



# Parshas Chukas

For the week ending 5 Tamuz 5756 (12 Tamuz 5756)\*  
 21 & 22 June 1996 (28 & 29 June 1996)\*  
 \*Week ending dates for locations outside of Israel

## Summary

**T**he laws of the *Parah Adumah* — the red heifer — are detailed. These laws of ritual purification are to be used when someone has come into contact with death. After the nation “wanders” for nearly 40 years in the desert, Miriam passes away and is buried at *Kadesh*. The people complain about the loss of their water supply which until then has been provided for them miraculously in the merit of Miriam’s righteousness. Aaron and Moshe pray for the people’s welfare. Hashem commands them to gather the nation at *Merivah*, and speak to a designated rock so that water will flow forth from it. Distressed by the people’s lack of faith, Moshe hits the rock instead of speaking to it. He thus fails to produce the intended public demonstration of Hashem’s power over the world which would have resulted if the rock had produced water as a result of him only speaking to it. Therefore, Hashem tells Moshe and Aaron that they will not bring the people into the Land. The *Bnei Yisrael* resume their travels, but because the King of Edom, a descendant of *Eisav*, denies them passage through his country, they do not travel the most direct route to *Eretz Yisrael*. When they reach *Mt. Hor*, Aaron passes from this world and his son *Elazar* is invested with his priestly garments and responsibilities. Aaron was beloved by all the people, and they observe a national mourning period of 30 days. The *Bnei Yisrael* battle *Sichon* the Amorite, who fights against them rather than allow them to pass through his land. As a result, *Bnei Yisrael* conquer the lands that *Sichon* had previously seized from the Amonites on the east bank of the Jordan River.

## Commentaries

A WING AND A PRAYER

**“This is the decree (*chok*) of the Torah...” (19:2)**

The mitzvah of the *Parah Adumah* (red heifer) is the quintessential ‘*chok*’ or decree which defies human understanding.

The world is like a 747. No pilot would dream of getting behind the control column of a 747 until he knows how to fly his craft in all kinds of weather and under all conditions. He has to know how to take off, to land, to trim the ailerons. He has to know what every button and switch in front of him can and cannot do. He has to be a professional. The lives of 500 hundred people are hanging on his judgment and experience.

In much the same way, every Jew is a ‘pilot’. We have to know how to fly the 747 of life. Every halacha is like a switch in that 747 cockpit. And only with the Torah’s help can we navigate life’s airways without nose-diving into the sea.

We can never understand the depth of a mitzvah, for a mitzvah is an expression of the Will of the Creator and transcends the knowledge of His creations. But we know that the mitzvos are the control panel to the spiritual world.

We can never know how a mitzvah works, but this mustn’t interfere with our precision and care in doing them. No pilot knows *why* his plane flies through the sky. But he has to know *how* to fly the plane. The fact that he cannot explain *why* the air passing under his wings should cause the plane to fly, in no way detracts from his concentration as he sits on top of two tons of metal hurtling down the runway at over 100 mph. At that moment he’s not in the slightest bit concerned that he doesn’t understand how flight works. He knows that unless he performs flawlessly, *this flight* will certainly not work!

(Heard from Rabbi Simcha Wasserman zt”l)

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel  
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Parshas Chukas — 5 Tamuz 5756, 21 & 22 June 1996

Production Design: Lev Seltzer ∞

## SOUL FOOD

Similarly, if someone asked us why we eat, we would answer that we must eat in order to live. If we were questioned further as to why we eat bread and not stones, we would answer that stones don't contain the necessary nutrients to sustain life, but why humans need these nutrients, and why we can't extract them from stones — that we would not be able to explain, for that only Hashem knows. Even though we eat to stay alive, Hashem created the world in such a way that our food also has a pleasing taste and aroma. But that taste should never be confused with our reason for eating. Mitzvos are spiritual food for the *neshama*. Why or how a particular mitzvah sustains our soul, we cannot know, anymore than we know why a particular protein sustains our body. Hashem wanted the mitzvos to be palatable to us, so he infused them with taste — ideas and lessons — that we can understand. However, we should never confuse the *taste* of a mitzvah with its real reason, as we should never eat merely to satisfy our taste buds.

(Rabbi Z. Leff in *Outlooks and Insights*)

## WRITTEN IN STONE

### “This is the decree (*chok*) of the Torah...” (19:2)

There are two kinds of letters. Letters which are written, and letters which are engraved. The difference is that letters which are written are ultimately separate from what they are written on. They are not *one* with the paper or the parchment. The letters are of ink and they adhere to the paper, and only then are they one.

However, when letters are engraved, the letters themselves are from the same medium as that on which they are written. There is no distinction between *what* is written and *on what* it is written. The letters are not something external, separate entities, rather they emanate from the stone itself.

The Torah was given in the form of engraved tablets to teach us that we should relate to it not as separate from ourselves, rather the Jewish People and the Torah are indivisible and identical. “Yisrael, the Torah and the Holy One, Blessed is He, are One.” The words of the Torah are engraved in the fabric of our heart, not merely embroidered there. They must penetrate to the deepest and innermost chambers of our identity, they must go through and through us - just like the tablets of the Torah which could be read from both sides.

The word in Hebrew for ‘engraving’ is from the same root as the word for a decree that surpasses human understanding - *chok*. Our attitude to the entire Torah should be the same as to a *chok*. Even though we don't understand the *chok*, we still do it because it is the Will of our Father in Heaven. With this same attitude we should do all the mitzvos, *even those that we think we understand* — for no other reason than the fact that they are engraved on the tablets of our hearts as decrees of the King of kings.

(Adapted from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin)

## Haftorah: Shoftim 11:1-33

### THE HISTORIAN

**A**n essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to comprehend truth does not make it untrue. Just as in the sedra this week, Man is left uncomprehending the law of the *Parah*

*Adumah* — the workings of the spiritual world — so too are the workings of history mysterious to all except He who writes history. Thus, the Haftorah depicts the ‘unhistorical’ rise of Yiftah to the position of chief despite his lowly beginning in life.



Insights into the Zemiros sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations.

**Yom Shabbos Kadosh Hu - תַּיִתּוּ אֵשׁ עַל הַבַּיִת**

**The Sabbath Day is Holy...**

Its laws were commanded to us in Marah **חֻקֹתֶיהָ בְּמַרְהַ נְצַטּוּ בְּאֶזְרָהּ**

This reference to the statement by our Sages (*Sanhedrin* 56b) that the laws of Shabbos were commanded to Israel when they camped at Marah before reaching Sinai raises the obvious question:

Why did Hashem give us Shabbos before giving us the rest of the Torah?

In order to be worthy of receiving the Torah, suggests Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, Jews had to sanctify their souls. Shabbos has the ability to lift a Jew's soul to the greatest heights and therefore served as an introduction to the receiving of the entire Torah at Sinai.

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