**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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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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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Chukat tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints after the kingdom of Edom refused to allow them passage through its territory, forcing *Benei Yisrael* to take a circuitous route on their way to the Land of Israel. The people grew impatient, and began complaining about the conditions in the desert – which they were now compelled to continue suffering after having anticipated journeying through Edom directly to the land (21:4-5). God reacted angrily to the people’s grumblings, sending snakes to bite them (21:6).

The phrase used by the Torah to describe the people’s impatience is “*va-tiktzar nefesh ha-am ba-darekh*” (21:4). Rashi explains this phrase to mean “the nation grew impatient of the journey.” According to this interpretation, the word “*ba-darekh*” is the object of “*va-tiktzar nefesh ha-am*,” the thing about which they were impatient. One might have thought, as Rashi acknowledges, that “*ba-darekh*” means simply “along the journey,” such that the verse informs us that it was along the journey – and not necessarily *because of* the journey – that the people grew weary and impatient. But Rashi dismisses this interpretation, noting that whenever this expression – “*kotzer nefesh*” – is used to describe frustration or impatience, we are told the cause. For example, Rashi cites a verse in the Book of Shoftim (10:16) which tells of God’s decision to help *Benei Yisrael* because “*va-tiktzar nafsho ba-amal Yisrael*” – He was “tired,” as it were, of seeing them suffer. Thus, here in Parashat Chukat, too, the phrase “*va-tiktzar nefesh ha-am ba-darekh*” must be understood to mean that the people grew impatient because of the long journey, not simply that they grew impatient during the journey.

As part of his discussion, Rashi elaborates on the precise meaning of “*kotzer nefesh*,” whose literal translation is, “shortness of soul.” Rashi writes that this expression refers to “anything that is difficult for a person,” to the point where “his mind is not expansive enough to receive that thing, and he does not have space inside his heart for that distress to reside.” The term “*kotzer ru’ach*,” Rashi explains, expresses that the source of the distress “is large and heavy for the person,” so much so that he cannot tolerate it.

In other words, we all have a certain emotional capacity, the ability to tolerate pain, discomfort, difficulty and anguish, but sometimes we experience “*kotzer nefesh*,” when our “soul” is too “small” to contain the weight of the distress. When this happens, we – like *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness – lose our composure, our patience and our poise, and begin complaining or expressing anger.

Rav Chaim Hirschensohn, in his *Nimukei Rashi*, makes a vitally important clarification about Rashi’s comments, noting that the term “*kotzer ru’ach*” is purely allegorical, reflecting only **our perception** of our limited tolerance. Just as the term “*kotzer ru’ach*” as applied to the Almighty must be anthropomorphic, likewise, the notion of “*kotzer ru’ach*” in the case of human beings is not actual, but rather imaginary. We are, in truth, capable of handling even the greatest challenges and the bitterest forms of adversity. It is only in our minds that we experience “*kotzer ru’ach*,” that we feel that our emotional capacity is too small to contain the burden of pain or distress.

The expression “*kotzer ru’ach*” points to the reality that we feel incapable of bearing great hardship. We should, however, be aspiring to change this reality, to change our mindset and perception, and realize that we are able to handle far more than we think.

Sunday

Towards the end of Parashat Chukat, we read of *Benei Yisrael*’s conquest of the Emorite kingdom after the kingdom launched an attack against them. The Torah in this context explains that the territory seized by *Benei Yisrael* had once been part of Moav, but the territory was captured by the Emorites under the leadership of its king, Sichon.

The Torah here records a poem composed by the “*moshelim*” (“poets”) after the Emorite conquest of this territory, which placed special emphasis on the fall of the capital city, Cheshbon: “Come to Cheshbon! Let the city of Sichon be built and established! For a fire has burst forth from Cheshbon… It consumed Moav’s [city of] Ar… O, Moav…it turned its sons into fugitives and its daughters into captives, to Sichon, the Emorite king…” (21:27-29).

Rav Gavriel Zev Margolis, in his *Torat Gavriel* commentary, cites a novel interpretation of these verses from Rav Bentzion Aryeh Leib Tzizling, who notes that in this poem, the “fire” that ravaged Moav is described as having originated from its own city – Cheshbon (“For a fire has burst forth from Cheshon”). What this might mean is that Sichon, in his quest to capture the territory, used bribes to elicit the support of the people of Moav, or at least those in the capital city. These citizens of Moav turned against their own king and their own countrymen, easily handing Sichon a resounding victory over Moav. Thus, the “*moshelim*” who composed this poem were moved to depict not simply the crushing defeat suffered by Moav, but the betrayal of Moav’s own citizens, who were bribed to fight against their own country. This is why they described Moav as actively turning its young men and women into fugitives and captives – because they assisted the enemy, essentially bringing calamity upon their own countrymen in exchange for some cash.

On this basis, Rav Margolis suggests an explanation for the Gemara’s well-known reading of the introduction to this poem – “*Al kein yomeru ha-moshelim bo’u Cheshbon*” (“Therefore, the poets would say: Come to Cheshbon!”). In Masekhet Bava Batra (78b), the Gemara comments that the word “*moshelim*” may be read as referring to “*ha-moshelim be-yitzram*” – people who “rule” over their natural instincts and inclinations, who restrain themselves from wrongdoing. The way they succeed in exercising self-restraint is by saying, “*Bo’u cheshbon*” – which the Gemara understands to mean, “Let’s calculate” – referring to the “calculation” between the benefits of sin and the harm of sin. We are able to restrain ourselves when we truly understand that the harm and long-term consequences of wrongdoing far outweigh any fleeting enjoyment it offers. Several writers raised the question of how this Midrashic reading of the verse connects to the context – the conquest of Cheshbon by the Emorites. Why would this lesson – that the detrimental effects of sin exponentially outweigh the benefits – be alluded to in the poem composed after the fall of Cheshbon?

Rav Margolis suggests that if, indeed, the conquest of Moav’s territory was enabled by turncoats who accepted bribes from the Emorites, then this story indeed serves as a compelling analogy for the “calculation” of the benefits and harm of sin. The Moavites who betrayed their countrymen surrendered their nation’s wellbeing for the sake of monetary gain by taking money to facilitate the country’s defeat. This is, in effect, what people do when they enjoy fleeting pleasures at the expense of their long-term spiritual wellbeing. They receive a “bribe’ in the form of temporary enjoyment, while surrendering their overall, long-term condition. It is thus perhaps for this reason, Rav Margolis suggests, that the Gemara associates the fall of Cheshbon with the “*cheshbon*” of the harm and benefit of sin – viewing the citizens’ betrayal of their country as a model of foolishly sacrificing one’s long-term wellbeing for temporary gain.

Monday

Parashat Chukat begins with the *mitzva* of *para aduma* – the “red heifer” that was slaughtered and then burned, after which its ashes were mixed with special water. This water was the “*mei chatat*” – the waters used to purify people and objects that became *tamei* (impure) through contact with a human corpse. The Torah specifies that the cow used for this ritual must be completely red, as well as “*temima*” – unblemished, without any “*mum*” – physical defect.

The Ben Ish Chai, in *Aderet Eliyahu*, suggested viewing the *para aduma* as a symbol of repentance, the method of “purification” from the defilement of sin. Just as the *para aduma* must be “*temima*” – whole and perfect, likewise, one’s repentance must be “whole,” as we pray in the *Amida* each weekday, “*hachazireinu bi-tshuva* ***sheleima*** *lefanekha*” – “bring us back before You in **complete** repentance.” Our repentance must be “complete,” an endeavor to correct the entirety of our conduct and beings.

Similarly, the Ben Ish Chai writes, the *para aduma* must be an animal “*asher ein bah mum*” – without a physical defect, symbolizing the need to ensure that no “defects” tarnish our efforts to improve. The Ben Ish Chai observes that on some occasions, a person’s quest to improve in one area results in “blemishes” in other areas. As an example, he points to the situation of a person who takes it upon himself to observe a series of fasts as part of his process of *teshuva*, but the discomfort of fasting makes him impatient and irritable, causing him to become angry at his family members. Such repentance, the Ben Ish Chai writes, is “blemished.” It might be sincere and well-intentioned, but if it accompanied by sinful “side effects,” then it is not legitimate.

Finally, the Torah requires that the cow used as the *para aduma* must have never been harnessed to a yoke – “*asher lo aleha ol*.” The symbolic meaning of this requirement, the Ben Ish Chai explains, is that we must not complain about, or be deterred by, the challenges and difficulty of *teshuva*. We should embrace repentance as a precious opportunity for change, rather than viewing it as a heavy “yoke” upon our shoulders. We should undertake measures of repentance happily and enthusiastically, eager to make a fresh start, without resenting the “burden” of *teshuva*, recognizing that repentance is an invaluable gift we have been granted, that we are privileged to be able to make ourselves better and continually grow.

Tuesday

The opening section of Parashat Chukat describes the preparation of the *mei chatat* – the special “purifying waters” which were needed to bring purification to those who became *tamei* (impure) through contact with a human corpse. The *mei chatat* consisted of a mixture of water taken from a spring, and the ashes of the *para aduma* – the “red heifer” that was slaughtered and then burned.

Numerous writers have sought to explain various aspects of the *mei chatat*, which eliminated the halakhic status of impurity, as symbols of the broader process of “purification” which we are all urged to undertake, eliminating our improper habits and tendencies. One such theory is advanced by Rav Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau of Vilna, in his work [*Patshegen Ha-dat*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39356&st=&pgnum=105), where he suggests that ashes, which are stationary until they are moved by an external source, symbolize inaction, whereas water, which constantly moves unless it is contained, represents energy and passion. These two elements thus correspond to the two basic, opposite negative tendencies that we have – lethargy, and desire. On the one hand, like “ash,” we often feel languid and lethargic, preferring to lazily stay in place rather than actively engage in and pursue good deeds. At times we need to struggle to overcome our lazy instinct in order to meet our religious responsibilities, and certainly to extend beyond them and take on ambitious projects. On the other hand, we also face the opposite challenge – the desire to do more than we are permitted to, to extend beyond the Torah’s restrictions in the pursuit of wealth, prestige or pleasure. Like a raging current of water, we instinctively seek to “flow” unrestrained, to pursue gratification without limits.

The combination of ash and water in the *mei chatat* thus signifies that we “purify” ourselves by maintaining a delicate balance between the fatigue represented by ashes, and the rage of energy represented by water. The *mei chatat* represents the need to neutralize our lazy instincts through the passion and fervor symbolized by water, and to contain our innate “water-like” energies through the control and stability symbolized by ashes. We live a life of purity when we succeed in balancing passion with discretion, and energy with self-restraint, when we are able to live with enthusiasm, rigor and bold ambition, while at the same time knowing when to exercise self-discipline and self-restraint.

Wednesday

The Mishna in Masekhet Para (3:1) teaches that when the time came to slaughter and burn the *para aduma* for the purpose of preparing the purifying waters, the *kohen* assigned to burn the cow would spend a week away from home in a special chamber in the area of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. In order to ensure that he would be in a state of *tahara* (purity) as required for the performance of this ritual, the *kohen* was required to remain in this chamber, where he would not be exposed to *tum’a* (impurity). The Gemara infers this law from the Torah’s account in Sefer Vayikra of the seven-day *miluim* procedure, whereby Aharon and his sons were formally consecrated as *kohanim*. They were instructed to spend the entire seven-day period in the courtyard outside the *Mishkan* (Vayikra 8:33), and they were told, “As was done on this day, the Lord commanded to do to atone for you” (Vayikra 8:34). The Gemara interprets this vague verse as a reference to two other occasions when a *kohen* was required to spend seven days in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – the *kohen gadol* before Yom Kippur (Yoma 2a), and the *kohen* who burned the *para aduma* who spent the previous seven days in a special chamber in the Temple courtyard.

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Para Aduma* (2:2), writes that this *halakha* was received via oral tradition dating back to the time of Moshe Rabbeinu. Apparently, the Rambam felt that the inference from the verse in Sefer Vayikra was intended merely as an *asmakhta* (a subtle allusion), and in truth there is no actual textual source for this law.

The implication of the Mishna is that only the *soreif* – the *kohen* assigned the role of burning the cow – was required to spend seven days in the Temple courtyard. There were several different roles involved in the procedure of preparing the purifying waters, such as slaughtering the cow, collecting the ashes, and mixing them with the water. It seems, however, that although all the *kohanim* involved in this process needed to be in a state of *tahara*, only the *soreif* required a special seven-day period of “protection” in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This point was made by the *Tosafot Yeshanim* in Masekhet Yoma (2a), where they explain that this law applies only to the *kohen* filling the primary role involved in the *para aduma* – the job of burning the cow. (See also *Tosafot Ha-Rosh* and *Penei Yehoshua* there in Masekhet Yoma.)

The *Minchat Chinukh* (397:17), however, takes a different view, positing that the Mishna actually refers to all the *kohanim* involved in the *para aduma* procedure. The Gemara infers from the verse that this requirement applies to “*ma’aseh para*” (“the activity of the *para*”), indicating that this includes all the *kohanim* involved. The Mishna speaks only of the burning of the cow, the *Minchat Chinukh* suggests, because this was the major stage in the process, and in any event, everything was likely done by just a single *kohen*. But if the roles were divided among several *kohanim*, then, according to the *Minchat Chinukh*, they were all required to spend seven days in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* for a week before the procedure.

Rav Yaakov Zev Yoskovitz, in his *Ambuha De-Sifrei* commentary to the *Sifrei Zuta* (Parashat Chukat), questions the *Minchat Chinukh*’s assumption that the *para aduma* procedure was normally performed by just one *kohen*. The Midrashic *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* translation of the verses here in Parashat Chukat emphasizes at each stage that a “*kahana ocharan*” – “different *kohen*” – would perform that stage, clearly indicating that the process actually required the involvement of several different *kohanim*. Moreover, Rav Yoskovitz cites the *Penei Yehoshua* (Yoma 2a) as noting that since, as the Torah here states, those involved in the preparation of the purifying waters became *tamei*, a different *kohen* was needed for every stage of the process. Once a *kohen* performed one stage, he immediately became *tamei* and hence disqualified for the subsequent stages. It thus seems difficult to understand why the *Minchat Chinukh* assumed that one *kohen* normally performed the entire procedure of preparing the *para aduma* waters.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Chukat of the request Moshe presented to the king of Edom, requesting that *Benei Yisrael* be allowed to pass through the kingdom’s territory on their way to the Land of Israel. The king of Edom resoundingly rejected Moshe’s request, and even mobilized an army that went out to confront *Benei Yisrael*, whereupon *Benei Yisrael* turned away and circumvented Edom’s territory (20:14-21).

Later in the Torah, in Sefer Devarim (23:8), the Torah commands, “Do not despise an Edomite, for he is your brother.” Rashi explains that one might have thought it legitimate to hold Edom in contempt for the kingdom’s fierce rejection of *Benei Yisrael*’s legitimate request of passage and threat of war, and so the Torah issues a specific command forbidding such contempt. Since Edomites are the descendants of Esav, the brother of *Benei Yisrael*’s ancestor, Yaakov, we are commanded not to treat Edom with hostility.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the Torah commands us to treat Edom as our “brothers,” despite the kingdom’s harsh treatment of our ancestors as they sought to journey through Edom’s territory. In presenting his request to the king of Edom, Moshe built upon the “brotherly” relationship between the two nations, introducing his message with the words, “So does **your brother, Israel**, say…” (20:14). Moshe emphasized the kinship between Israel and Edom, indicating that this relationship warranted Edom’s granting *Benei Yisrael* passage through its land. But Edom rejected Moshe’s plea, giving no consideration at all to the “fraternal” bond between it and *Benei Yisrael*. And yet (as noted [by Rabbi Jonathan Ziring](https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/927524/rabbi-jonathan-ziring/respecting-brotherhood-even-when-others-do-not/)), despite Edom’s “non-brotherly” treatment of *Benei Yisrael*, the Torah commands *Benei Yisrael* to treat Edom in a “brotherly” fashion. The Torah here teaches us that we are to transcend the petty “tit-for-tat” response to hostility, and to uphold high ethical standards even when we feel that we ourselves are not treated at those standards. Of course, we are fully entitled and expected to defend ourselves from abusive or criminal behavior. However, we must carefully distinguish between legitimate self-defense and spiteful vindictiveness. We are to show “brotherly” concern even when it is not reciprocated, to proudly adhere to our high standards even towards those who do not appear to follow the same standards in their dealings towards us.

Friday

We read in Parashat Chukat of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints about their extended sojourn through the wilderness, when they protested the fact that “there is no food and there is no water” and proclaimed their disgust with the manna, which they derisively called, “*lechem ha-kelokel*” (“miserable food” – 21:5).

The *Sifrei*, Parashat Devarim, 1) view this complaint as a grave instance of “*kefiyut tova*” – ingratitude. God responded to the complaints, *Chazal* teach, by announcing to the people, “This favor that I granted you – about this you are arguing with Me and protesting to Me?!” The *Sifrei* adds that God compared *Benei Yisrael*’s ingratitude regarding the manna to Adam’s expression of ingratitude regarding his wife, Chava. After Adam partook of the forbidden tree and was confronted by God, he cast the blame on Chava: “The woman which You placed beside me, she gave me from the tree” (Bereishit 3:12). Just as Adam complained about the precious gift he had been given – a wife – *Benei Yisrael* similarly complained about the precious gift they had been given in the wilderness – the manna.

This comparison, at first glance, seems difficult to understand – and seemingly unfair to Adam. *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints about the manna were completely unjustified and unwarranted. *Chazal* (as Rashi cites here in Parashat Chukat) explain that the manna was fully and perfectly digested in the body, such that *Benei Yisrael* had no need to perform bodily functions during this period – and this is precisely what they complained about, saying that such food is not normal. The food they received was perfect, and yet they complained. Adam’s complaint was much different. Chava had been given to him as a “helpmate” (“*eizer ke-negdo*” – Bereishit 2:18), but she misled him by bringing him fruit from the forbidden tree. Adam had a legitimate grievance about his wife, even if he was wrong in complaining about her, rather than appreciating the benefits she provided notwithstanding the harm she now caused. And yet, *Chazal* compare Adam’s accurate, even if unjustified, complaint about Chava to *Benei Yisrael*’s entirely unwarranted complaints about the manna.

Perhaps, *Chazal* precisely seek to instruct that focusing our attention on grievances – valid as they may be – is as wrong as *Benei Yisrael*’s unjustified complaints about the manna. We are to recognize that no blessing in life will ever be perfect – and we are to appreciate our blessings despite their imperfections. Complaining about Chava’s wrongful conduct is as much an expression of ingratitude as complaining about the manna – because although Chava was not perfect like the manna, Adam was to appreciate her as much as *Benei Yisrael* were to appreciate the perfect food they were given. *Chazal* here teach us to view all our blessings in life as “manna” even though they are imperfect, to celebrate all that is good in life even when the good is accompanied by challenges and hardships, recognizing that life will never be, and is never supposed to be, perfect like manna.

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