

Abraham sends Hagar at Sarah's request. God endorsed his wife's prophetic insight.

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Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

Volume VI, No. 33...June 22, 2007

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Houston	8:07	Phoenix	7:23
Jerusalem	7:29	Pittsburgh	8:35
Johannesburg	5:07	Seattle	8:52
Los Angeles	7:49	Sydney	4:38
London	9:02	Tokyo	6:42
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Montreal	8:28	Washington DC	8:19

## Weekly Parsha

# Chukat

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aaron, saying: This is the statute of the law which Hashem has commanded, saying, “Speak unto the Bnai Yisrael, that they should take for you a red heifer, faultless, that has no blemish, and

(continued on next page)

## Parshas Chukas:

# GODLESS HUMAN NATURE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

“And they traveled from Hor Hahor by way of Yam Suf, to encompass the land of Edom, and the peoples’ patience grew short on the way. And the people spoke regarding God and Moses, ‘Why have you taken us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness; for there is no bread and no water, and our souls loathe this light bread [manna]’. And God sent in the people fiery serpents and they bit the people and there died a large people from Israel. And the people came to Moses and they said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against God and you – pray to God and remove the serpents from us’. And Moses prayed on behalf of the people. And God said to Moses, ‘Make for yourself a poisonous serpent and place it on a staff, and it will be: anyone who is bitten, and will look at it, will be healed’. And Moses made a copper serpent and placed it on a pole: and it was that if a serpent bit a man, and he gazed at the copper serpent, he lived.” (Num. 21:4-9)

(continued on page 6)



**Moses' Copper Serpent**  
 Structures like this and the Ark, commanded by God, are not idolatry since they are divinely ordained. But all other objects, such as modern day segulas, have no Torah source, and therefore are idolatrous.

(Chukat cont. from pg. 1)

## Weekly Parsha

# JewishTimes

Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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upon which never came yoke.” (BeMidbar 19:1-2)

Parshat Chukat includes three commandments. All of these commandments deal with impurity through contact with a dead body. The first commandment is the requirement to secure and burn a red heifer – a parah adumah. The ashes of the parah are then retained for use in the purification process of a person who became defiled through contact with a dead body.[1] The second commandment is the laws regarding defilement through contact with a dead body.[2] The final commandment deals with the unique attribute of the mixture created from the ashes of the parah. Although these ashes are used in the process of purification, they also transmit impurity to those who process the parah.[3]

In our passages Hashem communicates to Moshe and Aharon the first of the commandments and directs them to instruct Bnai Yisrael in this commandment. The instructions begin with the directive that the nation should take a red heifer that meets the requirements of the Torah. It must be completely red; it must be free of any blemish, and it must not have previously employed in any labor.

Maimonides explains that one of the many laws concerning the parah is that it should be purchased

from the communal funds of the Bait HaMikdash.[4] These communal funds are created through an annual tithe. Every male is required to contribute to the fund.

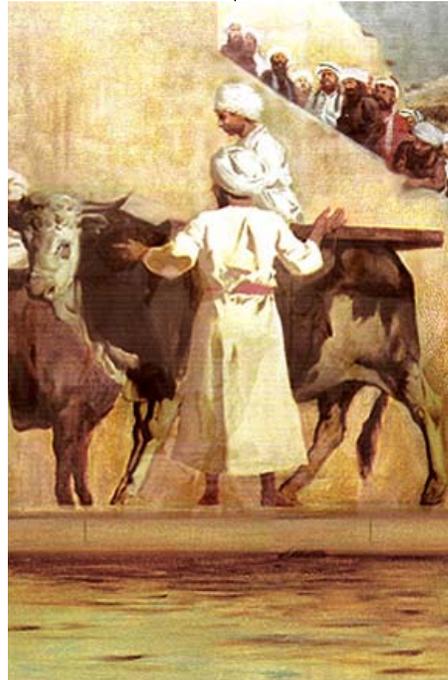
What if a person contributes a parah adumah? Can this contribution be accepted for the purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah of parah adumah? There is a general rule that would seem to address this issue. There are a number of sacrifices that must be offered by the nation. The animal used for the sacrifice must be collectively owned by Bnai Yisrael. In order to meet this requirement the animals used in these sacrifices are purchased from the Bait HaMikdash's communal funds. However, if a person contributes an animal to the tzibur – to the national community – it may be accepted for and used as one of these communal sacrifices. Mishne La'Melech suggests that this principle also applies to the parah adumah.

Maimonides does not intend to imply that there is an absolute requirement to purchase the parah with community funds. The parah must be owned by the tzibur. Purchasing the animal with community funds meets this requirement. However, the requirement is also met when a person donates the parah to the tzibur.[5]

Others disagree. Aruch HaShulchan contends that the general principle that an animal donated to the tzibur may be used for communal sacrifices does not apply to the parah adumah. The parah adumah should be purchased from communal funds. An animal donated to the tzibur does not meet this requirement.[6] Presumably, he maintains that this is Maimonides' position. Maimonides' ruling that the parah should be purchased from communal funds is to be understood literally.

We can easily understand the position of Mishne LaMelech. According to his understanding, the requirement regarding the parah adumah is identical to the requirement for communal sacrifices. The animal must be owned by the tzibur. An animal donated to the tzibur is acceptable. But the position of the Aruch HaShulchan requires more careful analysis. Why is the parah adumah different from communal sacrifices? Why must the animal be secured through purchase with communal funds?

There is another interesting problem with Maimonides' ruling. Maimonides rules that all communal sacrifices must belong to the tzibur. This is an absolute requirement.[7] This requirement would seem to apply to the parah adumah. However, Maimonides, in discussing the requirement to purchase the animal from communal funds, does not express this requirement as an absolute requisite. Instead, he states that the animal should be purchased from communal funds.[8] According to Aruch HaShulchan, this seems to imply that the animal should be purchased from communal funds but that an animal donated to the tzibur can be used. In other words, although the community is required to purchase the animal through the communal fund, if the animal is donated to the community it is acceptable. This raises a second question. Why is the requirement to purchase the animal with



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(Chukat continued from page 2)

## Weekly Parsha

communal funds not an absolute requisite? If the animal should be purchased with communal funds, why is a donated animal acceptable?

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin – Netziv – provides an insight that helps answer these questions. He agrees with Aruch HaShulchan that the tzibur is required to purchase the parah from communal funds. He explains that the source for this requirement is in the midrash Sifrai. Sifrai explains that Moshe is commanded to instruct Bnai Yisrael to “take” a parah adumah from which the required ashes will be created. Sifrai explains that this term is the source for the requirement to purchase the parah from communal funds. Netziv comments that this derivation clearly adjoins us to purchase the parah with communal funds rather than accepted a donated parah. If the parah is donated, then the tzibur has failed to fulfill the obligation of “taking” a parah.[9]

Apparently, according to Netziv, the mitzvah of parah adumah does not only describe the process for creating the ashes of the parah adumah; the mitzvah also establishes an obligation upon the nation to proactively assure that these ashes are available for those who must purify themselves from defilement through contact with a dead body. The requirement that the nation take a proactive role dictates that the tzibur purchase the parah from communal funds. In other words, the ashes can be created from a donated parah and these ashes can be effectively used in the purification process. However, if the nation does not purchase the parah, it has not fulfilled its obligation to proactively assure that this instrument for purification is available.

With this insight, we can understand Aruch HaShulchan’s interpretation of Maimonides. According to Aruch HaShulchan, the parah adumah cannot be compared to other communal sacrifices. The mitzvah of parah adumah includes an element that is not relevant to communal sacrifices. The nation does not have an obligation to proactively secure these sacrifices. In contrast, the nation does have an obligation to proactively assure that the means of purification from defilement through contact with a dead body are available.

We can also understand why failure to meet this requirement does not affect the efficacy of the ashes. The ashes of a parah donated to the tzibur are effective. This parah is owned by the tzibur and consequently, its ashes are completely effective. However, when the parah is donated the tzibur has failed to fulfill its obligation to proactively secure and provide the means of purification. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 113.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 107.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 108.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Parah adumah 1:1.

[5] Rav Yehuda Rosanes, Mishne La’Melech, Hilchot Parah adumah 1:1.

[6] Rav Yechiel Michal HaLeyve Epstein, Aruch HaShulchan HaAtede, Hilchot Parah adumah 52:8-10.

[7] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Klai Mikdash 8:7.

[8] Rav Yosef Babad, Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 397, note 2.

[9] Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Commentary Emek HaNetziv on Sifrai, Parshat Chukat, chapter 1.

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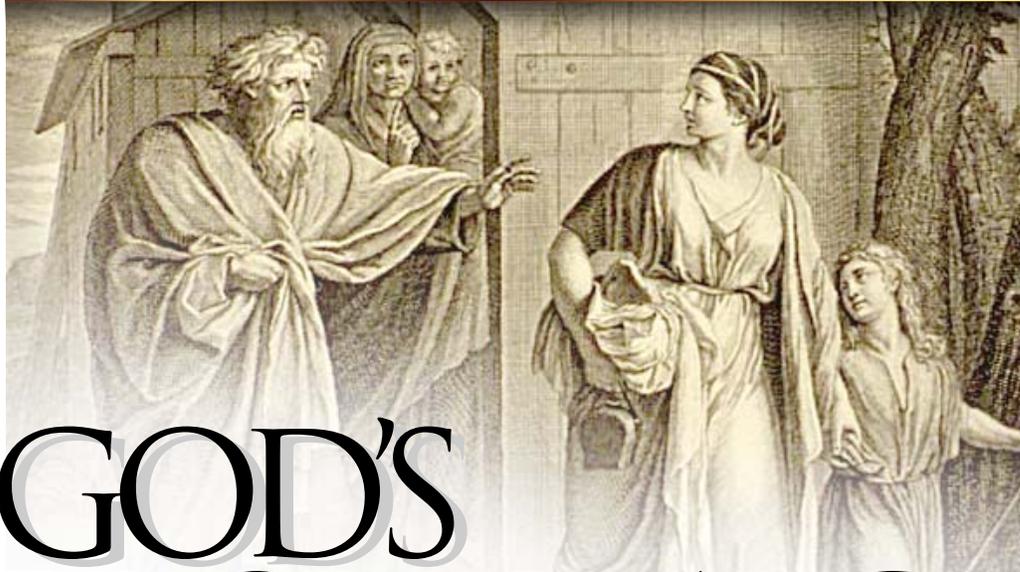
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# GOD'S PROVIDENCE

## Two Arenas

Maimonides states in his Laws of Idolatry that Abraham was quite young (some suggest three years of age) when he started recognizing God, and pondering His existence. Having worshipped idols himself, but then realizing the contradictions in such practices, Abraham was yet a youth, considering these matters day and night. Over time, he realized the idolaters were gravely mistaken.

Then, Abraham wrote responses to the idolaters and debated with them, but not until he was 40. Although possessing far greater knowledge than they had possessed, for decades, Abraham abstained from entering into debates with others until he fully concluded his thinking process, and attained clarity on the issues he pondered. Maimonides teaches that a poor answer is worse than no answer at all. Influencing people thru truth requires the educator to give over an entire subject matter: a conclusive series of arguments. To effectively present a "system" of truths, an incomplete or poor presentation mars the appreciation intended for the student – the goal is forfeited, and even worse, the student assumes the teacher to possess a flawed system. This would greatly decrease or perhaps even remove the student's ability to ever recognize this system at a later date. The student would thereby suffer the greatest loss: he would never come to an appreciation for the Creator, and His system of knowledge and providence over mankind. Therefore, Abraham patiently studied all matters until he attained crystallized concepts. Only then did he venture out into society, and take on the idolatrous cultures with well-formulated responses, only attained over decades of analysis driven by his yearning to know truth.

Two times in his life, did Abraham engage in debate: 1) in Ur Kasdim, and 2) in Charan. Charan was a major platform. He went from kingdom to kingdom, and called in God's name in many cities. Abraham dealt with others on an individual basis, offering them arguments against their corrupt philosophies: each person according to his own, subjective level. He also wrote many books addressing the flawed views these cultures defended.

However, Abraham's real success was not in Ur or even in Charan. He only succeeded in attracting his 10,000's of followers once God's providence stepped in. Abraham's philosophy continued thru Isaac, until it was almost lost by the time the Jews left Egypt.

Each morning we recite the blessing of "Sanctifying God's name":

*"You are the one (who existed) while the world was not yet created. You are the one from when the world was created. You are the one in this world, and You are the one in the world to come. Sanctify Your name by those who sanctify Your name, and sanctify Your name in Your world. And with Your salvation, raise up, and exalt our horn. Blessed are You, God, who sanctifies His name publicly."*

This blessing reiterates the truth, that the Jews are the people given the task to sanctify God's great name. But it is only through His providence that we may do so. We learn this from the Torah's omission of Abraham's initial successes prior to God's intervention, and we learn this from Revelation at Sinai. It was this Sinaic event where God's providence intervened in human affairs, directing the descendants of Abraham to study and observe His Torah, and educate the world on His existence, His Oneness, and His truths.

### **Maimonides: Only Certain Individuals Knew God**

Noah's son Shem recognized and taught about God. Shem established a house of study in B'aire L'chai Roh-ee. We learn when the twins (Jacob and Esau) violently wrestled within Rebecca, that Rebecca went to the study hall of Shem to gain some insight as to why her pregnancy deviated from the norm. What was Rebecca intent on learning? Why did she go here specifically? Upon Eliezer's successful return from locating a wife for Isaac, the Torah tells us that Isaac too was returning from B'aire L'chai Roh-ee. What Isaac was doing there?

Previously, when Hagar fled from before Sarah, she named the well where the angel appeared, "B'aire L'chai Roh-ee". We now arrive at the initial event, from which we may derive the significance attributed to this place. What is this significance?

*(continued on next page)*

**RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT**

*Written by student*

(continued from previous page)

**B'aire L'chai Roh-ee – God's Providence over Individuals**

Rashi states that Hagar had witnessed God's providence while in Abraham's house. But now exiled, she never expected to see providence outside of Abraham's house. Hagar, as an individual, no longer comprised Abraham's mission and was surprised to witness an angel of God, i.e., God's providence. (Gen. 16:7) Hagar named that God who spoke to her at the well, "The God Who sees." (Gen. 16:13) The Torah explains why she gave this name, "[13] ...for she said, 'for also further I see, after I have seen'. [14] Therefore the well was named, 'The Well of the Living One Who is Seen.'" Hagar states that she saw God's providence "again". After having seen it Abraham's house, Hagar again witnessed God's providence via His angels. What is the lesson?

Yonasan ben Uzziel explained the name of this place as, "One Who sees, but is not seen." What does this name mean? Hagar's naming of this place on account of a new providential event teach this: "You are the One who has true existence. Here was revealed the providence of God." Hagar praised God. She admitted of the idea that no human knows when providence will take place. She assumed providence was limited to Abraham's mission. But now, Hagar recognized that His providence provides for every "individual". She experienced God's intervention, His providence, even away from Abraham's house. Providence for God's mission for Abraham to establish the Jewish nation was not the only type of providence. Thus, Hagar identified two distinct roles in which God's providence relates to man, 1) providence for mankind (Abraham establishing a nation, and 2) providence for individuals. The idea Hagar spoke of, "He sees but isn't seen", refers to providence outside Abraham's mission, that is, "How God's providence extends to every individual."

Simultaneously, Hagar demonstrated through her very surprise at God's intervention that man cannot know when and where God's providence will step in. In contrast, most people incorrectly feel they "know" when God is in their lives. But as Yonasan ben Uzziel explained, the name means "One Who sees, but is not seen." "Is not seen" means that man cannot predict God's methods of providence.

Isaac too came from B'aire L'chai Roh-ee, where Shem was. Shem's house of study was established precisely in this location, as this was the goal of Shem's study hall: to study God's providence for individuals. Shem's study hall embodied the truth uttered by Hagar. Therefore he established his study hall in the very place where Hagar had expressed this very truth.

Why did Rebecca go to Shem's study hall? As we stated, Shem taught about God's providence for individuals. Rebecca didn't think her pregnancy was

anything more than a personal crisis, not on par with God's mission for Abraham and Isaac to establish the Jewish nation. Therefore she sought understanding about her "individual" case: she felt it was a personal and private problem. However, it was then revealed to her through prophecy that her pregnancy was not a personal matter. Her abnormal pregnancy was an act of God's providence over the nation, not the individual.

Both Isaac and Jacob learned at Shem's study hall. Why? To fulfill their roles as forefathers of the Jewish nation, they required knowledge of God's providence for the individual. To pass on to Israel the traditions and teachings of Abraham, this "individual providence" was required learning. Abraham's knowledge concerned providence for mankind, while Shem's knowledge centered on individual providence.

We learn that on his journey from his home to his uncle Laban, Jacob lodged at Shem's study hall for 14 years. This teaches that Jacob required 14 years of knowledge of God's providence over individuals, so as to become the establisher of the tribes. This level of knowledge was acquired at Shem. Only then, did the providence relate to Jacob to establish the tribes. Such a long duration of study teaches that God's methods of providence require long and deep study. The patriarchs all required a level of in-depth study, in order to accomplish their goals: this study was "God's Providence to individuals."

It was asked, "Why did Isaac have to spend so many years in blindness?" The answer was "to give the blessing to Jacob" So why could he not be temporarily blind? We must appreciate that God's providence is not a simple matter. For some reason, Isaac required this degree of blindness. If Isaac had a condition that led to his blindness, and God did not remove it, it was necessary for God's plan. It was not a punishment, as it says, "To give the blessing to Jacob". But we may investigate this matter further.

Moses did not lose his vision. (Deut. 34:7) He knew that beyond a certain point, he could not

know. This is the meaning of "...and Moses hid his face" (Exod. 3:6) stated in connection with his encounter with the burning bush. Because of this, Moses merited to attain the highest level of prophecy ever experienced. Moses understood when a matter that was greater than his abilities. However, Isaac tried to understand that which was beyond his abilities. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac pondered how God could first tell Abraham "For in Isaac will your seed be called", and then Abraham should be commanded to kill Isaac. Isaac sought an understanding for this contradiction in God's words.

The Medrash states that Isaac's blindness was due to the angel's tears falling into Isaac's eyes as he was bound on the altar. How do we understand this Medrash? The angels represent "ultimate knowledge". Their "tears falling into Isaac's eyes" metaphorically alludes to something greater than Isaac (angels) causing a negative (blindness) in Isaac. Thus, Isaac's very attempt to overextend his inquiry into areas greater than his abilities had a negative effect on him. He became blinded. God's initial promise of Isaac being a successor would not come to be. This knowledge affected Isaac, i.e., blindness. However, this very blindness helped direct Isaac to review his act, and repent from trying to gain knowledge, which surpassed his abilities. Another Medrash also teaches that Isaac lacked the knowledge concerning how the providence over Abraham works.

We learn that God designed two types of providence, 1) providence over mankind, and 2) providence over the individual. Hagar understood that God granted His providence over Abraham for the sake of mankind. But Hagar was then exiled from Abraham's house. She did not assume she would experience providence, unless connected somehow with God's influence over mankind. After experiencing God's intervention at the well, Hagar now learned of this second type of providence. ■

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After all the miracles in Egypt, the Red Sea, Sinai, and others...and the people still view their situation as hopeless. How is this possible? Two verses offer the answer...

### Human Nature

“And your hearts will wax haughty, and you will forget God your God who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slaves”. (Deut. 8:14)

“And you will say in your heart, ‘My strength and the power of my hands that has rendered this great wealth’.” (Deut. 8:17)

These verses describe the proud and escapist feelings we can indulge upon our success. “Proud”, since we see the second verse embodies man’s ego, which is relentlessly pushing forward. “Escapist”, since the first verse describes our need to escape God’s commands. The Jews didn’t have a real complaint about the Manna. It was miraculous, and offered the flavor of all they imagined. It created no human waste. However, they wished to be free of the Manna, as we read in Numbers 11:5 when the Jews degraded the Manna, “We recall the fish that we ate for ‘free’ [in Egypt]...” Rashi comments, “If straw was not given to the Jews to create bricks, fish was given for ‘free’? Yes, it was free...free from Mitzvos”. The Jews identified Manna – which comes from God – as synonymous with observing all the commands, which too come from God. Their distaste for the Manna is in fact a displaced distaste for the burden of Torah commands. They viewed the commands as restrictive, instead of as their true value: joyful, rewarding, perfecting and offering eternal life. With the combined desires to flee from Torah restrictions, and a need for ego satisfaction, we are bent on denying God, as a means of catering to both. Even after so many miracles, those Jews of the wilderness caved into human frailties. And so do we.

### Desperation

This emotional expression witnessed in the verses above is generated from the denial of God’s abilities, and His very existence. Our distorted sense of what is truly real is rooted in what we sense ‘physically’. This is due to our youth, where our emotions have been granted a head start over our intelligence. “Man’s inclination is evil from youth”. (Gen. 8:21) We become attached to emotional gratification, and constantly seek sustained physical enjoyments. Some of us become so attached; it is almost impossible to fathom any other enjoyment. But with this attachment, we unconsciously convince our emotions – not our minds – that what is “real” is synonymous with what is physical. This becomes an unques-

tioned “truth”. We then lead lives where God is no longer part of our sense of reality, despite our daily prayers, Sabbath observance, and other ritually performed and rote acts. God knows this danger as witnessed in His warnings above. The Rabbis too recognized this danger, and formulated many blessings as Maimonides taught, “To recall the Creator regularly”. (Laws of Blessings, 1:3)

### Prayer & Creation

Our morning prayers (Shacharis) are replete with references to Genesis; starting with our initial prayer of Baruch She-Amar and Barachu. Why? The primary lesson is that all exists and relies on God’s will. The very existence of everything is impossible without God, for nothing can create itself. And even subsequent to creation, all existences require God’s will to be sustained. The reasoning is that since something did not exist until God willed it to be, both its creation “and” its continued existence as well are not dependent on itself. All matter “remains” in existence due to God’s will: “In His goodness He renews each day regularly, the acts of creation”. (“Borachu”, morning daily prayers)

### Providence

The Talmud teaches, “All man’s needs are decided by God between Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur.” (Beitzta, 16a) If we accept the Rabbis as authorities, this statement must help us abandon our ego feelings of success.

Jacob wished to regularly demonstrate from Whom he received his sustenance and wealth. He therefore gave a portion of his successes to God.

Malachi 3:10 teaches that we may test God in one area: the giving of charity. We may test God to see if He “opens the storehouses of heaven, emptying out a blessing more than enough”. Furthermore, in his “Guide for the Perplexed”, Maimonides teaches that God’s involvement in our lives is based on our intellectual perfection:

#### *Book III, chap. XVIII*

*“The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence. This benefit is very great in the case of prophets, and varies according to the degree of their prophetic faculty: as it varies in the case of pious and good men according to their piety and uprightness. For it is the intensity of the Divine intellectual influence that has inspired the prophets, guided the good in their actions, and perfected the wisdom of the pious. In the same proportion as ignorant and disobedient persons are deficient in that Divine*

(continued on next page)

Parshas Chukas:

## GODLESS HUMAN NATURE



influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank equal to that of irrational beings: and they are "like unto the beasts" (Ps. xlix. 21)."

"Consider how the action of Divine Providence is described in reference to every incident in the lives of the patriarchs, to their occupations, and even to their passions, and how God promised to direct His attention to them. Thus God said to Abraham, "I am thy shield" (Gen. xv. 1); to Isaac, "I will be with thee, and I will bless thee" (ibid. xxvi. 3); to Jacob, "I am with thee, and will keep thee" (ibid. xxviii. 15): to [Moses] the chief of the Prophets, "Certainly I will be with thee, and this shall be a token unto thee" (Exod. iii. 12): to Joshua, "As I was with Moses, so I shall be with thee" (Josh. i. 5). It is clear that in all these cases the action of Providence has been proportional to man's perfection. The following verse describes how Providence protects good and pious men, and abandons fools;" He Will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness: for by strength shall no man prevail" (I Sam. ii. 9). When we see that some men escape plagues and mishaps, whilst others perish by them, we must not attribute this to a difference in the properties of their bodies, or in their physical constitution," for by strength shall no man prevail" : but it must be attributed to their different degrees of perfection, some approaching God, whilst others moving away from Him. Those who approach Him are best protected, and" He will keep the feet of his saints"; but those who keep far away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them; there is nothing that could protect them from what might happen; they are like those who walk in darkness, and are certain to stumble." "Now consider how by this method of reasoning we have arrived at the truth taught by the Prophets, that every person has his individual share of Divine Providence in proportion to his perfection. For philosophical research leads to this conclusion, if we assume, as has been mentioned above, that Divine Providence is in each case proportional to the person's intellectual development."

Maimonides teaches that Divine Providence is a reality, and the intensity and level reaching each person is in direct proportion to his or her intellectual perfection. We should then desire to be influenced by God's goodness, by improving our intellectual perfection at all times. We should "minimize our work and maximize our Torah study" (Maimonides' Laws of Personalities, 2:14).



*Jewish merchants reach new lows, as do Kabbalistic Rabbis who join the cultish, red bendel endorsement fad. No different than Catholic holy water, Jews assume trinkets outweigh God's ability to punish man. Magical red strings violate the Torah Fundamental of Reward and Punishment.*

### Refutation of Segulas

Recognizing God's words in the sources above, and the reasonable truths so pleasing to our minds... we can no longer accept irrational segulas as responsible for our success and goodness in our lives. It is our "intellectual perfection" as Maimonides teaches that entitles us to God's Providence. We thereby completely dismiss the foolish belief that trinkets, amulets, and all segulas play any role whatsoever. In fact, belief in nonsense renders us as – Maimonides taught – "deficient in that Divine influence, our condition is inferior, and our rank equal to that of irrational

beings: and we are like unto the beasts." Accepting the notion that our fate is not based on our perfection, but rather, on segulas and trinkets...degrades us to the level of beasts, which have no Divine Providence at all. Segulas also deny the Torah Fundamental of Reward and Punishment. For segula proponents feel one may be evil or average, and yet be shielded from God's intended infertility, poverty or single hood, by baking keys in challas, reciting Tehillim, giving challa with blessings, wearing red bendels, or checking mezuzas. However, God says His Providence will only help them if they introspect, recognize their sins, and repent: "Let us search and examine our ways and return to God". (Lamentations, 3:40)

### The Cure

"And remember God your God – for it is He who gave you strength to create success, in order to fulfill His treaty that He swore to your forefathers, as this day." (Deut. 8:18)

Again we see the theme that is so crucial at every moment of our lives: we must be cognizant of "Who" provides our abilities, and our very existence. And we must maintain focus upon "why" He gave us existence: to fulfill His commands, for our "own good" (Deut. 10:13). If we contemplate and become convinced of this truth, we will escape the danger of being Godless humans. We will also merit His intervention, and arrive at a serene life where our worries evaporate...since God can do all.

The sin of those bitten by the fiery serpents was their elevation of the physical world to absolute supremacy over all other considerations. They valued what they perceived sensually as the be all and end all of their Godless human existence. They ignored the very Creator of that physical world. How sublime.

As the rabbis teach, we are not allowed to rely on miracles. We must use our ingenuity to provide for ourselves. But at the same time, we are foolish to assume our fate is exclusively "our own might". Therefore, we must all first become intellectually convinced in God's existence by means of proofs; live by His Torah, give charity, and become convinced that He can and will intervene with His astonishing Divine Providence in our lives. If you live the life He has mapped in His Torah, you may truly cast away your worries. You must also cast away your segulas, unless you wish to be cast away by God, as are all dumb beasts. ■

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## HOW TO

# Keep Chukim

MATT SCHNEEWEISS

The Rambam, in Hilchos Me'ilah 8:8, defines mishpatim and chukim:

*"The mishpatim are those mitzvos whose benefits in this world are evident, such as the prohibitions of stealing and murder, and honoring one's father and mother. And the chukim are those mitzvos whose reasons are not evident . . . such as the prohibition of pig's meat, meat and milk, the decapitated calf, the red heifer, and the goat which is sent away."*

How are we supposed to view chukim? The Rambam explains:

*"It is proper for a person to think into the statutes of the Holy Torah and to know their underlying concepts in accordance with his ability. If he doesn't find a reason and doesn't know a cause of something, it should not be of a lesser stature in his eyes, nor should he break forth to ascend to Hashem lest He burst forth against him, nor should he think of it as a mundane matter."*

According to the Rambam there are three groups of people who relate to chukim incorrectly. Understanding these incorrect approaches to chukim will equip us to fully appreciate the correct approach.

In the eyes of the first group, *chukim* are "of a lesser stature." They are perceived as inferior to mishpatim, and are performed in an irreverent, annoyed manner - like a person who wishes to rid himself of a burdensome chore which he views as absurd and pointless.

In order to understand the second group, we must first examine the phrase "*break forth to ascend to Hashem lest He burst forth.*" The Rambam borrowed this phrase from Shemos 19:24. Hashem cautions the Jews not to attempt to draw close to His Glory at Sinai lest "He break forth against them" - lest they cause irreversible damage to their souls [1]. This metaphor is utilized by the Rishonim to warn people not to delve into esoteric areas of knowledge which they are not emotionally and intellectually equipped to handle. If they do so, they will inevitably arrive at false ideas - rooted in imagination and unconscious desires - and project them onto God and His Torah, thereby endangering their souls and jeopardizing their portion in the World to Come [2].

The people in the second group "*break forth to ascend to Hashem*" by inventing speculative, mystical explanations for the chukim, infusing the otherwise bland or perplexing mitzvos with cosmic, spiritual significance. The Rambam warns such people not to take this approach to chukim, lest "He break forth against them" - lest they arrive at false ideas about God and forfeit their portion in the World to Come.

The third category of people "*think of [the chukim] as mundane matters.*" They neither denigrate them nor imbue them with mystical significance. These people are not bothered by the fact that they are obligated to perform actions which, to their mind, are senseless. They perform these mitzvos perfunctorily and do not give them any more thought than their brushing teeth or tying their shoes [3].

All of these attitudes, the Rambam warns, are incorrect. Rather, writes the Rambam in Hilchos Temurah 4:14: "*Even though all of the chukim of the Torah are scriptural edicts, it is proper to think into them, and attribute reasons to them to the best of one's ability.*" The Torah urges us to invest all of our intellectual ability into analyzing the chukim in order to find rational reasons.

To what extent must we understand the chukim? The Rambam continues:

Behold! The Torah states, "You shall keep all My chukim and all My mishpatim and do them" (Vayikra 19:37, 20:22). The Sages say that we must "keep" and "do" the chukim just like the mishpatim. "Doing" is obvious, namely, that we should observe the chukim. "Keeping" means that we must be careful and not regard the chukim as inferior to the mishpatim.

In other words, the obligation to understand the chukim is not confined to the world of the theoretical, but it must actually affect our "keeping" of the mitzvos. According to our Sages, "we must 'keep' and 'do' the chukim just like the mishpatim." Our conviction in the rational reasons for chukim should be as strong as our conviction in the rational reasons for the mishpatim.

This degree of "keeping" is beautifully expressed in the Meiri's commentary on the verse: "I will keep your chukim; do not forsake me utterly" (Tehilim 119:8). The Meiri interprets this to mean: "*I shall keep your statutes to the greatest degree of keeping, as if my intellect obligated me to keep them.*"

In other words, we are obligated to find reasons for all of the mitzvos - chukim and mishpatim - which are so clear and rational that it as if they were mandated by our intellects. Only then have we succeeded in fulfilling the Torah's commandment, "*You shall keep all My chukim and all My mishpatim and do them.*" ■

[1] Avraham ben ha'Rambam on Shemos 19:21.

[2] See the end of the Ramban's introduction to Sefer Bereishis.

[3] This, I believe, is why the ben sh'eino yode'a lishol (the son who does not know to ask) receives the same answer as the ben rasha (the evil son). The ben sh'eino yode'a lishol is faulted because he is not bothered by the chukim of the seder. He sees people involved in apparently crazy actions - cramming matzah down their throats, double-dipping vegetables, guzzling wine, and rushing to finish before midnight - and is not curious or bothered enough to ask a question: a symptom of a severe imperfection of the soul.

# Tzedaka

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



The Torah saw it necessary to record two accounts of tzedaka. This is because I believe there are two basic concepts regarding tzedaka.

One story is about Avraham, after he defeated the five kings, where Malkitzedek brought out bread and wine to nourish Avraham, and Avraham gave a tenth of his possessions to Malkitzedek. The second account, describes Jacob, upon his flee from his brother Esav, where God, in the famous dream of the ladder, assured Jacob of His Divine providence. Here we find Jacob swore to give a tenth. We learn two ideas about tzedaka from these accounts.

Regarding Avraham, as Malkitzedek greeted him with the bread and wine, it says that Malkitzedek blessed Avraham. However, Avraham did not respond. But in the next passage, Malkitzedek blessed again, only in this blessing, he is blessing God, not Avraham. In this very same sentence, it records that Avraham then gave Malkitzedek a tenth of all that he had. Why did Avraham wait for the second blessing? I believe that the Torah is indicating here that there must be a proper recipient for tzedaka. Once Malkitzedek blessed God, he defined himself as that proper recipient.

In connection with Jacob, there is a different lesson. Here, I believe the focus is not on the recipient, but on the benefactor, namely Jacob. Jacob's tenth displayed 2 objectives: 1) he wanted to demonstrate that all which he received was directly from God. Therefore the concept of returning possessions to God made sense. 2) He had no fear that by being charitable, that he was in any way placing himself

in monetary risk. He was certain that God would continually provide.

The gain then that one receives by giving tzedaka is that he is constantly affirming his belief that God provides, and will provide for him. The charitable person has no problem parting with his money. Firstly, this is not his central value system, the pursuit of wisdom is. Secondly, he does not look at this as a loss. We learn in Malachi (3:10) that God tells the Jews that charity is the one area a person is allowed to "test" God, to see if He will return to us financial success. God states, "...and test Me please with this, says the Master of Hosts, (see) if I do not open up the storehouses of heaven, and empty out (for you) a blessing until you have more than enough". God is guaranteeing that by giving tzedaka, we assure for ourselves financial security, and not an average income, but "until we have more than enough".

We learn from Abraham and Jacob that one must give to a worthwhile recipient, and that one affirms his convictions in God's kindness and generosity towards man when we are charitable. We lose nothing in the process, but rather, we secure God's blessings. We also affirm our convictions that the very monies we give, are in fact from God, by giving to those who follow God.

One might listen to these words with a bit of disbelief and ask, "How will God accomplish that? I give tzedaka, and God will give me financial success?"

To this person I would ask, "Did not God create the heavens and earth? The sun and moon...the innumerable number of spheres in space? Is it not then a small thing for Him to

give financial increase? Recognition of those who have less than us is commanded many times in the Torah. There are many reasons for us to adhere to this command. As Maimonides states in the Mishneh Torah, "this commands must be followed more carefully than all other positive commands". One who thinks this through will arrive at the truth, that he should experience no sense of risk when he gives his tzedaka.

Tzedaka is not defined merely as giving money as its own ends. The obligation of tzedaka when giving to the poor is to also restore one's sense of self so he may function inline with Torah. Therefore, as Jewish law states, if one had a high level of living, where, for example he had a servant-pulled horse, and became impoverished, one's obligation is to restore to him a servant and a horse. Even if the one giving doesn't live this high, it is irrelevant, as the goal is to restore one to a state where he feels his self image restored, and can function once again, achieving the lifestyle outlined by the Torah. When we give to the poor, our intent must not be to simply provide finances, but to raise this person's state of mind to a level of self-sufficiency and happiness, that he feels well enough to realign himself with the Torah lifestyle.

The Shulchan Aruch states that the highest level of charity is 20% of ones profit. Not the commonly assumed 10%. 10% is mentioned as an average person's tzedaka. But the highest form is 20%.

## 8 levels of charity:

The source for this law is in the Jewish law book entitled "Shulchan Aruch", Chap. 249, subheadings 6 through 13:

- 1) Assisting the poor person so he no longer requires charity, i.e., giving him a job
- 2) Where the donor and recipient are both ignorant of each other (this removes ego from the donor, and humility from the recipient)
- 3) The donor alone knows the recipient, but not vice versa
- 4) The poor person knows the donor, but not vice versa
- 5) Both know each other, and the donor gives prior to being asked
- 6) You give the poor person what he asks, only after he asks
- 7) You give the poor person less than what he asks, but with a pleasant countenance
- 8) You give the poor person begrudgingly ■

# Torah Study Methodology

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



MS 2195  
Tanhum ben Joseph Yerushalmi: The adequate guide, an alphabetical concordance to the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides. Egypt, 13th c.

*“The correct question is 90% of the answer”*

This paper was written years ago during Parshas Chukas. It was written as an aid for Torah study. Developing the proper, central questions on any area is crucial to arriving at answers.

When one goes through an account of Jewish history found in either the Torah, Prophets, Writings, or Jewish Law; in the Mishna or the Talmud, it is essential to our understanding to keep the following in mind: the Torah was designed word for word, letter for letter by God, as was the Oral Law. The Talmud was written by the extremely wise. One commits a grave injustice both to the ideas and to oneself by offering a simple explanation of any topic found in these areas, as they all stem from God Who has infinite wisdom, “For God gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.” (Proverbs, 2:6). Everything must be appreciated and understood on

this level. Every sentence in the Torah, for example, must contribute to the explanation of the area. In any given story in the Torah, the Prophets or the Writings the precise amount of information is disclosed to us by God so that we can detect the issues. Certain unusual words will be used to catch our attention. Certain passages will seem out of place at first, and seemingly impossible events are described which force us to delve onto the area. These are all generous clues for the investigation.

Besides having the correct appreciation for the design of the Torah, we must also approach our studies with the correct questions. As a Rabbi once said, “asking the right question is 90 percent of the answer.”

Many times when asking a question, you already have more information than you may think, and by using that information in your question, you will more likely arrive at the correct answer. For example: When you see a flat tire on you friend’s car you can ask, “What happened?” But you already know what happened. He drove his car over some sharp object. The question should really be formulated as “What did you drive your car over?” By asking the question in this way, you will start pondering what could have punctured his tire. You’ve directed your thoughts directly to the area that contains your answer - namely, the type of sharp object. If you would have persisted with your first question of “What happened?”, you would have placed your mindset in an ‘astonished’ state, as opposed to an ‘inquisitively’ mode. Being in an astonished state creates an emotional curiosity that does not necessarily probe further towards any intellectual search.

The following area in the Torah will illustrate this point. I will first give a brief summary of the area. Then I will show an indirect and direct way of asking questions.

The area is in Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 through 9. It states that the people traveled towards the land of Edom, and their patience grew short on the way. They complained regarding God and Moses that there was no bread and water and they were tired of the light bread (the manna). God then sent fiery serpents to attack and kill the people, and many died. The people saw their wrong and went to Moses and confessed that they spoke wrongly about God and about Moses, and asked that he pray that the serpents be removed. After Moses prayed, God told him to create a serpent and to place it upon a pole and that any who looked at it would be healed. Moses did so, and made a

(continued on next page)

copper serpent and placed it on a pole, and any man that was bitten gazed at it and lived. This is the basic story. Be mindful that to successfully answer an area you must keep to the main issues, and identify what is peripheral. This cannot be emphasized enough.

The main questions on this section are: What was the fault of the people? Why did God choose to give “fiery serpents” as a punishment here, as opposed to something else? What does the added affliction of “fiery” serpents come to accomplish? Why did Moses have to make a serpent if the people already confessed? Why put it on a pole? Why did Moses make it out of “copper”? How did looking at this serpent heal?

Rashi said, “let the serpent who was punished due to his evil talk (the section dealing with Adam and Eve) come and exact punishment from those who spoke evil. Let the serpent come, to whom everything tastes as one, and exact punishment from those who denied the good. That one thing (manna) was changed for them to many things.” According to Rashi, the Jews received a corrective measure through snakes because of evil talk. However, this isn’t the first time someone spoke evil. Why didn’t Miriam receive snakes when she spoke against Moses? Why didn’t the Jews receive snakes long before this? They spoke evil before.

These are the basic questions. It is very possible to work with them as they are. But if we make slight changes to their structure, we will direct ourselves closer to the answers. Remember, all of the information needed to answer these questions is in these passages.

The main question should be addressed first. Why snakes? We know why. They spoke evil. So we must ask more directly: “What was the difference in the evil talk of the Jews here as opposed to all other cases, that they received the serpents?” Asking the question in this way, you direct your mind to look at their actions for the answer. You know that in other cases the Jews complained to God and Moses, and they didn’t receive snakes, let alone “fiery” snakes. So speaking evil per se cannot be what is the cause of their extraordinary punishment. What is different here? The difference is that it never mentions anywhere else that the people “grew tired on the way”. This first passage seems extraneous at first. But now, rephrase the question using this information from the first passage: “What is it in the fact that they were tired, that their following evil talk should be punished with serpents?” You can almost immediately make the connection that their evil talk was the direct result of being tired.

Meaning, their evil talk was unjustified in relation to the object of their complaint. It was just talk used to vent their emotions regarding something else. There was no inherent flaw with the manna.

Talking can be used for one of two things: 1) communication of an idea or of a real complaint, 2) an outlet for the emotions, as one does when hot tempered and breaks something. So instead of breaking something, you whine and complain. This first passage is here to hint towards the underlying cause for their complaining: they were tired of the journey and didn’t control their feelings, and began to displace their frustration to outlet their emotions.

We now also understand why they received such a different punishment here, as compared to other areas. Here, their complaining wasn’t based on any real problem. They covered it up with a rationalization of the lack of bread and water. But in reality they shouldn’t have complained. This explains why they received serpents. Serpents were given to them because they represent what the original serpent was punished for- evil talk- and to point out to them that they were victims of an emotion of venting their feelings through speech. Had there been another incident in Scripture where an individual, or people, had vented their emotions in this manner, and were on a level for God to administer a corrective measure, we would witness another case of “fiery serpents”. However, this is the only account where this specific flaw occurred, and therefore, the only account where fiery serpents come to correct the situation.

With this information, we can also answer another question: Why the additional aspect of “fiery”? The reason is because they denied the good of the manna. This is what Rashi was pointing to. If there were two aspects to their punishment (serpents and fiery), there must be a reason for both. So “serpents” come to correct evil speech, and “fiery” comes to correct their denial of the good manna.

Tangentially, Miriam wasn’t punished with serpents because her degrading talk wasn’t to outlet an emotion. Contained in her words was an incorrect notion regarding how God relates to man. She however expressed this with a boastful overtone. Thus, she fell prey to two faults; 1) she misunderstood how God relates to Moses, (as compared to herself) and 2) she gave in to the feeling of haughtiness. Since Miriam faulted in these two, God corrected her in both. He taught her how His relationship with Moses differed from His relationship to

her, and He gave her leprosy, which lowers ones self-esteem. This is another example of how Gods punishment differs from man’s punishments. When God punishes someone, or a people, it is an act which corrects a fault. It is not just a deterrent. This is the basic concept behind “Mida k’neged mida”, (measure for measure).

What about the question as to why God told Moses to make replica of the serpent? Didn’t the people repent already? This is one way of asking this question. But we can deduce from the facts that there must have been something lacking if God told Moses to do something further. The question should be rephrased as the following: “What was it in the Jews’ request for the removal of the serpents that their repentance was not complete?” You can see the answer clearly. Their confession to God and Moses is immediately followed by their request to have the serpents removed. (An important point about this is that they both take place in the same passage. When one passage contains a few thoughts, they are related.) Their repentance was only for the sake of removing their immediate pain from the serpents, and not a true conviction in their error. Because of this, God instructed Moses to create a replica of the serpent so that they could stare at it in order to contemplate their problem properly and remove from themselves their incorrect notions. Placing it upon the pole facilitated them to direct their thoughts towards God, Who is figuratively “upon high”.

### Summary

The following steps should be taken when approaching an area of Torah:

- 1) Know where the area begins and ends.
- 2) Understand the area thoroughly.
- 3) Distinguish between main points and side points.
- 4) Ask yourself how this area differs from all other areas. This will help to point you towards the main topics.
- 5) Formulate questions clearly using as much information as you have to work with.
- 6) If the area deals with Gods relationship to man, detect either man’s fault and see how the punishment fits the crime, or look into God’s actions towards man to understand what He was improving upon.
- 7) If the area deals with mitzvos (commandments), if they are positive commands, look into man’s nature to see what they affect; and if they are negative commands, then they are coming to control a natural disposition of man, which must be tempered. ■



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