

## Rabbi Elchanan Shoff

### PARSHAS CHUKAS

#### Parshas Parah and Remembering the Golden Calf

...*a red heifer*... (Num. 19:2). The *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 685) cites the opinion of those who hold that obligations to read Parshas Zachor **and Parshas Parah** are of Biblical origin, not rabbinic. In response to the view that Parshas Parah is a Biblical obligation, *Magen Avraham* writes that he is not aware of any reason that the Bible would order such a reading, and he does not know of any source or even allusion to this obligation in the Torah. The Malbim in his work *Artzot HaChaim* (Laws of *Tzitzis*) was asked to explain the opinion that Parshat Parah is Biblical commandment and the reason behind it. He writes that it requires investigation as to why there is no obligation to read the Parshah of the Golden Calf, which is equally important and is one of the events which we are warned not to forget. To answer this, he explains that since the story of the Golden Calf speaks ill of the Jewish People, God kindly did not create an obligation to read it. However, since ultimately there is a commandment to *remember* that event, the rabbis instituted that we read Parshas Parah as a manifestation of that obligation to remember the Golden Calf debacle. This explanation is in accordance with Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan's explanation (cited by Rashi) who said that the Parah Adumah comes as an atonement for the Golden Calf. See also Meshech Chochmah about this.

#### The Mother of all Sin

...*a red heifer*... (Num. 19:2). Rashi (to Num. 19:22) offers a parable comparing this to a maidservant's son who dirtied the king's palace. In such a case, the king would say that this child's mother should come and clean up the mess that her own child made. In a similar vein, the Red Heifer, which is a cow should come and clean up the sin of the Golden Calf, for calves are the children of cows. At first glance, this seems like nothing more than a play on words. As we probe the subject more deeply, we will learn all sin in the world comes as the ramification of the sin of the Golden Calf. When the Jewish People stood at Mount Sinai and said "we will do and we will listen", they lost the *zuhama* (spiritual filth) that the snake had injected into mankind when he enticed Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. At that momentous occasion, the Jewish People cleansed themselves of that pollution and attained a level completely free of evil, such that the rabbis teach that the Jews were freed from the Angel of Death (who is the Evil Inclination). Indeed, the very concept of death is an embarrassment to the Jewish People, as the prophet Yeshaya says about the removing

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

death, “Death will be swallowed up forever, and Hashem God will wipe a tear from every face, and the embarrassment of His nation will be removed” (Isa. 25:8). This means that the fact that there is any death in the world is really something that highlights a failure of the Jewish people, whose job it is to bring this world to a perfection that restores the eternal life that was present in pre-sin Eden. In light of this, the Jewish People are charged with the responsibility to cleanse the world of this embarrassment and remove sin. Now, the Red Heifer is complicated. Pure people are made impure by coming into contact with it, whilst the impure are cleansed. The verse in book of Job says “Who can make purity out of impurity, *lo echad*, no one. But the Midrash Rabbah at the beginning of Chukas says “Who gives purity from the impure? Can't the One? Can't the One and only God of our world?” The midrash teaches that both the concept of purity and impurity come from **one** source—from Hashem. He is the sole source of both purity and impurity, so at its root it is all one. Everything flows from Him. The Red Heifer itself points to this very idea, because the son of the Red Heifer—typified by the Golden Calf—represents sin, yet its source (i.e. mother) is something holy. This again shows that sin and holiness stem from One unique and unified source—Hashem. This is the lesson of the Red Heifer. By focusing on the fact that everything depends on Him, we can have a better appreciation of the ramifications of sin that at some level sin does not really need to make one more distant from Hashem, because everything must be connected to Him in order to exist. Sin only creates an illusion as though one is distanced from Hashem, but in reality a connection to God is possible no matter what one has done, and purity can always be accessed and achieved. The fact that sin and impurity also come from Hashem in a certain way is evidenced in the fact that when one perform *teshuvah* of love after committing a sin, then not only is his sin erased, but **it is transformed into a merit**. This shows that sin and merit on some level flow from the same source, and He is above them all. Thus, the mother comes, to show the true source of even the sins that we have committed, and that understanding of how connected we are to God, allows us to become pure.

### The Red Heifer and the Red Exile

**...a red heifer... (Num. 19:2).** The Red Heifer has two dualing properties; on the one hand it can purify somebody who is impure, but, on the other hand, those pure people who are involved in preparing the Red Heifer become impure by doing so.

*Much of the material presented in **Oneg!** has been translated by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein from Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's weekly Hebrew 'Aalefcha Chochma' parsha sheet. To sign up to the **Oneg!** weekly email list, or to sponsor a week of **Oneg!** send an email to [BKLAshul@gmail.com](mailto:BKLAshul@gmail.com)*

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

Rabbi Yosef Shaul Nathansohn in *Divrei Shaul* explains why the rabbis said that the Red Heifer alludes to the exile of Edom (אדום = red). This exile of the last 2000 years has the ability and purpose of cleansing and refining the spirit of the Jewish People though the challenge of fighting the assimilation, but on the other hand causes the Jewish People to intermingle with the nations of the world and the weakest among the masses become influenced by their impure ways, and succumb to assimilation and intermarriage. In this way, exile, just like the Red Heifer, has these two dualing properties, it purifies the impure and it defiles the pure.

Checking for *treifabs*

**...and you shall give her [i.e. the heifer] to Elazar the Kohen, and he shall bring her to outside the camp, and he will slaughter her in front of him (Num. 19:3).** Targum Yonasan writes that when Elazar will slaughter the heifer, he must cut both *simanim* (i.e. the wind pipe and the food pipe) and check to make sure the beast is from the 18 signs of a *treifab*. Why does Targum say that Elazar must check to make sure it is not a *treifab*, if the Talmud (*Chullin* 11a) clearly says that whenever one slaughters an animal—whether as a sacrifice or otherwise—one need not check to ensure that it is not a *treifab* because we can rely on the fact that a majority of animals are not a *treifab*. In fact, the Talmud actually points to the case of the Red Heifer as proof to this idea, for the Red Heifer after it is slaughtered must be burnt wholly intact, yet if one had to check to make sure it is not a *treifab*, then it would inevitably have to have been cut up into pieces for an internal examination. So not only is checking for the 18 signs of a *treifab* not required for the Red Heifer, it is actually impossible! So why does Targum Jonathan say that Elazar was commanded to do so? *Beis Yitzchak* (cited in *Har Tzvi*, *Orach Chaim* 45) answers that it says in *Braisa de-Meleches HaMishkan* (cited by *Tosafos* to *Shabbos* 22b) that the entire forty years that the Jews were in the desert, the Clouds of Glory would enlighten the eyes of the Jewish People. It says that a person would be able to look at a barrel and see what was inside of it. According to this, when Elazar prepared the first Red Heifer in the time of Moshe, it was possible for him to check the 18 signs of a *treifab* by using this special "x-ray vision" light from the Clouds of Glory. Since he had the option of checking, he was obligated to check and could not simply rely on a majority. However, in subsequent generations, when there was no Clouds of Glory and, ergo, no option to check the

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

Red Heifer for the 18 signs of a *treifah*, then one could rely on the fact that a majority of animals are not a *treifah*.

Worm eats man

***And the Kohen shall take a cedar tree and hyssop and a red worm-dyed string (Num. 19:7).*** Rashi explains that the hyssop bush is a lowly bush and represents man's lowliness. The Chida in *Nachal Kedumim* writes that the red string dyed by the blood of a certain worm, also represents man's lowliness. He explains that people are considered "rulers" over animals because mankind has permission to *eat* animals. However, if that's true, then worms should be considered superior to people, because when people die and are buried worms eat their corpses. Accordingly, the worm reminds us of the frailty of man, and reminds us to remain humble. Because of this, the Torah prescribes the use of a red worm-dyed string alongside the hyssop.

Drink first, then feed animals

***And you shall quench the congregation and their animals (Num. 20:8).*** The rabbis say (*Brachos* 40a) that it is forbidden for a man to eat before he feeds his animals, as it says, "And I will put grass in your field for your animal" and then afterwards the Torah says, "And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied." However, when it comes to drinking, *Sefer Chassidim* (531) says that one is allowed to ***drink*** before giving drink to his animals, just as we find by Rivkah that she told Eliezer "drink, and I will also give your camels drink", and also here it says that Moshe should quench the Jews' thirst and afterwards their animals' thirst. And indeed, this ruling is accepted by the *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 167:18), who also brings the abovementioned proof from the story of Rivkah and Eliezer.

However, *Chasam Sofer* (in *Toras Moshe, Parshas Chayei Sarah*) rejects this proof from Rivkah, because he argues that the requirement to feed one's animals before oneself only applies to the owner of the animals, but if somebody is bringing food or drink for another person, then **certainly he should first give that person before feeding that person's animals.** Accordingly, the fact that Rivkah offered Eliezer a drink before offering his camels a drink does not prove that one is otherwise allowed to drink before one's animals are given to drink. Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (*Chochmas Shlomo, Parshas Chayei Sarah* p. 398) offers justification for this through an explanation found in *Nezer HaKodesh*. He explains that the reason a person must first feed his

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

animals before feeding himself is that a person should look at himself as somebody unworthy and non-meritorious. Sometimes Hashem supports people and gives them life and sustenance not because they are great and deserve it, but because they are integral to the ecosystem, and they own and interact with animals who God wants alive. In order to remain humble, a person should always act on the assumption that perhaps he only gets to eat in the merit of feeding his animals (as opposed to on his own merits), and so he should feed his animal first. However, when somebody is bringing food or drink for another person, he must look at that person as a *tzaddik* and deserving of the food in his right. Because of this, he should give that person food or drink before giving that person's animals food or drink.

Similarly, one can reject the proof from Rivkah's response to Eliezer on the basis of another Halachic ruling. Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (*Or HaChaim* to Gen. 24:19) writes that even though one must first feed his animals and then feed himself, but if one is in danger or is in pain, then he should feed himself before feeding himself. With that in mind, he explains that when Eliezer asked Rivkah for some water, she was sensitive enough to realize that he was truly thirsty and was in pain, so she gave him water before giving water to his camels. According to this explanation, we again have no proof from Rivka that one is allowed to drink before giving drink to his animals, because anyways in a case of danger or pain, one is allowed to eat before one's animals eat.

We could also point to another factor in this case. Rambam (Laws of Slaves 9:8) writes that the Halacha of feeding one's animals before oneself also applies to one's slaves who should be fed before oneself. Now, according to this, if the laws of feeding animals before oneself apply only to your own animals, and not other people's animals, then obviously, the story with Eliezer and Rivkah is not relevant. And if we say that it does apply to other people's animals, then we must also say that it applies to other people's slaves too, in which case they come first, just as one's animals do! If this is true, then again Rivkah's response does not teach about a regular person being allowed to drink before his animals are given to drink. Nonetheless, if one looks very carefully in Rambam's wording, he will notice that Rambam writes "And we first give food to animals, and slaves have a separate meal" before discussing a regular person

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

eating. Perhaps the wording of Rambam's ruling on this issue somewhat implies that an animal even has precedence over a slave.

*The Sin of the Rock*

***And Moshe and Aharon congregated the congregation in front of the rock, and he [i.e. they, Moshe and Aharon] said to them, 'Now listen O rebels, from this rock we shall bring forth for you water?'*** (Num. 20:10). The Talmud (Megillah 15a) quote Rabbi Elazar in the name of Rabbi Chanina, who says that whoever says over something in the name of the one who said it brings redemption<sup>1</sup> to the world<sup>2</sup>. Based on this, *Chassid Yaavetz* (to Avos 6:6) explains in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel that the sin of Moshe and Aharon was that they said "we shall bring forth..." as though they had the power to do so, instead of saying "He [i.e. God] shall bring forth" which would properly ascribe the miracle to the One who would perform it. Accordingly, their sin was not giving true credit to the real source of things, Hashem, just like someone who does not cite the true source of a teaching. The result was "therefore you will not bring this congregation to the land which I have given to them" (Num. 20:12). In other words, Moshe and Aharon's punishment was that they did not get to participate in the redemption of bringing the Jewish People to Holy Land.

Similarly, *Paneach Raza* explains in the name of Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid that Moshe's sin was that instead of saying "He shall bring forth" (יוציא), he said "we shall bring forth" (נוציא). This sin was so slight, that it was the difference of one letter, switching out a ך for a ך. Accordingly, he explains that Moshe's sin was that he did not properly use the letter *yod*. Based on this, he explains that *piyyut* which reads: "Because he had been ensnared *in the ten*, God sentence him to death..." This refers

---

<sup>1</sup> The word for redemption is *Geulah*. The difference between *Geulah* and *Gaavah*, arrogance, is the letter *lamed*. *Lamed* means learning. When a person shared the source of something he has learned, he adds the *lamed* to his speech, changing what would otherwise be plagiaristic arrogance into redemption. (I heard this quoted from someone who heard it from Rabbi Benjamin Blech).

<sup>2</sup> I am astonished at how often this teaching is cited without mentioning the name of Rabbi Elazar in the name of Rabbi Chanina. (or one of the other talmudic sources where it is cited, at least.)

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

to Moshe's sin at the Rock in which he misused the letter *yod* whose *gematria* value is ten (י = 10).

“Water” from “Rock”

***And he hit the rock (sela) with his staff twice, and much water came out (Num. 20:11).*** *Vayakbel Moshe (Parshas Chukas, p. 128)* quotes in the name of the Tzadik of Lanzut a fascinating explanation of how “water” comes from “rock”. He explains that if you take the letters of the word rock (סלע) and spell them out, then if you “hit” each letter twice and thereby knock away the first and last of the letters used to spell out those letters, you are left with the letters that make up the word “water” (מים), as shown in the diagram to your right.

ס	מ	י
ל	מ	ע
ע	י	ל

What was Moshe's sin?

***Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the land which I have given to them (Num. 20:12).*** Maharsha (to *Sotah* 12b) points out a contradiction in Rashi concerning what exactly Moshe did wrong in this story. In his commentary to the Torah, Rashi writes that Moshe's sin was that he *hit* the rock, instead of *speaking* to it. However, in his commentary to the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 101b), Rashi writes that Moshe's sin was that he said “Now listen O rebels...” The *Beis Shmuel Acharon* resolves this apparent contradiction by explaining that both of these contributed to Moshe's sin and punishment. He explains that in truth, Moshe's main sin was that he hit the rock. However, this sin would not be enough to give him such a harsh punishment, because we say elsewhere that if somebody is passive in response to those who wrong him, then Hashem will be “passive” toward him and overlook his sins. In the case of Moshe, since he was generally passive in that way to those who wronged him, then Hashem should have theoretically overlooked this sin of not speaking to the rock. However, in this very episode Moshe showed that he was not “passive” in this way, as he called the Jews congregated around him “rebels”—a sign of anger. Only because of this, did Hashem not overlook his sin of hitting the rock, so He gave Moshe the punishment in question.

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

*Amalekites in disguise*

***And the “Canaanite”—king of Arad who dwells [in] the south—heard that Israel is coming on the path of the sites, and he fought with Israel, and he captured from them a captive (Num. 21:1).*** Rashi explains that “who dwells [in] the south” refers to Amalek, as elsewhere the Torah describes Amalek as living in the south (see Num. 13). However, the Amalekites changed their language and spoke in Canaanite so that the Jews will think they are Canaanite and pray that Hashem give them the Canaanite into their hands, while really they were not Canaanites. In truth, the Jews saw that these people dressed like Amalekites even if they spoke like Canaanites, so the Jews were wise to the situation and prayed to Hashem that He give them whoever this nation they are fighting is, without specifying Canaanites or Amalekites. This understanding is somewhat problematic because it is much easier to change one’s clothes than to change one’s language (like we find about Yaakov that he was able to wear Eisav’s clothes, but he was still not able to *speak* to like Eisav), so why would the Amalekites try changing their languages before changing their clothes? The answer seems to me to be that a person can only change something that is not fundamental to them. One can change ones appearance but not ones essence. But, Amalek's essence, as descendants of Esav ***is externality***. This means, that his internal world is all fake, his language and ideologies are all false and interchangeable; created just to justify desires and not truly essential to his identity. (See Yalkut Shimoni to Melachim 1, Chapter 12 remez 198, where Esav, Haman, and Yeravam are all highlighted as being external people, and dishonest on the inside.) As we explained elsewhere, the angel of Esav ancestor of Amalek who followed in all of Esav's worst ways, explained that his name was "Why do you ask my name", for he has no real name or identity, but instead creates that identity to serve himself and his desires.

*The Inside is not like the outside*

***...the path of the sites... (Num. 21:1).*** Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef HaKohen (cited in Tel Talpiyos vol. 2 100, and in *Yalkut HaGershuni*) explains that this was war against the Amalekites was a Divine punishment which was sent as a retribution against the Spies. He explains that the Ten Spies which Moshe sent were described as important, righteous people. Yet, in a very short amount of time, they became completely corrupted. He explains that it is farfetched that these Spies went from one extreme (good and righteous) to the other (evil and rotten) in such a short span of time.

*Much of the material presented in **Oneg!** has been translated by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein from Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's weekly Hebrew 'Aalefcha Chochma' parsha sheet. To sign up to the **Oneg!** weekly email list, or to sponsor a week of **Oneg!** send an email to [BKLAshul@gmail.com](mailto:BKLAshul@gmail.com)*



**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**  
PARSHAS CHUKAS

Instead, he posits that they were always rotten on the inside, but they made themselves look like they were righteous, which is why they are described as such. Because they pretended to be good while they were really evil, the fitting punishment was that the Jews be attacked by a nation which seemed to be Canaanite, but was really Amalekite.

***And our soul is disgusted by this lightweight up bread, and Hashem send at the nation snakes...*** (Num. 21:5–6). Chazal say that the Jews were “disgusted” by the fact that when they ate the *mann*, it was absorbed completely into their limbs, and they did not have to defecate after eating it. The Chida in *Pnei David* (15) writes that it possible that the Jews were disgusted or disturbed by the fact that when they ate the *mann*, they did not have to go to the bathroom, which they understood meant that their “souls” became dirtied by the excremental byproducts of that food, because they never ended up ejecting those byproducts. However, they did not realize that the only reason why eating food creates excremental byproducts is because of the effects of the pollution injected into mankind by the snake who convinced Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. That pollution created a reality in which everything good (i.e. in this case natural food) has bad mixed into it, and this means that when eating one must excrete the excess unnecessary material. However, the *mann* which came directly from the Heavens was only holy and had nothing extra. Accordingly, when the Jews complained, Hashem sent snakes upon them to teach them that the extra admixture of evil in this world comes from the snake, and in the case of the *mann* there was nothing extra because it is from Above and remained unaffected by the snake’s efforts.

**Og helps Avraham**

***Do not fear him...*** (Num. 21:34). Rashi explains that Moshe was scared because maybe the merit of Avraham would protect Og. Even though elsewhere Rashi (to Gen. 14:13) explains that Og had an ulterior motive in telling Avraham that Lot was kidnapped (i.e. because he wanted Avraham to get involved in the war and be killed so he can marry Sarah), still Moshe was scared that this gave Og enough merits to be saved from himself. This explanation is explicit in *Tosafos* to Niddah 61a. This gives us enormous insight into the power of a mitzvah performed even for less than pure motivations.

**ONEG!**

A collection of fascinating material on the weekly parsha!

**Rabbi Elchanan Shoff**

**PARSHAS CHUKAS**

“Plain” Spelling

***And they camped at the Plains of Moab (Num. 22:1).*** Usually, when the Torah refers to the Plains of Moab, the word “plains of” (ערבות) is spelled with a *vav*. However, here, the word “plains of” is spelled without the letter *vav* (ערבת). *Peirush HaRokeach* accounts for this change by explaining that the absence of the letter *vav* whose *gematria* is six serves an allusion to the fact that Moshe explained the entire Torah to the Jewish People from Rosh Chodesh Shevat until the 6<sup>th</sup> day of Adar (ו = 6), and on the next day, the seventh of Adar, Moshe died.

*Much of the material presented in **Oneg!** has been translated by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein from Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's weekly Hebrew 'Aalefcha Chochma' parsha sheet. To sign up to the **Oneg!** weekly email list, or to sponsor a week of **Oneg!** send an email to [BKLAshul@gmail.com](mailto:BKLAshul@gmail.com)*