



Parshas Chukas

For the week ending 12 Tammuz 5759 / 25 & 26 June 1999 (Outside Israel)
5 Tammuz 5759 / 18 & 19 June 1999 (Inside Israel)

Overview

The laws of the *para aduma* — the red heifer — are detailed. These laws are for the ritual purification of one who comes into contact with death. After nearly 40 years in the desert, Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. The people complain about the loss of their water supply which until then has been provided miraculously in the merit of Miriam's righteousness. Aharon 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. 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 mastery over the world, which would have resulted had the rock produced water merely at Moshe's word. Therefore, Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon that they will not bring the people into the Land. *Bnei Yisrael* resume their travels, but because the King of Edom, a descendant of Esav, denies them passage through his country, they do not travel the most direct route to *Eretz Yisrael*. When they reach Mount Hor, Aharon dies and his son Elazar is invested with his priestly garments and responsibilities. Aharon was beloved by all, and the entire nation mourns him 30 days. Sichon the Amorite attacks *Bnei Yisrael* when they ask 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 Exodus.

Insights

Hocus Pocus

“This is the decree of the Torah” (19:1)

It always amazes me that people who claim to be agnostics will open up a newspaper and start reading their horoscopes.

A non-Jew once quizzed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai about the purification process of the *para aduma* (red heifer) in this week's *Parsha*: “This stuff you do looks like a bunch of hocus-pocus to me. You get a cow and burn it. You pulverize it and make it into dust. If one of you is impure from touching a cadaver, you sprinkle a couple of drops over him and say “You're pure!”

Rabbi Yochanan asked him, “Have you ever seen someone who was possessed?” The non-Jew answered “Yes.” “What do you do to him?” asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. “Well, we put smoking roots underneath him, sprinkle him with water and the evil spirit runs away.” Rabbi Yochanan said to him “Why don't you let your ears listen to what comes out of your mouth?”

After the non-Jew had left, the students said to Rabbi Yochanan “You pushed this fellow off with a reed. But what do you say to us?” He answered them: “By your lives, the dead do not make impure. Neither does the cow purify, nor does the water. Rather the Holy One, Blessed be He says: ‘A statute I have instituted. A decree I have decreed. Yours is not to transgress my decrees, as it states ‘This is the decree of the Torah...’”

People often say, “Look Rabbi, what is all this mumbo-jumbo, putting funny black boxes on your head, not wearing a mixture of wool and linen, not cooking milk and meat together, putting little metal cases on your door-posts. It's just a lot of hocus-pocus isn't it? So I say to them: “Have you ever used a cellular telephone?” “Yes.” “Do you understand how it works.” “Well, not really. It picks up radio signals that travel through the air.” “How does it do that?” “Well, it's got a receiver inside it.” “How does this receiver work?” “Well, it's on a chip. And there are thousands of miniature circuits on this chip and...well it receives the signal...You know what Rabbi, you're right, I don't really understand exactly how a cellular phone works.” “Did that stop you using it?” “No.” “It's the same thing with *mitzvot*. I don't have to know how a *mitzvah* works in order to do it. As long as G-d knows how it works, that's fine by me.”

PORKIE

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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel
38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA
613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

972-2-581-0315
1-212-213-3100
1-905-886-5730

fax: 972-2-581-2890
fax: 1-212-213-8717
fax: 1-905-886-6065

Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair
General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

info@ohr.org.il
RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@aol.com
Somayach@MSN.com

Dedication opportunities are available for Torah Weekly — Please contact us for details.

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“This is the decree of the Torah” (19:1)

It's a well-known fact that Jews don't eat pork. Why not? You might hear people saying that as the refrigerator companies hadn't got off the ground in the land of Canaan some three thousand years ago, so the Torah forbade eating pork for health reasons. The corollary of that statement is that seeing as now we have wonderful refrigerators, we can all eat pork.

Alternatively, you might hear some people expressing their revulsion at our little porcine friends thus: “The pig is a disgusting animal. It grovels around in the dirt. Its diet is from the most disgusting things that lay on the ground. Even if pig was kosher, I'd never eat it.”

The Torah's view is neither of the above. Our sages say quite clearly that “A person shouldn't say: I don't want to eat pig meat or wear *shatnez* (a forbidden mixture of wool and linen). Rather he should say: I *could* do these things, but what can I do — my Father in Heaven ordered me not to do them.”

It is for this reason that the meal we eat on Shabbat afternoon is called colloquially *shalosh seudos*, which translates as “three meals.” More accurately, it should be called *seuda shlishit* — “the third meal.” So why is this meal called “three meals?” (The answer is not because you're supposed to eat enough for three meals.)

When a person sits down to eat the first meal of Shabbat on Friday night, he has an appetite built up from the day. Similarly, the second meal of Shabbat on Saturday morning comes at a time when most of us are ready to sit down and enjoy a meal. However, when just a couple of hours after this meal, we are obliged to sit down and eat yet another meal, it becomes clear retroactively that the other two meals were not for the sake of our own stomachs but to honor Shabbat with our eating and drinking. Eating on Shabbat and non-eating of pig are for the same reason — to fulfill the Will of the Creator.

DEAD TO THE WORLD - 1

“This is the Torah of a man who will die in a tent...” (19:14)

“The Torah does not stay with someone unless he kills himself over it.” (Talmud Berachot 63)

Most of us spend our lives in a kind of somnambulism. We all know that everything can stop in one second. We know that no one gets out of here alive. But we live our lives as though we were immortal.

There once was a businessman who woke up one day and thought to himself that he wasn't getting any younger. He ate his breakfast and said good-bye to his wife, but instead of driving to work, he drove to a *beit midrash* (Torah study hall). He walked in and asked a young bearded fellow sitting there if he would teach him the Torah. The young fellow asked him what he would like to learn. Without batting an eyelid, the businessman replied “Everything. Where do we start?”

The next day, the businessman ate breakfast, said good-bye to his wife, and drove back to the *beit midrash*. And the following day. And the day after that.

That night, his wife was standing at the door when he came home. “They called from the office today,” she said “Oh yes,” he murmured non-committally. “Apparently, you haven't been there for four days.” “That's right.” “Where have you been?” “I've been studying the Torah.” “Are you crazy? Who's going to support us if you don't go to work anymore?” “My dear wife, if I had passed away four days ago, would you be asking me now who was going to support you? My whole life I spent working for this world. Before I take my leave here, I would like to have something put away for our ‘retirement.’ I'm taking out some bonds in the First National Bank of the Next World. If I were dead, you wouldn't be asking me why I didn't go to the office today.”

Most of the time, we don't study Torah because we're “too busy.” However, unless we can picture ourselves as “dead to the world,” we will never have the impetus to study until we are really dead to the world.

DEAD TO THE WORLD - 2

“This is the Torah of a man who will die in a tent...” (19:14)

“The Torah does not stay with someone unless he kills himself over it.” (Talmud Berachot 63)

The Torah is like water, it always finds the lowest point. G-d gave the Torah through Moshe because he was the humblest of people. When a person makes of himself nothing, he can make G-d everything. Thus the Torah does not stay with someone unless he “kills himself” over it, unless he is prepared to nullify his own ego for it.

Sources:

Hocus Pocus - Midrash Tanchuma, Rabbi Mordechai Perlman

Porkie - Devash V'Chalav in Iturei Torah

Dead To The World - 1 - Chafetz Chaim

Haftorah: Shoftim 11:1 - 33

To the Amonite king's demand that Israel withdraw from the land east of the Jordan, Israel's new head, Yiftach, gives him a history lesson taken straight out of this week's Parsha. Yiftach relates how the Jews had captured that land purely in self-defense against a totally unprovoked attack, and that it had been won from the Ammorites, not from the Amonites. Ignoring this, the Amonites attack; and — echoing the vow made by the Jews in their battle for that same land three hundred years before — Yiftach vows to sacrifice whatever exits his house first to greet him on his victorious return. G-d gives him victory, and in a tragic twist Yiftach's daughter is the first to greet him upon his return.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

“Yiftach in his generation is like Shmuel in his generation,” says the Talmud. This refers to our obligation to honor a leader of the Torah community even if he doesn't quite measure up to the leaders of old. Compared to Shmuel, Yiftach had relatively small spiritual stature: Shmuel's greatness as prophet is likened to that of Moshe and Aharon; whereas regarding Yiftach the word “prophet” is never even used. Nevertheless, “Yiftach in his generation is like Shmuel in his generation.” Dreaming about the great leaders of “the good old days” is no excuse to ignore the direction of our present-day Torah leaders.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

YAM HAMELACH (DEAD SEA)

The lowest spot on the earth's surface — about 394 meters below sea level — the *Yam Hamelach* is commonly known as the Dead Sea because no fish can live in it, and its mineral substances destroy almost all organic life.

A fascinating explanation of how this unusual sea came into being is offered by the great Biblical commentator Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim. When Avraham parted company with his nephew Lot, the latter is reported to have lifted his eyes and looked at “the entire Jordan plain, which was entirely irrigated before Hashem destroyed Sodom and Amorrhah.” (*Bereishet 13:10*) The Jordan River once created a fertile delta at this plain, compared at the conclusion of this passage to the famous Nile Delta and the “Garden of Hashem” in Eden. It was the richness of this well-watered land that attracted Lot to settle in its principal city, the wicked Sodom.

When Hashem destroyed Sodom and its sister cities, this plain turned into a giant crater which became filled with the water of the Jordan running into it. The salt and other minerals contained in the depths of the earth combined with the Jordan waters to form the Dead Sea.

In the early 1930s exploitation of the close to 50 million tons of magnesium chloride, sodium chloride, calcium chloride, potassium chloride and magnesium bromide in this sea was initiated, and today it has become the site of major commercial enterprises farming it for minerals and health products. Also, it is a considerable attraction for tourists and those seeking health cures in its mineral-rich waters.

