YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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In loving memory of Ada bat Avroham, Alice Stone z"l

beloved mother and grandmother

on the occasion of her Yahrzeit, 2 Tammuz

Ellen & Stanley Stone and their children and grandchildren,

Jake & Chaya, Micah & Addie, Zack & Yael, Allie & Isaac,

Ezra & Talia, Shai, Yoni & Cayley, Azi, Eliana & Moshe,

Adina & Emunah, Gabi & Talia

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***Chok* or *Mishpat* – The Read Heifer and the Service of God**

Adapted by Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

The commandment regarding the red heifer (*para aduma*) opens as follows:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Aharon saying: This is the statute (*chukka*)of the law that the Lord has commanded, saying… (*Bemidbar* 19:1-2)

What is the meaning of the word *chukka*? Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

"This is the statute of the law" – 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 *chukka* about it, implying: It is an enactment from before Me; you have no right to criticize it.

*Chazal* explain the uniqueness of the red heifer – namely, that it purifies the impure, but also renders the pure impure. According to them, this phenomenon is so unique and incomprehensible that it turns the *mitzva* of the red heifer into a *chukka*. The red heifer symbolizes a *mitzva* that the intellect cannot grasp, and thus following God blindly, without reservations or criticism.

First, we must ask ourselves: Why did *Chazal* choose this commandment to symbolize *mitzvot* that do not lend themselves to rational understanding? Is the difference between white hair that precedes a white spot and a white spot that precedes white hair more intelligible? And what about the number of offerings brought on the various festivals?

However, the difficulty in the words of *Chazal* is not just that there are other *mitzvot* that are just as difficult to understand. The very difficulty with the *mitzva* of the red heifer encounters several landmines. Given that the red heifer purifies the impure, the question indeed arises – how is it that it also defiles the pure? But this question is automatically answered when we examine the Torah section dealing with the sacrificial service on Yom Kippur:

And Aharon shall come into the tent of meeting and shall put off the linen garments, which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. And he shall bathe his flesh in water in a holy place and put on his other vestments, and come forth, and offer his burnt-offering and the burnt-offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people. (*Vayikra* 16:23-24)

The High Priest, in the course of his service on Yom Kippur, must immerse himself in a *mikveh.* This is a clear model for service involving a particular offering that defiles a priest and requires him to undergo a process of purification before he is permitted once again to enter the Holy.

Another assumption in the words of Rashi is that the word *chukka* relates to a *mitzva* that cannot be understood by way of the rational mind. According to *Chazal*, then, apart from Moshe, no one ever understood or will ever understand this *mitzva*. But if we consider other *mitzvot* in the context of which the word *chukka* is mentioned, we find that the word is used also for *mitzvot* whose reasons are perfectly clear and understandable.

Let us being with the *omer* offering and the *bikkurim* offering. In both of these cases, the Torah uses the word *chukka*:

And you shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this selfsame day, until you have brought the offering of your God; it is a statute (*chukka*) forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. (*Vayikra* 23:14)

The reason for these two *mitzvot* is clear, and even important and central: The first fruits of the harvest, which are especially dear to a person, must be brought to the Temple and waved before God.

From here we move on to the rest of the holidays, regarding which this unique term, *chukka*, is also mentioned: Regarding Yom Kippur, it is stated in *Parashat Acharei Mot* (*Vayikra* 16):

And it shall be a statute (*chukka*) forever to you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and shall do no manner of work, the home-born, or the stranger that sojourns among you. (*Vayikra* 16:22)

Is it not absolutely clear that we are in great need of Yom Kippur, that atonement and purity be granted to all of Israel? The word *chukka* is used here regarding a *mitzva* that is totally logical and reasonable.

The word *chukka* is used also in connection with the festivals of Shavuot and Sukkot:

And you shall make proclamation on the very day; there shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall do no manner of servile work; it is a statute (*chukka*) forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (*Vayikra* 21:31)

And you shall keep it a feast to the Lord seven days in the year; it is a statute (*chukka*)forever in your generations; you shall keep it in the seventh month. (*Vayikra* 23:41) 

The word *chukka* is also found in connection with the *mitzvot* of inheritance and forbidden sexual relationships. It is difficult to argue that these *mitzvot* lack clear and understandable reasons.

If we look for a reason for the very *mitzva* of the red heifer, beyond the mechanism of purification on the technical level, we will find important and essential things.

The cult of death was accepted and central in various religions over many periods and across various different regions. We are familiar with the cult of death in Egyptian mythology, in the pyramids and in the treasures buried in them. This cult was also found in various Canaanite religions, and it even began to penetrate Judaism during the Second Temple period. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel came out firmly against this phenomenon:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught: Monuments are not erected for the righteous; their words are their memorials. (*Yerushalmi Shekalim* 2:8)

What is the cause of the cult of death? Christianity also gives much attention to death. This stems from the notion that the source of death lies in primeval sin. We are all immersed in a reality of sin, and death is its conclusion. From the very beginning, life leads to death. We must do what we can do during our lifetimes, before we are overtaken by the predetermined sentence – death. This is an irreversible, final, and negative situation.

Judaism never saw things in this negative light. For us, death is not the end. We learn in our *parasha* about Elazar, who wears the garments of Aharon his father and continues his role and actions. Aharon's death is not absolute; his son will continue his actions, and after him, his grandson.

Moreover, an important and central component of our faith is belief in the resurrection of the dead. This is not merely some future event, which does not affect our lives in the here and now. This is a reality that affects our view of death already now, and thus also the manner in which we live our lives. Life does not lead to a final stop called death. Death is but a stopover on the way to the World-to-Come, to the world of resurrection.

R. Kook writes that the worst thing about death is the falsehood connected to it – the perceived finality – while in essence it is merely a stopover.

Resurrection is not just a return to the life of all the dead from ancient times. Resurrection is actually a means for general, comprehensive repair. As opposed to Christianity, which sees in death a revelation of primeval sin, we focus on the resurrection and see it as an opportunity for repair.

The red heifer reflects the same repair. The red heifer is exceedingly difficult to prepare properly – so difficult that it was precisely Moshe who had to prepare the heifer, as Rashi writes:

"And they shall take to you" – It will always be called by your name; the heifer that Moshe made in the wilderness. (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 19:2)

That heifer must be red and unblemished, with no yoke ever having been placed on it. There are well known *midrashim* that describe the difficulties involved in finding such a heifer, as well as its cost. This symbolizes the difficulty in the repair of sin, which is likened to the impurity of death. The repair is difficult and costly; it exacts a price and requires offerings. But it is within one's grasp. It is possible.

There are also streams in Judaism that attach great weight to death. I refer to the cult that is gaining momentum in our very day – the cult of visiting the graves of the righteous. This cemetery industry was never the norm among the Jewish People, and it has faulty roots. This approach is based on the assumption that this world is a negative and problematic world. From this it follows that one can either fight the horrors and trials of this world or try to escape from it through death.

This is not true! The world is not only a source of sin and hardships! The world is full of challenges and opportunities, from which we grow as individuals and as a people. Thus, the red heifer reflects the same danger and negativity of the world around us regarding death, its finality, and the sin that it expresses.

We have thus explained the matter of the red heifer in a manner that finds a great deal of logic in it – both on the essential level of the impurity that is contracted through contact with the dead and the way that one purifies oneself from it and regarding the specific question regarding the purification of the impure and the defilement of the pure. Rashi, as noted, did not choose this path. Rashi's approach is further reinforced in the books of *Chassidut*, such as the *Sefat Emet*. Here, following God in a natural manner, without any search for logic, receives a boost, meaning, and strength.

Here we stand between these two approaches. To one approach belongs words such as responsibility, criticism, and rationality. Here the servant of God tries to find a reason for every *mitzva*, a logical explanation for every law. Though he feels himself uncompromisingly obligated to the Torah's *mitzvot*, he is not willing to follow a commandment blindly if it is possible to find a logical reason for it, using the human tools at his disposal.

In contrast to this approach, there is also a completely different approach. To this approach belong the words innocence, wholeness, and faithfulness. Here the servant of God follows the Torah, without any compromises. No attempt is made here to understand God's supreme judgment, but only to walk in His path in absolute manner.

Many of us tend to view the world as a circle and to see our goal as reaching the center. Thus, by taking one step and then another step, we approach the ideal, the desired end. This stems from the school of Aristotle, who saw the world in this manner. The truth, however, is that in Judaism, the world is much closer to an ellipse, which has two centers – one center of serving God by way of innocence, and a second center that involves trying to understand and delve into the heart of the matter.

Both centers are good. Both approaches have great benefits. They cannot be bridged; they are two parallel lines, which do not and will not ever meet. Here, each and every person must choose between approaches. When choosing one approach, one must be aware of what he loses by not choosing the other approach. Of course, one must choose with a whole heart and soul, but one must not make light of the approach that was not chosen.

I could have attempted to express what is, in my opinion, the preferred approach and where, according to my worldview, the advantages are more significant. However, stating what the better way is will immediately lead to thinking about the less-desired way, and from there the road is very short to scorn for and negation of the second approach.

We must be aware of the existence of both approaches, and we must consciously choose between them. However, we must never make light of the second approach – neither the innocent and natural approach, which Rashi represents in our *parasha*, nor the approach that tries to understand the essential elements of the Torah by way of the intellect that God has given us.