**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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In memory of Alice Stone, Ada Bat Avram, A"H, beloved mother, grandmother and great grandmother whose Yarzheit is 2 Tammuz.

Dedicated by, Ellen & Stanley Stone,

Jake & Chaya, Micah, Adeline, Zack & Yael, Allie,

Isaac, Ezra & Talia, Yoni & Cayley, Marc & Eliana, Adina, Gabi & Talia.

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Chukat tells of the time when God punished *Benei Yisrael* for their complaints by unleashing poisonous snakes which bit and killed many members of the nation (21:6). In response to Moshe’s prayers, God instructed him to make an image of a “*saraf*” (a kind of serpent) that snakebite victims would look at and be miraculously cured. The Torah tells that Moshe made an image of a *nachash* (snake), and the people were then healed when they looked upon the image.

Many commentators addressed the question of why God instructed Moshe to make an image of a “*saraf*” instead of that of a “*nachash*,” given that it was “*nechashim*” (“snakes”) that were killing the people at the time. And, once God did instruct Moshe to make a “*saraf*,” why did Moshe make a “*nachash*” instead?

Rabbenu Efrayim, a disciple of Rabbenu Tam, suggested that God chose against mentioning the word “*nachash*” to Moshe in order to preserve his honor. Many years earlier, right when he was chosen as leader of *Benei Yisrael*, Moshe made two mistakes for which he was punished with a snake. At the burning bush, when he initially refused to accept the mantle of leadership assigned to him, God momentarily transformed his staff into a snake (Shemot 4:3), and then he was later nearly killed by a snake after failing to circumcise his son (Shemot 4:24-25; see Rashi). God therefore decided to avoid using the word “*nachash*” in order not to remind Moshe of his past failings. In Rabbenu Efrayim’s words, God changed the word “*bishvil kevodo*” – for Moshe’s honor. Rabbenu Efrayim explains that Moshe understood this, and realized that God had actually intended that he make a “*nachash*,” and he acted accordingly.

This creative explanation reminds us that people deserve the right to have their past misdeeds forgotten. Certainly, the sinner himself should keep his past mistakes in his memory in order that he remain humble and ensure not to repeat them. Indeed, *Halakha* requires confessing each year on Yom Kippur even those transgressions which we had confessed the previous Yom Kippur (Rambam, Hilkhot Teshuva 2:8). This is inferred from King David’s proclamation after his sin with Batsheva, “*chatati negdi tamid*” – “my sin is in front of me, always” (Tehillim 51:5). Others, however, must allow his wrongdoing to be buried in the past, and even avoid making subtle allusions that might cause him embarrassment and shame for his mistakes. We are to show genuine respect and admiration for people despite the mistakes of their past, recognizing that as human beings, we are all flawed and prone to failure. Just as God, according to Rabbenu Efrayim, went to great lengths to protect Moshe’s honor by avoiding making even the subtlest allusion to his past mistakes, so must we be willing to forget people’s past wrongs, keep them in the past, and give people the honor they rightfully deserve for all the good that they’ve done.

Sunday

Parashat Chukat begins with the *mitzva* of *para aduma* – the “red heifer” which would be slaughtered and burned to produce ashes that were used for purifying people and objects that had come in contact with a human corpse.

The Midrash, in a famous passage (*Bamidbar Rabba* 19:5), lists the law of *para aduma* among the four *mitzvot* which the *yetzer ha-ra* – our sinful inclination – challenges, advancing rational objections to them. The law of *para aduma* is unusual in that the ashes are used to bring purity to those who had become impure, yet the *kohen* who sprinkles the ashes on the impure individual becomes impure (19:21). Our instinctive sense of reason questions the notion of a substance that brings purity to the impure but brings impurity to the pure. Another of these four *mitzvot* is the prohibition of *eishet ach* – marrying or cohabiting with one’s brother’s wife, even after his death. While such a union is ordinarily forbidden, it becomes a *mitzva* in the case of *yibum*, where one’s married brother dies without children. The *yetzer ha-ra* leads us to question how a relationship can be strictly forbidden in some circumstances but obligatory in others. Thirdly, the Torah forbids wearing *sha’atnez* – a combination of wool and flax – yet this becomes a *mitzva* in the context of *tzitzit*, where wool strings may be used as *tzitzit* strings for a flax garment. Finally, the *se’ir ha-mishtalei’ach* – the atonement goat sent out into the desert and killed on Yom Kippur – brought atonement for the entire nation, yet brought impurity upon the person who led it into the wilderness (Vayikra 16:26). This *mitzva*, too, is inherently paradoxical, and thus comes under challenge by our innate sense of logic.

What exactly is the logical objection to these *mitzvot* of which *Chazal* warn us in this passage?

We might have intuitively assumed that in order for an act to be considered a *mitzva*, a religiously meaningful action through which we serve our Creator, it must be perfect and pristine. Intuitively, we tend to define “good” and “bad” in absolute terms, and have trouble conceiving of something being both potentially noble and potentially offensive. An action which under certain circumstances is sinful, we might naturally think, cannot possibly be a sacred religious act under other circumstances. After all, we would instinctively assume, a sacred religious act cannot possibly be associated in any way with sin, and must be entirely detached from any sort of impropriety to have validity and spiritual significance. This is a very dangerous form of the *yetzer ha-ra*, as it can result in our excusing ourselves from *mitzvot* with the claim that we are incapable of performing them perfectly. More generally, we might be led to excuse ourselves from *mitzva* obligation altogether, figuring that we cannot achieve the requisite standard of purity. If we assume that *mitzvot* require a state of pristine perfection, then we are likely to despair from observance, unable as we are to reach, let alone maintain, such conditions of perfection.

*Chazal* here teach us to recognize and appreciate the complexity of religious life, that *mitzvot* are not performed in a vacuum of perfection, but rather in the complicated, messy context of the real world. An action which constitutes a sin under certain circumstances can be a virtuous *mitzva* act in others, because *mitzvot* are not meant to be observed under pristine, perfect conditions. The Torah was given to us flawed, problematic human beings to observe in this flawed, problematic world, and so its laws are meant to be observed under less-than-ideal conditions. Indeed, very often, we are required to perform an act which is the best option under the circumstances, even if it is not inherently perfect, and in other circumstances would be considered sinful. We must the resist the “*yetzer ha-ra*” of absolutism, the natural tendency to think of good and evil in black-and-white terms, and recognize that we serve God under the complex, imperfect conditions in which He has placed us.

(Based on [an article by Rav Oded Mittelman](http://www.vorts.co.il/?p=2987))

Monday

We read in Parashat Chukat of *Benei Yisrael*’s request to pass through the territory of the Edomite kingdom to reach the Land of Israel, and the kingdom’s adamant refusal to grant them passage. After Edom’s initial refusal, *Benei Yisrael* pledged to travel only on paved roads and to pay for any water they draw from wells along the way, assuring the king that no harm would be caused. But the king of Edom still refused, and responded by mobilizing a large army and confronting *Benei Yisrael* (20:20). The Torah then writes, “Edom refused to allow *Yisrael* to pass through its territory, so *Yisrael* turned away from it” (20:21).

Maharil Diskin raises the question of why the Torah needed to reiterate that Edom refused to grant *Benei Yisrael* passage. After all, we have already been informed that Edom rejected *Benei Yisrael*’s request and even threatened to wage war. Why do we need to be told again that “Edom refused to allow *Yisrael* to pass through its territory”?

This question led Maharil Diskin to suggest a novel reading of this verse. The simple understanding is that “*Yisrael* turned away” from Edom upon seeing the formidable army that came to confront them. Maharil Diskin, however, explains this verse differently. He writes that the Torah specifically seeks to emphasize that *Benei Yisrael* journeyed away from the Edomite border immediately upon hearing of the king’s rejection of their request. Presumably, it took some time for Edom to mobilize the large army it is described as having dispatched to threaten *Benei Yisrael*. In truth, this time-consuming and costly process was unnecessary, because *Benei Yisrael* left the area immediately after “Edom refused to allow *Yisrael* to pass through its territory.” The kingdom Edom embarrassed itself, Maharil Diskin writes, by going through the trouble of sending a large military force to confront *Benei Yisrael*, because by the time the army was dispatched, *Benei Yisrael* were already gone. The Torah emphasizes that *Benei Yisrael* left the border immediately upon hearing the king’s refusal, well before they saw the Edomite soldiers, and this was a source of embarrassment to the Edomite kingdom.

It occasionally happens that we make the same mistake as Edom, wrongly misinterpreting innocent statements and actions as threats which require a hostile response. Just as the king of Edom treated *Benei Yisrael*’s request of passage as a provocation that necessitated strong military action, we, too, sometimes wrongly ascribe acrimonious motives to people who never intended any harm or offense. And then, like Edom, we wastefully expend valuable resources, a great deal of emotional energy, in our response. The Torah tells us of Edom’s folly to instruct that before we choose a confrontational response, we should ensure that such a response is warranted, and that we are not misinterpreting innocence as provocation.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Chukat of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints after the Edomite kingdom rejected their request of passage, and were forced to circumvent the territory of Edom. They came to Moshe and cried, “Why did you bring us from Egypt to die in the wilderness, for there is no bread or water, and we loathe this worthless bread” (21:6). God punished the people by unleashing a deadly swarm of snakes that killed many members of the nation.

*Benei Yisrael* introduced their complaint by noting the absence of “bread and water,” and then clarified that although they had “bread,” in the form of manna, they “loathed” it and desired normal bread. The question arises, however, as to how they justified their charge that they had no water. As opposed to the story of Mei Meriva, which appears earlier in the parasha, where the Torah explicitly tells that the people had no water (“*ve-lo haya mayim la-eida*” – 20:2), in this instance it appears that they had water. It is commonly assumed that the rock which Moshe struck in Refidim shortly after the Exodus to produce water (Shemot 17:1-7) continued miraculously providing water until Miriam’s death, and the rock struck by Moshe at Mei Meriva continued providing water throughout the remaining year of the nation’s sojourn in the wilderness. Why, then, did the people claim that they had no water?

One possibility, perhaps, is that the people expressed their growing dissatisfaction with the supernatural conditions in which they lived in the wilderness. They had anticipated crossing through the territory of Edom and quickly arriving in *Eretz Yisrael*, where they would transition to a natural mode of existence, tilling the land and establishing an agricultural infrastructure in the land. As they found themselves backtracking to circumvent Edom, realizing that they were still far from their destination, they became exasperated and impatient with their prolonged period of supernatural living. Rather than being sustained by heavenly manna and a miraculous, traveling well, they wanted to drink rainwater and to eat bread which they produced from the earth. And thus when they complained, “There is no water,” they meant that there was no natural rainwater, and they were tired of relying on God’s supernatural provision of sustenance.

Alternatively, it has been suggested (see Rav Moshe Rubenstein’s [*Parperet Moshe*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47827&st=&pgnum=250&hilite=)) that *Benei Yisrael* complained here not about a current water shortage, but rather about their fears for the immediate future. As mentioned, the well that had miraculously provided water over the previous thirty-nine years stopped flowing when Miriam passed away, and *Chazal* explain that the water had been provided in the merit of her piety, and so it ceased once she left this world. The people thus may have feared that now that Miriam’s brother, Aharon, the *kohen gadol*, passed away, as the Torah relates several verses earlier (2:22-29), their miraculous well would once again run dry. Although there was no indication that this would happen, the people feared that they would soon find themselves without water.

If so, then *Benei Yisrael* were guilty here of two very common forms of negativity: failing to appreciate one’s blessings, and fretting about the future. They expressed their disgust with the miraculous manna which God sent them from the heavens each morning, and they expressed their baseless concern about the possibility that they would lose their water source. Indeed, these two tendencies are often correlated. When we look at our lives and our conditions with negativity, we focus on what we do not have, rather than feel content over what we do have, and we also find ourselves anxious about what the future will bring. *Benei Yisrael*’s punishment thus teaches us the importance of feeling optimistic and upbeat about both the present and the future. We should look happily and contentedly at our current conditions, imperfect as they may be, and avoid unwarranted anxiety about what the future holds.

Wednesday

Parashat Chukat begins with the law of the *para aduma* – the red heifer whose ashes were mixed with water to prepare the *mei chatat*, the special waters needed to purify people and utensils which had come in contact with a human corpse. The Torah commands slaughtering the heifer, burning it, and then mixing the ashes with water.

*Targum Yonatan*, in translating the Torah’s instructions (19:3), writes that after the *para aduma* was slaughtered, it must be inspected to assure that it does not have any of the eighteen *simanei tereifa* – fatal medical conditions that render an animal forbidden for consumption, and invalid as a sacrifice. As the *para aduma* was a quasi-sacrifice, it needed to be checked to ensure it was suitable, and thus the carcass was dissected and inspected before it could be burned for the preparation for the *mei chatat*.

Many writers noted that *Targum Yonatan*’s comments appear to directly contradict the Gemara. In Masekhet Chulin (11a), the Gemara points to the burning of the *para aduma* as one of the Biblical sources for the concept of *rov* – the rule that allows us to rely on a statistical majority for halakhic purposes. The Gemara notes the *halakha* requiring burning the *para aduma* whole, indicating that it may not be dissected before it is burned. Accordingly, there is no possibility of inspecting the cow for *simanei tereifa* before burning, and yet, the ashes are nevertheless presumed valid for preparing the purification waters. The Gemara thus invokes the law of *para aduma* as a Biblical source for the concept of *rov*, as the Torah allows us to follow the statistical majority to presume that the *para aduma* is not a *tereifa* (terminally ill animal). The Gemara’s discussion clearly works off the assumption that a *para aduma* does not have to be inspected to ascertain the absence of *simanei tereifa* – in direct contradistinction to *Targum Yonatan*’s comments in translating the laws of *para aduma* presented here in Parashat Chukat.

Several different approaches have been taken to reconcile *Targum Yonatan*’s comments with the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Chulin. Rav Yehosef Schwartz, in his [*Divrei Yosef – Rosh Ha-shani*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=30858&st=&pgnum=130&hilite=), posits that in truth, there was no requirement that the *para aduma* be burned whole. The Mishna in Masekhet Para (4:3) writes explicitly that if the *para aduma* was dismembered after its slaughtering, it remains valid. When the Gemara in Masekhet Chulin speaks of burning the cow whole, Rav Schwartz asserts, it means that one has the option of doing so, not that this is required. The Gemara draws proof to the rule of *rov* from the fact that the Torah **allows** burning the *para aduma* whole, which precludes the possibility of inspecting it for *simanei tereifa*. However, it is perfectly acceptable to dissect the *para aduma* before burning it. It stands to reason, Rav Schwartz writes, that although *Halakha* accepts the validity of a *para aduma* that was burned without being checked for *simanei tereifa*, in practice, inspections were made. The Talmud elsewhere speaks of the extreme care that was taken to ensure that the ashes of the *para aduma* would be perfectly valid without any doubts or suspicions, and we might therefore speculate that it was also thoroughly checked for *simanei tereifa*. As such, *Targum Yonatan*’s comments are perfectly consistent with *Halakha*.

Others, however, offered different explanations, following the conventional understanding, that the *para aduma* was to be burned whole, even though the ashes are valid if the cow was first dismembered. Rav Hersh Yaar, in his [*Chamudei Tzvi* (Shemot, pp. 484-5)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2189&st=&pgnum=484&hilite=), answers by noting the *berayta* cited by Tosefot in Masekhet Shabbat (22b) stating that during the period of *Benei Yisrael*’s travels in the wilderness, the cloud hovering over the *Mishkan* produced a supernatural light with which Aharon was able to see through utensils to identify their contents. Conceivably, then – as far-fetched as this might sound – the original *para aduma* prepared in the wilderness could have been inspected with this supernatural light, without dissection. Rav Yaar writes that although *Halakha* permits relying on the statistical majority, one is required to verify halakhic validity when this is possible without great inconvenience, and so in the case of the original *para aduma*, the animal was inspected through supernatural means to ascertain the absence of *simanei tereifa*.

A simpler answer is proposed by Rav Gavriel Zinner, in the introduction to his [*Nitei Gavriel – Hilkhot Nisuin* (vol. 2, p. 12)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=46546&st=&pgnum=12&hilite=). He suggests that a stricter standard of certainty was required for the first *para aduma*, because there is great value to maintaining especially high standards whenever one begins something new. Beginning a new process at a high standard sets an example of excellence that will, hopefully, leave an imprint on the entire process. And thus although the *para aduma* generally does not need to be inspected for *simanei tereifa*, the first *para aduma* was dissected and checked so that the *mitzva* of *para aduma* would begin at an especially high standard.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the discrepancy between the Gemara’s comments in Masekhet Chulin (11a) and *Targum Yonatan* in Parashat Chukat (19:3) regarding the procedure of slaughtering and burning the *para aduma* (“red heifer”). The Gemara writes that after the cow was slaughtered, it was burned whole, without being first dissected in order to verify the absence of *simanei tereifa* – fatal medical conditions. Although an animal with such conditions is disqualified as a *para aduma*, nevertheless, the Torah requires burning the cow whole and relying on the statistical majority, as most animals are generally healthy and do not have *simanei tereifa*. *Targum Yonatan*, however, writes explicitly that the cow must be inspected to verify it is not a *tereifa* before it may be burned.

Rav Azriel Hildesheimer, in [one of his published responsa](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=21352&st=&pgnum=520&hilite=), suggests that *Targum Yonatan* follows the dissenting view of Rabbi Meir, who, as cited several times in the Talmud, does not allow relying on a statistical majority in matters of *Halakha*. In his view, we must take into account the minority possibility in any situation (“*chayish le-mi’uta*”), and thus, presumably, he would require inspecting the *para aduma* to ensure its validity before it is burned. *Targum Yonatan* perhaps embraced this dissenting position, and for this reason wrote that the *para aduma* would be inspected before burning.

This possibility is discussed at greater length by Rav Zev Wolf Leiter, in his [Beit David (1:32)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2156&st=&pgnum=38). Interestingly, Rav Leiter points to other contexts where *Targum Yonatan* makes puzzling remarks which could be explained in light of Rabbi Meir’s position. One such instance appears in the context of the Torah’s discussion of divorce in Sefer Devarim (24:1), where *Targum Yonatan* writes that a divorce contract (*get*)must be written in a *Beit Din*. This *halakha* is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the Talmud, but Rav Shlomo Kluger, in *Chokhmat Shelomo* (E.H. 141), finds a subtle reference to Rabbi Meir’s requiring a *Beit Din* for divorce. In the beginning of Masekhet Gittin (2b), the Gemara comments that since most Jews (at least in Talmudic times) were proficient in the halakhic requirements of divorce, a *get* which is delivered can be presumed to have been properly written, in accordance with halakhic guidelines, and she may thus be permitted to remarry. The Gemara then adds that this is true even according to Rabbi Meir, who does not permit relying on a statistical majority, because “court scribes are proficient” in the halakhic requirements of divorce. (Practically speaking, the Gemara states, *Chazal* added stricter requirements for a *get* to be presumed valid.) Rav Kluger notes that in reference to the conventional view among the *Tanna’im*, that we may rely on a statistical majority, the Gemara writes simply that most Jews are proficient. In reference to Rabbi Meir’s position, however, the Gemara specifies that most scribes hired by *Beit Din* are proficient. This subtle but significant distinction might suggest that the Gemara implicitly assumed that Rabbi Meir requires *gittin* to be written specifically in *Beit Din*. Since there is a minority of Jews who are not proficient in the laws of divorce, Rabbi Meir, who does not allow relying on a statistical majority, requires writing *gittin* specifically in *Beit Din*, which can be assumed to ensure compliance with the relevant halakhic details. As such, it is possible that *Targum Yonatan* follows Rabbi Meir’s position, and for this reason he requires writing a *get* specifically in *Beit Din*. If so, then *Targum Yonatan* here in Parashat Chukat is consistent with his view in the context of divorce, embracing the dissenting position of Rabbi Meir, who does not allow relying on a statistical majority.

In [a different responsum (187)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2156&st=&pgnum=181), however, Rav Leiter questions this explanation of *Targum Yonatan*’s comments. Tosefot (Chulin 12a) and Tosefot Yom Tov (Taharot 3:8) claim that Rabbi Meir stated his position only on the level of rabbinic enactment; as far as Torah law is concerned, Rabbi Meir agrees that we may rely on a statistical majority. It seems difficult to explain *Targum Yonatan*’s translation of Biblical verses on the basis of a principle which was enacted by *Chazal*, and thus we should likely assume that *Targum Yonatan* requires inspecting the *para aduma* on the level of Torah law. Hence, we cannot, seemingly, explain *Targum Yonatan*’s comments on the basis of Rabbi Meir’s position.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Chukat introduces the law of *tum’at ohel*, which confers a status of *tum’a* (impurity) upon people and utensils situated under the same roof as a human corpse. This law is introduced by the Torah with the verse, “*Zot ha-Torah adam ki yamut be-ohel*” – “This is the law concerning a person who dies in a tent.” In a famous Aggadic passage, the Gemara (Berakhot 63b) interprets this verse to mean, “This is the way Torah is studied: a man dies in a tent.” The Gemara establishes on the basis of this reading that “*ein divrei Torah mitkayemin ela be-mi she-meimit atzmo aleha*” – “Words of Torah are sustained only in one who kills himself over it.” The lesson being conveyed is that who seeks to acquire Torah scholarship must be prepared to “kill himself” – to exert a great deal of hard work and effort, and sacrifice convenience and leisure, for the sake of studying.

We might wonder whether perhaps *Chazal* found some connection between this vitally important message and the context of this verse – the Torah’s discussion of *tum’at ohel*. Did the Gemara superimpose an Aggadic reading on a verse that extracts it entirely from its context, or is the message of intensive effort in Torah study somehow related to the status of impurity generated by a human corpse?

Possibly, *Chazal* here draw a comparison between the significant halakhic impact of a corpse and the influence wielded by one who “kills himself” in the pursuit of Torah study. A lifeless body affects all people and utensils in the building, conferring upon them a status of *tum’a* which requires a weeklong process of purification that includes sprinkling of purifying waters. Although the corpse is still, silent and motionless, it wields influence, as it were. The Gemara perhaps teaches us that one who devotes time and energy to the pursuit of Torah knowledge, rather than to the pursuit of wealth, notoriety or prestige, wields a great deal of influence. Like a corpse, he does not make “noise,” he does not make any attempt to draw attention to himself, but his presence has a considerable impact and influence. People in the vicinity of a sincere, humble, diligent Torah scholar gain inspiration and are uplifted and encouraged to reach higher. Just as a corpse spreads *tum’a*, a genuinely devoted Torah scholar spreads inspiration and has a significant impact upon his surroundings.

However, the law of *tum’at ohel* is presented amidst the Torah’s broader discussion of purification, the means by which one divests himself of his status of *tum’a*. Although a human corpse spreads *tum’a*, this status is not permanent, and can be erased. The same is true of the positive influence exerted by devoted scholars of Torah. Although we can gain inspiration and encouragement from the great people with whom we come in contact, this effect does not necessarily last. Like *tum’a*, inspiration is not permanent. As much as we have to gain from being in the presence of outstanding religious figures, ultimately, there is no substitute for sustained hard work and effort to continually grow and improve. Even as we look to be inspired by the people around us, we must realize that their influence will wane without a constant, consistent and concentrated effort to grow each day of our lives.

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