the text, the majority view in the second Mishna is consistent with the majority view of the first Mishna, and maintains that a bull must complete two years of life before qualifying as a “*par*.” If we accept this text, then there is certainly no reason to believe that *Halakha* follows the minority opinion of Rabbi Eliezer.

Yet another possibility is to distinguish between cows and bulls, and this indeed is the view of the Rambam. In Hilkhot Para, as we have seen, the Rambam follows the majority view, that the *para aduma* must be in its third year of life. However, in Hilkhot Ma’aseh Ha-korbanot (1:14), he writes that a bull qualifies as a “*par*” with respect to sacrifices already in its second year. Following the first version of the text noted above, the Rambam maintained that a young bull becomes a “*par*” already after its first year, despite ruling that a female cow becomes a “*para*” only after its second year.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted the debate among the *Tanna’im* in the first Mishna of Masekhet Para regarding the minimum age requirement for the *para aduma* – the red heifer that was slaughtered and burned to ash, which was then used for purification. Today we will look at the next part of the Mishna, where it addresses the issue of the maximum age at which a cow may be used for this purpose.

The discussion begins with the *Tanna Kama* stating that a cow in its third or fourth year may be used as a *para aduma*. Rabbi Meir then comments, “Even five,” adding that an elderly cow is theoretically qualified for use as a *para aduma*, but this should not be done due to the concern that its red hair might change colors. The *para aduma* must be entirely red, without any black-colored hair, and thus if such a cow is found, it should be slaughtered as a *para aduma* in its youth and not allowed to grow older, as some of its red hair may change color with time. Thus, even though an older cow is qualified, in practice, this should not be done.

The *Rishonim* debate the question of whether this final remark was said only by Rabbi Meir, or represents the consensus. The Rash Mi-Shantz, among others, explains that this was spoken by all *Tanna’im* – meaning, according to all views, an elderly cow is qualified for use as a *para aduma* but should preferably not be used. Rabbi Meir and the other *Tanna’im* disagree as to the age at which this *halakha* takes effect: Rabbi Meir maintains that a cow may be used through the end of its fifth year, whereas the other *Tanna’im* maintain that it may be used only through the end of its fourth year. They all agree, however, that even beyond the maximum age – whatever age that is – the cow is technically suitable, but it should preferably not be used due to the concern mentioned above. This is the position taken by the Rambam, who rules (Hilkhot Para 1:1) that a cow may be used as a *para aduma* in its fourth year, adding that beyond the fourth year it is still suitable, but the slaughtering of a red cow should preferably not be delayed until such a late age.

Others, however, including the Rosh, in his commentary to the Mishna, and the Ra’avad, in his commentary to *Torat Kohanim* (*Dibura De-chova*, 3:6), explain differently. In their view, the comment about an elderly cow being fundamentally suitable as a *para aduma* was made by Rabbi Meir, and does not represent the view of the majority. According to the other *Tanna’im*, a cow past its fourth year may not be used as a *para aduma*, and even after the fact, if it was slaughtered, it is disqualified. The reason is either because using an older cow for this *mitzva* is disrespectful (Ra’avad), or due to the aforementioned concern of some hair changing colors due to age (Rosh). In any event, according to these *Rishonim*, as opposed to the Rambam, the majority view – which is accepted as *Halakha* – does not allow the use of a *para aduma* after its fourth year, even after the fact.

Already the Rash Mi-Shantz noted the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sota (46a) where it states explicitly that old age does not disqualify a cow as a *para aduma*, seemingly providing an explicit basis for the first view cited above. However, the Rash Mi-Shatz himself responds that this might refer to the level of Torah law, as opposed to the level of Rabbinic enactment. All agree that as far as Torah law is concerned, an older cow is accepted as the *para aduma*; the debate is whether the Sages disallowed the use of such a cow only preferably, or even after the fact. Therefore, the Gemara’s remark there in Sota has no bearing on the debate at hand.

Tuesday

Many sources in *Chazal* speak of the *para aduma* – the red heifer whose ashes were used for purification – as the quintessential “*chok*,” or statute whose rationale eludes human comprehension. One of the aspects of the *para aduma* that is commonly viewed as especially mysterious is the fact that the heifer’s ashes are used for purification, but those involved in its preparation or who handle it become impure. In the words of the Rambam (Hilkhot Para Aduma 5:1), “All who are involved in the cow from the beginning until the end – their clothes are impure” – referring to the fact that both the individuals involved in making and using the ashes, and their clothing, require immersion to regain their status of purity. Although the ashes are sprinkled on people and objects that have been defiled (through contact with a human corpse) to purify them, those who prepare and sprinkle the ashes become defiled.

One approach taken to explain this anomaly appears in Rabbi Natan of Breslav’s *Likutei Halakhot* (*Hashkamat Ha-boker*, 1). Rabbi Natan viewed the *para aduma* as a symbol of the spark of goodness that exists within a person’s being regardless of whatever mistakes he has made and whatever misdeeds he has committed. The Torah requires that the cow used for the *para aduma* be perfectly unblemished, without ever having been used for any labor that could have caused some harm to its body or compromised its physical strength. The *para aduma* thus represents that element of perfection within the human soul which can never be corrupted, what Rabbi Natan calls the “*nekuda tova*” – “point of goodness” that forever exists within us even when we fail and sin.

Rabbi Natan explains that the awareness of this “*nekuda tova*” can be both beneficial and detrimental. When we find ourselves in a state of “impurity,” in times of failure and shame, the recognition of our “*nekuda tova*,” that we still possess an untarnished element of purity, is indispensable for spiritual recovery. We cannot even begin the process of return without recognizing our “*nekuda tova*,” that we still have the potential for sanctity and purity despite our grave mistakes. In this sense, Rabbi Natan writes, the *para aduma* “purifies the impure”; it facilitates our process of purification after we have fallen into a state of impurity. On the other hand, however, this awareness can potentially ruin us when we experience a state of “purity.” Under normal conditions, when we do not feel “impure,” focusing on our “*nekuda tova*” can lead to complacency or hubris. Contemplating our sacred spark that can never be extinguished could cause us to become overconfident and too comfortable with ourselves, which could then easily result in laxity in our religious commitment. And so in this sense, the *para aduma* “defiles the pure,” as our recognition of our innate goodness can cause our “defilement” by making us self-righteous and smug.

Essentially, Rabbi Natan here alerts us to both the vital necessary and grave danger of self-esteem and self-confidence. On the one hand, such feelings are vital for growth and progress; we will never begin to try to improve if we do not believe in our capacity to improve, that we are capable of being better than our current condition. But on the other hand, such feelings can have the precise opposite effect, leading us to a sense of comfort with our current selves, without sensing any need to work to become greater. We are thus urged to fully acknowledge and trust in our “*nekuda tova*,” in our innate goodness and spark of sanctity, a recognition that should lead us not to complacency, but rather to an ambitious, lifelong effort to reach higher and constantly strive to become better.

Wednesday

The first section of Parashat Chukat, which presents the basic laws of the *para aduma* (red heifer), is read each year not only as part of the standard Torah reading cycle, but also as the *maftir* reading on one of the Shabbatot in between Purim and Rosh Chodesh Nissan. This special reading of “*Parashat Para*,” as this section is known, is mentioned in the *Shulchan Arukh* along with the other special readings conducted during that time of year (O.C. 685:3).

The *Magen Avraham* commentary cites the various views concerning the source of this requirement. Whereas the conventional view is that the reading of *Parashat Para*, like virtually every other required Torah reading, was instituted by the Sages, there is an opinion that this reading constitutes a Biblical obligation, like the reading of *Parashat Zakhor* before Purim. The *Magen Avraham* notes the obvious difficulty in this position, raising the question of where the Torah makes any indication of a requirement to read *Parashat Para*. Unlike the reading of *Parashat Zakhor*, which is introduced by an explicit command – “Remember that which Amalek did to you” (Devarim 25:17), the reading of *Parashat Para* does not appear to have any basis in the Torah text.

A creative answer to this question appears in Rav Shmuel Alter’s compendium *Likutei Batar Likutei,* citing the *Artzot Ha-chayim*. Rashi, in his closing remarks to the section of the *para aduma*, cites an elaborate symbolic explanation of these laws in the name of Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, who saw the *para aduma* as a means of atonement for the sin of the golden calf. If, indeed, this is the function of the *para aduma*, then we may perhaps identify a Biblical source for the requirement to read *Parashat Para* each year. The Torah in Sefer Devarim (9:7) commands, “Remember and do not forget how you angered the Lord your God in the wilderness.” We are commanded to remember our ancestors’ sin in the wilderness with the same expression – “*zakhor*” – used to command us to recall Amalek’s assault. Conceivably, then, this verse introduces an obligation to conduct a formal reading of the story of the golden calf. We fulfill this obligation, the *Artzot Ha-chayim* explains, through the reading of the *para aduma*, the *mitzva* that serves to atone for the golden calf. Rather than read of *Benei Yisrael*’s shameful worship of a graven image at the foot of Mount Sinai just weeks after the Revelation, we instead read of the law through which that grievous sin is rectified.

The underlying premise of this insight is that if the Torah commanded us to remember our nation’s shameful past, this must be for the purpose of correcting our mistakes. Recalling the tragedy of the golden calf is not intended to bring shame upon our ancestors, but rather serves to assure us of the possibility of repairing the damage done through wrongdoing. However one chooses to explain the precise point of connection between the golden calf and the *para aduma* (a topic addressed by many writers and *darshanim*), the message being conveyed here is that a command to recall the former must involve the latter. There is no purpose served in recalling our mistakes of the past without contemplating the process of rectifying them. Reflecting on the wrongs we’ve committed has no value if it leads us to paralyzing shame and guilt; such reflection becomes significant and precious only if it leads to reflection on how our mistakes were corrected or still need be corrected, so that they can retroactively be transformed into part our lifelong process of growth and improvement.

Thursday

One of the stories told in Parashat Chukat is that of the “*nechashim ha-serafim*,” the poisonous snakes which God unleashed against *Benei Yisrael* as punishment for their grumblings while traveling. After the people repented and Moshe prayed on their behalf, God instructed him to make an image of a “*saraf*” – a poisonous snake – and put it somewhere high where the people could see it. Anyone bitten by a snake would then look upon the image and be miraculously cured.

God instructed Moshe in general terms to make an image of a “*saraf*,” but the Torah tells that Moshe chose to make a “*nechash nechoshet*” – a “copper snake.” Rashi (21:9) explains that when Moshe heard God’s instructions, he figured that since he must make an image of a snake, the common Hebrew word for which is “*nachash*,” he was presumably to make it out of copper, the Hebrew word for which is “*nechoshet*,” which strongly resembles the word “*nachash*.” Seforno explains differently, suggesting that Moshe decided upon a “*nechash nechoshet*” in order to allude to the people that through their complaints against God they resembled the “*nachash*” – the snake in *Gan Eden* who spoke against God in luring Chava to partake of the forbidden tree.

Rav Elimelekh of Lizhensk, in *Noam Elimelekh*, offers a profound symbolic interpretation of the difference between God’s command to make a “*saraf*” and Moshe’s decision to make a “*nechash nechoshet*.” The word “*saraf*” is associated with the Hebrew word for “burn,” likely referring to the painful burning sensation experienced after suffering a snakebite. Accordingly, Rav Elimelekh suggested that the image of a “*saraf*” symbolizes a person with spiritual “fire,” who has the unique ability to inspire and inject religious passion in others. The scene described in the Torah of gravely ill patients being healed upon looking at the image of a “*saraf*” thus symbolically represents the “healing” effect of uniquely inspirational figures, people of genuine piety and spiritual greatness who exert a powerful influence upon others. Moshe, however, went a step further, making a “*nachash*.” The term “*nachash*” is sometimes used to refer to the seductive “snake” within us, our innate weaknesses and frailties. Moshe’s decision to make the image of a “*nachash*” instead of a “*saraf*” points to the fact that even a “*nachash*,” those of us struggling – and occasionally failing – to overcome our negative tendencies, are also capable of bringing “healing,” of exerting a positive spiritual influence. Even if we are not on the level of “*saraf*,” where our spiritual “fire” ignites the hearts of the people around us, we can still affect them, each in our own way. And so even in our state of “*nachash*,” as we continue to struggle with our weaknesses and bad habits, we should still be seeking to place ourselves “*al neis*,” in positions that allow us to impact our fellow Jews and the world generally to whatever extent and in whichever manner we can.

Friday

As we discussed yesterday, the Torah in Parashat Chukat tells the story of the “*nechashim ha-serafim*,” the poisonous snakes which entered the Israelite camp and killed many among *Benei Yisrael* as punishment for their complaints. Forced to circumvent the territory of the Edomite Kingdom, whose king heartlessly and senselessly refused to grant them passage through its country, *Benei Yisrael* grew weary and impatient, leading them to complain about having been brought out of Egypt, and about having to subsist solely on the heavenly manna. After finding themselves assaulted by the swarm of killer snakes, *Benei Yisrael* apologized to Moshe, repented, and begged him to beseech God on their behalf. In response to Moshe’s entreaties, God instructed him to constructed an image of a snake which the people were to look upon after suffering a snakebite, from which they would then miraculously be cured.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, notes two subtle but important linguistic nuances in the Torah’s description of the punishment brought against the people. The Torah (21:6) tells that God “sent the poisonous serpents” against the people, using the verb “*va-yeshalach*” (“sent”), a slight variation of the more common form of this verb, “*va-yishlach*.” Rav Hirsch avers that whereas “*va-yishlach*” means “sent,” the form “*va-yeshalach*” means “released” or “let go.” God did not “send” the snakes against the people; He allowed them to act naturally. At all other times throughout *Benei Yisrael*’s sojourn in the wilderness, God miraculously blocked the desert serpents from doing what they would normally and naturally do – attack humans. But in response to *Benei Yisrael*’s grumblings, He released these snakes from their “chains,” as it were, allowing them to pursue their natural course, thus resulting in deadly attacks upon *Benei Yisrael*. On this basis, Rav Hirsch explains a second nuance – the definitive article “*ha*” (“the”) in the expression “***ha****-nechashim* ***ha-****serafim*,” which suggests that the Torah refers to a specific, known group of snakes. Rav Hirsch writes that the Torah speaks of the snakes that naturally lurk in the desert that would have ordinarily attacked *Benei Yisrael* throughout their sojourn in the wilderness, and were only now allowed to do as God “released” them so they could act naturally.

Rav Hirsch proceeds to apply this approach to explain the symbolic meaning of the punishment brought against the people and the manner He later remedied the situation. *Benei Yisrael* needed to look upon a snake in order to contemplate all the kindness that God had performed for them throughout the previous forty years, protecting them from all the various “snakes” – dangerous elements – that abound in the desert. This was the most effective cure for the ill of ingratitude that plagued the people, for their petty complaints about the conditions of travel. The snakebites they suffered symbolized the imaginary “sting” that we pretend to feel when life does not serve us precisely what we desire, the psychosomatic “pain” of disappointment that we experience when our wishes are not perfectly fulfilled. And the cure for this self-inflicted malady is to reflect upon all the “snakes,” all the many dangers that lurk from which we are spared every moment. In Rav Hirsch’s words:

One who had been bitten had only to fix the image of a serpent firmly in his mind so that he realizes that even when God’s gracious power will again keep the serpents at a distance he will remember that the danger is still in existence, dangers that daily and hourly the special care of God lets us escape quite unconsciously. So that every breath we take in our life is made into a fresh gift from God’s might and goodness. Nothing is so thoroughly calculated to conciliate us in the everyday disappointments in life which so easily sting us to impatience – every big prize in the lottery which God has failed to let us win – and to mix them with the exalted feeling of God having saved us, and the joy of being granted a new life, than the conviction of the abyss on the narrow edge of which the whole path of our life treads which the loving Hand of God veils from what would be our giddy sight, nothing so much but to see, to realize the *nechashim ha-serafim* which lurk invisibly on our path, and which only the Almighty Power of God knows how to impose the ban of impotence to injure us on them.

The message of this episode, then, is that we must work to cure ourselves from the unnecessary “sting” of frustration and despondency that the day-to-day rigors and disappointments of life so often cause us to feel. We do this by looking at the “snake,” at all the potential forms of suffering and hardship that we do not experience, at all that is going right in our lives, so we can live in joyous gratitude and contentment, rather than constantly worrying and complaining about what we feel is missing.

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