**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHUKAT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Chukat begins with the laws of the *para aduma* – the red heifer that was burned to produce ashes which were used to purify people and objects that had become *tamei* (impure) as a result of an encounter with a human corpse. The Torah then proceeds to outline the basic principles of *tum’at meit*, the means by which a person or object contracts impurity through contact with a dead body. It introduces the concept of *tum’at ohel*, whereby the presence of a human corpse brings impurity to everything under the same roof as the corpse. The Torah begins this discussion by stating, “*Zot ha-torah adam ki yamut be-ohel*”- “This is the law when a person dies in a tent…” (19:14).

The Gemara (Shabbat 83b) cites the famous remark of Reish Lakish, taking this verse out of context and interpreting it to mean, “The words of Torah are retained only in one who kills himself for it.” The phrase “*zot ha-Torah*,” in Reish Lakish’s reading, means not “this is the law,” but rather, “This is the way Torah is retained.” The verse explains that one is able to master the immense corpus of Torah literature only if “*ki yamut be-ohel*” – if he “kills himself” in the “tent” of Torah study, applying himself with diligence and intensity in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

A number of writers noted that according to Reish Lakish’s homiletical reading of this verse, acquiring Torah scholarship demands not just diligent study, but diligent study in a “tent” – a term generally understood as an allusion to houses of study. It appears that Reish Lakish requires not simply intensive, disciplined engagement in Torah, but also that one learn in a “tent” with other scholars, rather than studying alone. (This point is made by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, in *Sichot Mussar*.)

The explanation might lie in the comparison implicitly drawn by Reish Lakish between the experience of Torah study and the halakhic phenomenon of *tum’at meit*. By rereading this verse as an allusion to the diligent study of Torah, Reish Lakish likely found some point of connection between the plain meaning of the verse, which speaks of the *tum’a* transmitted by a corpse to everything under the same roof, and devotion to learning. The concept of *tum’at ohel* is that a source of *tum’a* affects its surroundings. The presence of a corpse in a building impacts the people and even the objects in that building, causing them all to become impure. Similarly, Reish Lakish teaches, in order to acquire Torah scholarship, one must apply himself diligently “in a tent,” in the company of other students and scholars. Scholarship requires not only diligence and discipline, but also immersing oneself in a scholarly environment. Just as impurity spreads to everybody in the building, so does the positive energy of serious, devoted study spread to one’s surroundings.

If so, then Reish Lakish here emphasizes the importance not only of diligent study per se, but also of placing oneself in a “tent” – an environment – that encourages intellectual and spiritual growth, and motivates a person to realize his full potential in the study of Torah.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Chukat of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints as they were forced to circumvent the territory of Edom after Edom’s king denied them passage through his country. The people inappropriately charged that God and Moshe had brought them from Egypt “to die in the wilderness,” and they expressed their disgust over the manna, protesting the lack of regular food (21:5). In response, God sent snakes that killed many among the nation until they repented and regretted their complaints.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch noted that in speaking of God sending the snakes, the Torah uses an unusual form of the root *sh.l.ch.* (“send”). The common form of this verb is “*va-yishlach*,” yet in this instance, the Torah says, “*va-yeshalach*” (using the *pi’el* construction). Rav Hirsch explains that the term “*va-yeshalach*” is used because God did not actually “send” snakes against the people. Rather, He simply allowed the snakes to attack. Snakes had been present in the desert throughout *Benei Yisrael*’s travels, as Moshe would later recall, in Sefer Devarim (8:15 – “*nachash saraf ve-akrav*”). However, God miraculously protected *Benei Yisrael*, not allowing the snakes to enter the camp. In response to *Benei Yisrael*’s unwarranted complaints about their conditions, God simply removed the supernatural “barriers” which He had been providing all along for their protection. He did not send the snakes; He simply allowed them access to the people, which He had not done during all the years of travel until this time. This showed the people that they failed to appreciate all that God had done for them, without their even noticing, such that their complaints were unwarranted and inappropriate.

This same perspective is expressed in an especially striking way in an earlier source – a Midrashic depiction of the events cited in the commentary of Rabbeinu Efrayim. The Midrash tells that during *Benei Yisrael*’s travels, when they were encircled by God’s miraculous clouds, snakes regularly tried infiltrating the Israelite camp, but were instantly killed upon coming in contact with the protective cloud. *Benei Yisrael* used these snakes’ carcasses to construct fences when they encamped. When God decided to punish the people, He revived the snakes, and it was they who bit *Benei Yisrael*.

This graphic illustration might be read as an analogy to what Rav Hirsch described – God showing the people the dangers which had lurked for nearly forty years, and from which they had been protected. The image of the gates made from dead snakes might represent the sense of security *Benei Yisrael* experienced as a result of God’s supernatural protection. They resided in the safety of the “gates” formed by the miracles performed for them. Once they complained, God punished them by “resurrecting” the dangers of the wilderness which He had previously eliminated for them, in order to demonstrate their ungratefulness.

The message of this story, then, is that we often complain because we fail to appreciate the blessings in our lives. There are many “miracles” of one sort or another which we experience each day, many of which we are entirely unaware of, or take for granted. When we fail to acknowledge or appreciate our good fortune, we find reasons to complain. The story of the snakes teaches us to feel grateful for the goodness we enjoy, to never take it for granted, and we will then natural feel disinclined to complain about the things in our lives which are less than ideal.

Monday

Parashat Chukat begins with the laws of the *para aduma* – the “red heifer” that would be slaughtered and then burned, in order to prepare ashes that would then be used for the purification of people and articles that had come in contact with a human corpse. The procedure of the slaughtering of the *para aduma* in detailed by the *Mishnayot* in the 3rd chapter of Masekhet Para. The Mishna (3:6) teaches that the cow would be brought from the Temple Mount to the Mount Olives to the east, over a bridge especially constructed for this purpose.

In the next passage (3:7), the Mishna addresses the case where the cow refuses to go to the Mount Olives. In such a case, the Mishna rules, the *kohanim* may not bring another cow so that the *para aduma* would follow it and go where it needed to go. A cow that is not red, the Mishna writes, should not be brought because people might mistakenly think that this is the cow from which the purifying ashes were eventually prepared. And even if there was a second red heifer, it may not be brought in an attempt to lure the chosen cow, because people might have the impression that the ashes were prepared from both, in violation of the *halakha* requiring that the ashes be prepared from just a single red heifer.

The Mishna proceeds to cite Rabbi Yossi as agreeing with this rule, but disagreeing with regard to the reason. According to Rabbi Yossi, it is not due to the concern of misperceptions that *Halakha* forbids bringing along a second cow, but rather because the Torah commands, “*Ve-hotzi otah*” (19:3) – that “it” (the cow”) must be brought outside Jerusalem for slaughtering. This implies that it must be brought alone, without being accompanied by another animal.

At first glance, it appears that the *Tanna’im* here debate the question of whether we deal here with a provision introduced already by the Torah, or one which the Sages enacted later. The first view seems to maintain that Torah law permits bringing an additional cow to the Mount Olives along with the *para aduma*, but the Sages forbade doing so to avoid a misperception. Rabbi Yossi, by contrast, maintained that the Torah itself demands that the cow be brought to the mountain without any other animals accompanying it.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Yoma (42b-43a), clarifies that in truth, even the first *Tanna* acknowledges a Biblical requirement not to bring a second cow to the Mount Olives. The debate here revolves around the issue of “*darshinan ta’ama di-kra*” – whether the reason behind a Torah law affects its scope. The first view of the Mishna follows the famous view of Rabbi Shimon, who maintained that a law’s reason indeed affects its parameters, whereas the second view represents the opinion that a law’s scope is unaffected by its underlying reason. The question being debated, the Gemara asserts, is whether the *kohanim* may use a different animal – such as a donkey – to motivate the cow to walk across the bridge to the Mount of Olives. According to the first *Tanna*, this is permitted, because there is no concern of misconception. It is clear to all that the purifying ashes are produced from a cow, and not from a donkey. Therefore, nobody will mistakenly think that the ashes were produced from the donkey which accompanied the cow to the mountain. Rabbi Yossi, however, disagrees, and maintains that the law established by the Torah applies even when its underlying reason is not relevant. Hence, in his view, no animal may accompany the cow to the Mount of Olives, even one which would never be mistakenly regarded as the source of the purifying ashes.

Symbolically, this *halakha* might perhaps be seen as showing the importance of recognizing the true source of purity and sanctity. The Torah insisted that the process be conducted in a manner that made it very clear to the people where the purifying ashes originated – perhaps alluding to the need to ensure that our pursuit of purity is real and authentic. There are many “cows” which might appear to lead us to holiness and purity, but they are not real. Certain ideas and behaviors resemble the “red heifer,” the Torah’s prescription for lives of religious devotion, but are in reality not what the Torah expects or wants from us. We must ensure that we pursue “purity” authentically, in the way the Torah instructs, and not be misled by “cows” which appear to provide purity but in truth do not represent the Torah’s values and teachings.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Chukat introduces the concept of *tum’at ohel* – the transmission of *tum’a* (impurity) from a human corpse to all people and articles situated under the same room as the corpse (19:14). In the context of this halakhic principle, the Torah also notes the unique law that applies to a *keli cheres* – an earthenware utensil. Regarding such a utensil, the Torah writes, “And any open utensil, which does not have on it a sealed covering, is impure” (19:15). If the utensil is open, it becomes *tamei* by virtue of its being situated under the same roof as a corpse. If, however, the utensil is covered, then the covering “protects” the utensil from the impurity generated by the corpse, and the utensil remains pure. This is in contrast to utensils made from other materials, such as metal, which become impure through their presence in the building even if they are covered.

The Maggid of Kozhnitz (*Avodat Yisrael*) cleverly interprets this verse as an allusion to the “impurity” of inappropriate speech. He explains that anyone who resembles an “open utensil, which does not have on it a sealed covering” – in the sense that he speaks freely, without discretion, and without knowing when to “cover” his mouth and keep silent, then he invariably will be “impure.” If a person allows himself to speak on impulse, without exercising restraint, he will assuredly end up engaging in forbidden speech, such as gossip, slander and the like.

The concept of *tum’at ohel* reflects the power of “impurity” to affect its surroundings, how we are susceptible to the negative influence of inappropriate words and conduct. The protection from *tum’a* attained by the covering over an earthenware utensil likely points to the fact that when we find ourselves in an “impure” environment, we must make an effort to “block” the “impurity,” to resist the negative influence exerted by the impropriety around us.

The Maggid of Kozhnitz teaches that just as we must protect ourselves from the contaminating influences in our environment, we must likewise ensure not to contaminate our environment through improper speech. One might make the mistake of thinking that in order to avoid “impurity,” it suffices to simply shield oneself from external influences. But in truth, the effort to attain purity requires also self-discipline and self-restraint, overcoming one’s impulsive tendencies, conducting oneself with discretion, and exerting control over one’s instincts.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Chukat tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints as they traveled after being denied passage through the territory of the Edomite kingdom. Rather than traveling westward through the kingdom directly towards the Land of Israel, they were forced instead to circumvent the region of Edom, and as they traveled, the Torah writes, “*Va-tiktzar nefesh ha-am ba-darekh*” (21:4) – which is commonly understood to mean, “The people grew impatient along the road.”

Rashi, commenting on this verse, offers an explanation for the literal meaning of the expression “*va-tiktzar nefesh ha-am*,” which translates as, “the people’s spirit was short.” This phrase, Rashi suggests, describes the embittered individual “as a person beset by trouble, and his mind is not wide enough to accept that thing, and he does not have space within his heart for that pain to reside.” Interestingly, Rashi explains the expression, “short spirit” to mean that the person or people in question are unable to handle the crisis that befell them, because their “mind” and “heart” lack the “space” for this crisis. When people feel overwhelmed and exasperated when confronting some challenge or difficulty, it seems, this is because their “spirits” are too “small” to contain the hardship.

If so, then Rashi here is teaching us that the way to properly handle life’s challenges and sorrows is to ensure that our “spirits” are “large” enough to contain them.

This can be done in several different ways. One way we “expand” our “spirits” is by filling our lives with meaningful and gratifying experiences. Often, we find ourselves unable to deal with pain or challenge because our lives do not contain enough enjoyment and fulfillment, such that the pain fills the entire space in our minds and hearts, and we dwell on it excessively, giving it more attention than we should. The more we expand our “spirits,” filling them with joyful and meaningful substance, the less likely we are to focus exclusively or excessively on the less desirable aspects of life.

Secondly, we “make room” by eliminating other things which occupy space. This means having flexibility, coming to terms with the fact that we cannot expect or insist on things which we would ideally want. Just as making room requires discarding items which we thought we would always hold onto, similarly, making space in our “spirits” requires foregoing on certain plans and certain demands we’ve had of life. In order to contain adversity, we need to eliminate from our minds our ideal expectations.

Thirdly, we make space for things when we recognize their value and importance. Just as we somehow find room in our busy schedule for important events, and we somehow find room in crowded area for important objects, we can make room in our hearts for valuable emotions, even difficult ones. Often, challenges and crises offer us precious opportunities. If we embrace them with faith, confidence and optimism, trusting that they can, in some way, help us grow and achieve, then we can find room for them in our hearts, and we will avoid the exasperation and anguish caused by a “small spirit.”

(Based on [an article by Rav Menachem Mann](http://72.29.67.154/~oretzio/BOGRIM/moish/3/shichtuvim/tora/man_harav_menachem/chukat.pdf))

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Chukat tells of the passing of Moshe’s two siblings – Miriam (20:1) and Aharon (20:22-29). The Gemara in Masekhet Moed Katan (28a) finds it significant that the Torah tells of Miriam’s death immediately after discussing the laws of the *para aduma* (red heifer) which was used for purification. Additionally, the Gemara notes that the account of Aharon’s death includes a description of the transfer of his special priestly garments to his son and successor, Elazar. On this basis, the Gemara teaches, “Just as the red heifer brings atonement, the death of the righteous also brings atonement,” and, “Just as the priestly garments bring atonement, the death of the righteous also brings atonement.” By associating the death of these righteous individuals – Miriam and Aharon – with the *para aduma* and the priestly garments, the Torah alludes to us that the death of the righteous brings atonement like the *para aduma* and the *kohanim*’s garments.

How does the death of righteous people bring atonement, and why does the Gemara compare this atonement to the atonement effected through the *para aduma* and the priestly garments?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, in *Midbar Shur* (*derush* 36, cited and discussed by [Rav Dovid Gottlieb](https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/960557/rabbi-dovid-gottlieb/-misas-tzadikim-mechaperes-rav-kook-s-inspiring-interpretation/)), explains that the death of the righteous brings atonement by drawing our attention to their qualities and accomplishments. When a great individual passes away, we naturally reflect on that person’s achievements and the example he or she set, and we become inspired to emulate that example. In this way, the righteous person’s passing brings us atonement – by helping us grow and become better.

The two comparisons drawn by the Gemara, Rav Kook explains, correspond to two different kinds of achievement. The *para aduma*, which was used to purify any individual or article which had come in contact with a human corpse, corresponds to achievements which are accessible to all. Certain characteristics and behaviors of outstanding people are, in truth, within the reach of all of us, and when a righteous person dies, we have the opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments to which we all can and should strive. The priestly garments, by contrast, were worn only by the *kohanim*, and thus represent accomplishments which are beyond the reach of the vast majority of people. Many outstanding *tzadikim* (righteous people) achieve their stature by utilizing their unique, extraordinary talents and gifts with which they have been endowed, and which set them apart from the masses. These achievements, too, are important to recognize, respect and admire, even if they lie beyond our limits. Rav Kook explains that when a great individual passes on and people reflect upon that individual’s achievements – even those which are not attainable by most people – this reflection is valuable if for no other reason than to motivate those with rare, exceptional talents to strive to maximize their potential, just like the individual whose passing is being mourned. In this way, we gain “atonement” by awakening ourselves to the higher levels which we are all capable of attaining, and by collectively encouraging those who are uniquely talented to utilize their talents to their fullest, so together we grow and become the great nation that we have been chosen, and are expected, to be.

Friday

Parashat Chukat begins with God’s command to Moshe and Aharon to oversee the preparation of the first *para aduma* (red heifer), from which special purifying ashes were produced. God instructed Moshe and Aharon, “Speak to the Israelites that they shall bring to you an unblemished red heifer…” Rashi, noting that God used the singular form, “*eilekha*” (“to you”) despite speaking to both Moshe and Aharon, comments, “It shall always be called by your name – the heifer prepared by Moshe in the desert.” According to Rashi, God here emphasizes a special association between the *para aduma* and Moshe Rabbeinu, assuring Moshe that the *para aduma* will forever be known as “Moshe’s heifer,” and so He instructed that a red heifer be brought specifically to him.

The Maharal of Prague, in his *Gur Aryeh*, explains Rashi’s comment based on the tradition that the reason behind the seemingly peculiar institution of *para aduma* was not revealed to any human being – besides Moshe. As Moshe was the only person to understand the concealed reason behind the notion of the ashes of a slaughtered red heifer bringing purity, the *para aduma* is especially associated with Moshe.

Rav Yisrael of Modzitz, in *Divrei Yisrael*, offers a different explanation. Rashi concludes his comments to the section of *para aduma* by citing Rav Moshe Ha-darshan’s understanding of the *para aduma*, viewing it as a source of atonement for the sin of the golden calf. The *para aduma* was a mature female cow, and so the slaughtering of this cow to produce purifying ashes signified the atonement for the golden calf – a young cow. Just as a mother cleans the mess made by her child, Rav Moshe Ha-darshan explained, the *para aduma* serves to “clean” the spiritual “mess” of the worship of the golden calf. If so, the Rebbe of Modzitz explained, then we can easily understand the special connection between the *para aduma* and Moshe. In response to *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of the golden calf, God decided to annihilate the entire nation, and Moshe immediately pleaded on their behalf. It is only because of Moshe’s devotion to the nation that they were able to achieve atonement for the golden calf, and so the *para aduma*, the means by which they earned atonement, is forever associated with Moshe.

The *para aduma*, which brings a person or object from a state of impurity to a state of purity, signifies the ability to change, to recover, to improve, to repair and to rectify. The path to rectifying our wrongdoing begins with the recognition of our capacity to change. The first step to atonement is believing that we are not held captive by our past mistakes, that we are capable of achieving “purity” even after having “defiled” ourselves through wrongdoing. This belief was exemplified by Moshe, who refused to give up on *Benei Yisrael* even in their worst moment of shame. Even after they worshipped a statue, turning their backs on God who had revealed Himself to them just several weeks earlier, and even after God Himself decreed their annihilation, Moshe continued to believe in *Benei Yisrael*’s future. He refused to despair, even in their lowest moment. And so the *para aduma*, the symbol of the human capacity to recover and rebound from failure, is forever linked to the figure of Moshe, who never stopped believing in the nation he lovingly, selflessly and devotedly led, and continued having faith in their potential for greatness no matter how low they fell.

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