

# *Parshas Chukas*

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## *1. Preserving Kiddush Hashem*

The Torah tells us that before Korach and his community was about to be destroyed, Hashem informed Moshe that He was going to destroy the entire Klal Yisroel. Moshe said to Hashem, "Since You know the intent of every man, why should everyone perish for the sins of the one who sinned?" Hashem responded that He would only destroy those who sinned against Him. Thus, only Korach and his followers were destroyed. The question is – why did Hashem initially consider eliminating the entire Jewish people when He knew that only Korach and his community were contesting Moshe's authority?

Rashi cites the Midrash which explains what Moshe had said to Hashem. If a group of people rises up against their king and attempts to usurp his authority, the reason that he destroys the entire community is because he does not know who was involved in the rebellion. Rashi continues, You Hashem, that You know who is usurping Your authority, You should destroy them and not the entire Jewish people. It seems from the Torah that if it were not for Moshe's intervention and plea, Hashem would have destroyed all of the Jewish people. How do we understand this? If they are not guilty why do they deserve to be destroyed?

After acquiescing to Moshe's plea, the land opened its mouth and swallowed-up Korach and his entire community. The Mishna tells us that the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach and his followers was created at the end of the Sixth Day of Creation during the twilight period. It was formed specifically to bring Divine retribution upon Korach and his entire community. This miracle was intended to convey to the Jewish people that Moshe's word is the Word of Hashem. Having witnessed this tragic event, one would think that the Jewish people who survived would have proclaimed Moshe as the communicator of the Word of Hashem. However the Torah tells us differently.

The next day the Jewish people approached Moshe and Aaron with a complaint saying, "**You killed the people of Hashem. You were too harsh with them.**" After witnessing such a revealed and undisputable miracle demonstrating the Attribute of Justice, how could the Jews react in such a manner? As a result of their insolence, Hashem caused a plague to come upon them and over 14,000 people perished. How do we understand this?

The fact is that although the Jewish people themselves did not attempt to usurp Moshe's authority there was nevertheless a degree of culpability on a communal level. When Korach and his followers openly confronted Moshe with a disgraceful accusation (contesting his word, which is synonymous with the Word of Hashem) the entire Jewish people remained silent. If they had truly understood and appreciated Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jews would not have tolerated Korach's attack. The fact that they remained silent was an indication that the Jewish people themselves were not entirely convinced of the authenticity of the Torah. The silence of the Jewish people in this situation was a desecration of Hashem's name (*Chilul Hashem*). The liability of Chilul Hashem is so severe that one can only be atoned when he dies. This is the reason why Hashem initially was going to destroy the entire Jewish people. However, Moshe came to their defense and Hashem acquiesced to Moshe's request.

When the Jews accused Moshe of being too harsh with Korach and his community, Hashem brought a plague upon them. This accusation against Moshe revisited the issue of Chilul Hashem. Their complaint against Moshe was a clear indication that they did not fully grasp the gravity of the wrongdoing of Korach and his cohorts. Therefore they were struck with a

devastating plague.

Moshe could not intervene on behalf of Klal Yisroel to stop the plague. If this is the case, then how did it come to an end? Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that after the death of Korach and his follower, the Jewish people believed that the incense offering had the ability to kill those who burned it. The Jews believed that the reason why Korach and his group were killed was because there was something lethal in the incense offering that they brought.

When Moshe was in heaven at the time he was receiving the Torah, the Angel of Death gave him a gift, which was the secret of how to stop a plague – the burning of the incense. Moshe therefore told Aaron to go immediately into the midst of the camp and burn the incense, thus causing the plague to cease. Observing this, the Jewish people understood that the incense was not at all lethal but that it was in fact one of the most exalted types of offerings. Through this action, Moshe brought about a sanctification of Hashem's name (Kiddush Hashem) by having Aaron burn the incense in the midst of the camp to demonstrate its value. Fourteen thousand people died as a result of the plague because of Chilul Hashem and only after the burning of the incense did it come to an end because of witnessing Kiddush Hashem.

## ***2. Our Relevance to the Infinite***

The Torah introduces the Laws of the Parah Adumah (the Red Heifer) with, **“This is the Statute of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow...”** The Parah Adumah is an essential element in the removal of spiritual contamination caused by coming in contact with human remains (*tumaas mais*). Whenever the Torah presents a Statute it makes a particular reference such as “This is the Statute of the Pesach (Pascal Lamb).” Therefore the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks - if the Torah is going to present the particular laws dealing with spiritual contamination and its removal, shouldn't it have referred to the process as, “This is the Statute of spiritual contamination or purity...”? So why does the Torah say “This is the Statute of the Torah...”? Evidently the Statute of the Parah Adumah is somehow related to the Torah in its entirety. How do we understand this?

The Ohr HaChaim elucidates this difficulty with a fundamental principle. The Halacha is that only a Jew is susceptible to any type of spiritual contamination. If a non-Jew comes in contact with the remains of a human being he will not become contaminated. In addition, the spiritual contamination which emanates from the remains of a non-Jew is not as pervasive as that of a Jew. For example, the remains of a non-Jew only contaminate upon contact. Whereas, the remains of the Jew not only contaminate upon contact but also through being exposed under the same roof or enclosure (ohel). The Ohr HaChaim explains that the reason for this difference between the contamination that emanates from a Jew and that which emanates from a non-Jew is because the dimension of their souls (*nishamas*) is fundamentally different. Before the Sinai experience when the Jews received the Torah and became “G-d's chosen people,” there was no spiritual difference between the family of Yaakov (the Jews) and the nations of the world. All people were bound only by the Seven Laws of Noah. When we became G-d's people, the Holy Nation, we became bound to Hashem. As it is stated in the Zohar, “The Jewish people, the Torah, and Hashem are one,” meaning that the Jews are intertwined with Hashem through the Torah that unites them.

The Ohr HaChaim explains that there are many nether forces in this world which seek to be nurtured by holiness and therefore attach themselves to the Jewish people whose holiness emanates from their linkage to G-d. When the Torah states, **“This is the Statute of the Torah...”** it wants to reveal the basis for the Jew's susceptibility to contamination which is a result of our receiving the Torah at Sinai. Because we became the holy people at Sinai through the giving of the Torah we thus became subject to spiritual contamination. However, if we had not accepted the Torah at Sinai, we would not have any susceptibility to contamination just as the non-Jew.

The Statute dealing with the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) is the most incomprehensible of all of the Statutes of the Torah. Even King Solomon who was the wisest man who ever lived could not fathom it. As he says (Koheles 7:23), “It is distant from me...” Why should this Statute be more

difficult to understand than all of the others? The answer is – just as it is not possible to comprehend the depth and the breadth of the Torah in its entirety because it is the encapsulation of the infinite wisdom of Hashem, so too, it is impossible to understand the Statute of the Parah Adumah because it is rooted in our spiritual dimension which is linked to the infinite (Hashem).

The Gemara in *Tractate Haggigah* says that one is not permitted to speculate about what existed prior to existence because it is beyond the human capacity of comprehension. Identically, this is true with the spiritual mechanics of the Parah Adumah. Just as Hashem is beyond our grasp and comprehension so is the Parah Adumah which addresses the spiritual make-up of the Jewish people.

We see that although there are concepts that are beyond our understanding and frame of reference we can still have relevance to them. As the Ramchal explains in his work *The Way of G-d*, the Jew can become part of an infinite system when he attaches himself to Hashem, although the human being himself is finite. The fact that we have relevance to spiritual contamination on the most intense level is an indication that we are connected to the infinite as a result of the Torah.

### **3. Appreciating Miriam**

The Gemara in *Tractate Taanis* tells us that the Jewish people had three special caretakers - Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam. The Jewish people were the recipients of three special gifts – the wellspring, the Clouds of Glory, and the Mann. The wellspring was in the merit of Miriam. The Clouds of Glory were in the merit of Aaron and the Mann was in the merit of Moshe. The Gemara quotes a verse in Zacharia which states, "I removed the three shepherds in one month." This verse indicates that Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam all passed away in the same month. The fact is that each of them passed away in different months. The Gemara states that this is not the case because Miriam passed away in the month of Nissan, Aaron in Av, and Moshe in Adar. How does the Gemara resolve the seeming contradiction between the verse and fact?

The Gemara answers – that when Miriam passed away the wellspring ceased to flow and it was only reinstated in the merit of Moshe. After Aaron passed away the Clouds of Glory were dispersed and were also quickly reinstated in the merit of Moshe. The Gemara explains that since the Jewish people had what was taken from them replaced quickly, albeit in the merit of Moshe, they did not sense the loss of Miriam and Aaron who were their benefactors for close to forty years. It was not until Moshe Rabbeinu passed away and all of these gifts ceased to be that the Jewish people internalized the loss of the "three special shepherds of Israel." Although the Jewish people understood that each of the miracles from which they derived continuous benefit was in the merit of each of these individuals, nevertheless, they had not internalized the reality of the loss until Moshe passed away.

The Torah states, "*Vayavou b'nai Yisroel kol haaida midbar tzin* (The Children of Israel, the whole assembly, arrived at the Zin Desert...)" The Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh asks – if the Torah tells us that the "B'nai Yisroel (The Children of Israel) arrived at the desert," why is it necessary to say "the whole assembly"? It seems to be totally superfluous. It is understood that if the "Children of Israel" arrived it means the "whole assembly." The Ohr HaChaim answers that the Torah uses a number of appellations when referring to the Jewish people. For example, there are times when the Jewish people are referred to as "*am* (people)," which is an indication that at that moment they are ordinary or at a failing spiritual level. However when the Torah uses the appellation of "B'nai Yisroel (Children of Israel)," it is to indicate that they are at a special spiritual level. The Ohr HaChaim explains that when the Torah states "B'nai Yisroel...The entire assembly" it is to indicate that when they arrived at the Desert of Zin all of the Jews were at the special level of "B'nai Yisroel."

The Torah tells us that when the B'nai Yisroel arrived at the Desert of Zin, Miriam passed away and they had no water to drink because the wellspring ceased to exist. Their predicament caused them to complain vehemently against Moshe and Aaron. It is important to understand who these people were. The Torah reveals to us that at this moment they were all within the classification of

“B’nai Yisroel.” Despite their advanced spiritual level, they understood that they were not sufficiently worthy for the wellspring to continue. This understanding caused them to fully comprehend and appreciate who Miriam was.

One could ask – if in fact the wellspring was reinstated in the merit of Moshe, why was it necessary to have any interruption to the flow of water? However with the Ohr HaChaim’s explanation it is understood that it only occurred so that the people would appreciate the special level of Miriam. It was solely in her merit (unrelated to them or Moshe) that they were provided with this miracle of water.

It is interesting to note that Moshe’s failing through the hitting of the rock (rather than speaking to it) only came about as a result of the cessation of the wellspring. If Hashem had not caused the wellspring to stop flowing, Moshe would not have failed. Although Hashem was fully aware that Moshe would fail and consequently be denied the right to enter into the Land, He nevertheless caused the wellspring to cease in order for the Jewish people to recognize and understand Miriam’s dimension of spirituality. From this we are able to learn the great value of recognizing the specialness of a tzaddik.

#### ***4. The Significance of Performing a Mitzvah in a More Perfect Manner***

The Torah tells us that after Miriam passed away the water ceased to flow and Moshe was told by Hashem to speak to the rock to give forth its water. However, rather than speaking to it Moshe struck the rock. The Sforno explains that if Moshe had spoken to the rock, he would have brought about a revealed miracle that would have been at a higher level than if he struck it. However since Moshe struck the rock he did not bring about the Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G-d’s Name) that would have resulted from his speaking to it. As a result of this failing, Moshe and Aaron had to pass away before the Jews entered the Land of Israel. As much as Moshe pleaded with Hashem for forgiveness, Hashem did not listen to his pleas because he had the opportunity to Sanctify G-d’s Name and he did not.

Seemingly, if Moshe would have spoken to the Rock and brought about a Kiddush Hashem, he would have been able to enter into the Land. The Early Commentators explain that had Moshe entered into the Land, the Bais HaMikdash (The Temple) would have been built immediately and the world would have come to its level of perfection. If Moshe had spoken to the rock and the Jews would have witnessed it giving forth its water, then that experience would have elevated them to a spiritual level making them worthy to enter the Land of Israel. However, since Moshe did not bring about that Kiddush Hashem, the Jews did not experience what was needed for their spiritual perfection. Thus, Moshe could not cross into the Land because the Jews were not ready to live within a perfect existence.

The Gemara in *Tractate Bava Metzia* states that the manner in which Avraham Our Patriarch hosted the visiting angels determined the manner in which Hashem accommodated the needs of the Jewish people in the desert. The Talmud states that any act of hospitality which Avraham performed himself resulted in a miracle coming directly from Hashem without any human intervention. However any act of hospitality that was brought about through an intermediary, Hashem allowed the corresponding miracle to come only through an intermediary. The Gemara explains that since Avraham offered the bread himself, the Jewish people received the Mann (Manna) in the desert. Because of the shade of the tree that was offered by Avraham to protect his guests, we merited the Clouds of Glory which protected the Jews in the desert for forty years. However since Avraham offered the water to the angels through an intermediary (to wash their feet) the Jews received the water through Moshe Rabbeinu who had to extract the water from the rock. If Avraham had performed the Mitzvah of hosting guests in a more perfect way, (by providing water for the angels himself), the opportunity for Moshe to strike the rock would not have existed.

We see from Avraham’s participation in the Mitzvah of hospitality that the consequences of not performing a Mitzvah in the most perfect manner possible have far reaching effects (although

Avraham was not culpable for this). Seemingly, if the water had been provided to the Jewish people directly without the need for Moshe's participation as an intermediary, Moshe would have not failed. Thus, the world would have been brought to a level of perfection and the purpose of existence would have been fulfilled.

With this understanding, we should examine the way in which we perform Mitzvos. Do we strive to perform Mitzvos in the most perfect way? Meaning, do we understand the far-reaching value of this level of performance? Or is this something not even taken into consideration? We do not understand or realize to what degree our Mitzvah performance impacts on other people (e.g. through example) nor do we understand the intrinsic spiritual energy that is brought into the world by performing a Mitzvah on a more perfect level.

We read in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) that that there were ten generations from Adam to Noach and ten generations from Noach to Avraham. The Mishna tells us that Avraham was worthy of receiving all the merit of the ten generations from Noach to Avraham. How is this possible? One would think that we receive reward based on what we personally accomplish. Rabbeinu Yona, in his commentary on Pirkei Avos, explains that the world needs a certain degree of perfection and this perfection can only be brought about through the performance of the Mitzvos. Avraham was the only individual in his time to introduce the reality of Hashem as the Omnipotent power and Creator of the world. All of mankind rejected Avraham's position and did not participate to any degree in the spiritual perfection of the world (serving Hashem) because they were pagans. Thus Avraham, through his espousing of monotheism, brought about the level of perfection that was meant to be achieved by the members of the ten generations from Noach to Avraham.

Unfortunately, in our times the vast majority of the Jewish people are not committed to the observance of Mitzvos and the study of Torah. Nevertheless their participation is needed for the world to become perfected and this is not happening. Therefore a Jew whose life is committed to Torah and Mitzvos on a qualitative level has unlimited merit because he brings about a level of perfection to existence at a time when so many others are not. We should therefore try to perform Mitzvos in a more perfect manner and we will be able to affect the world as a whole and bring about the ultimate redemption.

### ***5. Obstacles, Blessing or Curse?***

The Jewish people were meant to enter the Land of Israel after a forty-year period of wandering. In the final year before the Jews entered into the land, they experienced numerous difficulties. At the beginning of the fortieth year Miriam passed away and the wellspring ceased to flow. The Jews immediately began to complain to Moshe that they would die in the desert if they did not have water to drink. As a result of this confrontation, Moshe struck the rock rather than speaking to it, thus causing him to forfeit the right to enter into the Land. Soon after this, Aaron passed away; the Clouds of Glory were dispersed and reinstated in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu.

After the passing of Aaron, the Jews began to complain about the Mann (Manna) saying, "**...our soul is disgusted with this insubstantial food.**" It is a wonder that after forty years of wandering in the desert and being sustained by the Mann that the Jewish people started to complain about it on the brink of their arrival to the Promised Land. As a result of their ungrateful behavior, Hashem sent the serpents to bite the Jews and many perished.

The Torah tells us that the Amorites planned to ambush the Jewish people as they traveled through a mountain pass; however, Hashem brought about a miracle that destroyed those who were waiting in ambush. Rashi cites the Midrash that says that the Amorites were hiding in caves along side the road that the Jews were going to take. Hashem caused the mountains to come together and the protrusions on one side crushed the Amorites in the caves. The body parts of the Amorites were washed away by the water that cascaded through the mountain. As the Jews passed the location between the mountains they saw rising up in the wellspring many body parts of human remains. They realized that Hashem had performed a miracle by destroying their enemy and

averting the destruction of the Jewish people. The Jews sang songs of praise to Hashem for this miracle.

After this incident, the Jews engaged in the worship of Baal Paor, which was idolatry, and they cohabited with the Moabite women. Once again the Wrath of Hashem came upon the Jews and resulted in many casualties.

This entire chain of events from the passing of Miriam to the incident of the Baal Paor took place during the fortieth year after many years of wandering when the Jews were about to enter into the Promised Land. The question is - why did the Jews face such difficult tests at this point when they were about to enter the Land of Israel?

The Gemara tells us that that the end of the winter is the coldest part of the winter and the conclusion of summer is the hottest part of the summer. The Commentators explain that G-d created existence in a manner that whenever a transition is about to take place the move from one state of affairs to another is always the most intense due to the resistance of change. This is the reason why the night is darkest before the dawn. Therefore they explain this is the reason why the bondage of Egypt had to intensify after Moshe came to redeem the Jewish people. The transition from bondage to redemption caused the intensification of hardship to resist the imminent redemption.

The Jewish people were about to enter into the Land of Israel where they were going to reach a new dimension of spirituality. In this location the Jews were meant to fulfill the Torah in its entirety and thus achieve an advanced level of spirituality. Because of this change that was about to take place, Satan created an overwhelming level of resistance – not to allow this to occur. The desert location was the preparatory stage for this transition into the Promised Land.

It is true that whenever we are about to reach a spiritual milestone, we will always incur difficulties as a result of the transitional process to another level. Despite the level of clarity which the Jews had in the desert, nevertheless, they were subjected to many distractions and temptation due to the transition which was about to occur. If the generation that had the greatest level of clarity (the generation of the desert) experienced stumbling blocks and distractions prior to achieving a new spiritual milestone, how much more so are we susceptible? Chazal tell us that all beginnings come with great difficulty, especially when they have the potential to lead us along a spiritual path. The fact is that if we do experience obstacles in our ascent to spirituality, then it is an indication that we are about to undergo positive change that is worthwhile achieving.

## ***6. Truth can only be Perceived through Humility.***

The Torah tells us that Bilaam was the prophet of the nations of the world and his level of prophecy was at the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. Despite the fact that Hashem communicated with Bilaam at the same level as Moshe, Bilaam was nevertheless a person who could only be controlled by Hashem's saying "No." One would think that a person who prophesizes at such a level would have the clarity that would cause him to be a pious and righteous person. How is it possible that Bilaam, despite his understanding of Hashem and what He wants from him, could be so evil and corrupted?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "**A person who has the three characteristics: *Ayin Tovah* (Good Eye), *Ruach Nemucha* (Humble Spirit), and *Nefesh Shefelah* (Minimal physical needs) is considered to be a student of Avraham Avinu.**" If a person has *Ayin Tovah*, he is truly happy when he sees his fellow human being experience good fortune. A person who has *Ruach Nemucha* is humble and not self-absorbed. And a person who has *Nefesh Shefelah* is satisfied with even the most minimal physical requirements. If one has these three characteristics, then he is considered a disciple of Avraham.

On the other hand, the Mishna continues, "**A person who has the three characteristics of *Ayin Raah* (Evil Eye), *Ruach Gevoha* (Inflated Spirit), and *Nefesh Rechava* (Insatiable Desire) is**

**considered to be a student of Bilaam the evil one.”** If a person is pained by another’s good fortune and he is arrogant, haughty, and brazen and has an insatiable appetite for materialism, he is considered a disciple of Bilaam. For example, the Torah states that Bilaam said to Balak, **“Even if you give me a house filled with gold and silver it would not be enough...”** Although Bilaam was a commoner, he believed that he should have had the wealth of a king.

The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Avraham Avinu was the only human being to recognize Hashem completely on his own. As the Torah tells us, that Avraham referred to Hashem as, “Adon-ai (Master).” How was it possible for Avraham to recognize G-d’s Presence in existence despite the world’s devotion to paganism? The three most humble people that ever lived were – Avraham, Moshe, and Dovid HaMelech (King David). Avraham had a quality of humility, which could not be found in anyone else in existence. He was not self-absorbed to any degree and his focus was completely out of himself. He never considered “the I” or “the Me.” The only way a person can perceive truth is if he focuses outwardly rather than inwardly on his own needs. If a person is self-absorbed with himself then that person’s only agenda is to satisfy his needs to the exclusion of all else.

Hashem, the Creator and Master of the Universe spoke directly to Bilaam; however, because he was so consumed with his own agenda and ego, Bilaam could not internalize truth to any degree. He was arrogant, brazen, and pursued hedonism despite his understanding of Hashem because all that mattered was satisfying himself.

Ego can cause one to be oblivious to the realities of life. A person who is self-absorbed can be exposed and privy to the greatest source of wisdom and spirituality and still remain totally unaffected. A doctor once told a story about a heart patient of his who was advised not to travel to a location more than half an hour from a hospital. Despite the concern of the doctor, the patient insisted on going on a cruise that would take him far from any medical facility. He told the doctor, “I want to go on this cruise and I take full responsibility if I die on the ship!” How is it possible for a person to behave so irresponsibly at the risk of losing his life? How could a cruise that lasts only a few days have greater value than living several more years? The answer is - if the “I” and the “Me” are important, then nothing matters at that moment other than satisfying one’s own needs.

It was because of Avraham Avinu’s humility that he was able to perceive Hashem and the truth despite the fact that he existed in a pagan world. Contrastingly, it was because of Bilaam’s insatiable ego that he could not perceive truth despite his open relationship with Hashem.