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Weakness: The Fatal Flaw

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 24, 1972)

Our Sidra this morning tells of one of the most painful episodes in Biblical history, one which was seared into the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the incident of “the waters of contention.” The Israelites, after the death of Miriam, complained about the lack of water. From a mere water shortage, they escalated their complaints to a general attack on Moses, expressing a preference for having remained in Egypt as comfortable slaves over being in the desert as starving and thirsty freemen.

Thereupon, the Lord told Moses and Aaron, you shall address the rock (or, speak concerning the rock) before them, and it will give forth its waters. Moses and Aaron then turned to the Children of Israel and said: “Listen here, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Then Moses raised his hand with the staff in his hand he smote the rock twice and the water came out.

The punishment ordained for Moses and Aaron was severe: because you did not have sufficient faith to sanctify My Name before the Children of Israel, therefore you will not enter the Promised Land but will die on this side of the Jordan.

What was their sin? The Biblical text is unclear, and many interpretations have been proposed by commentators both ancient and modern. Rashi offers the most popular explanation: Moses was commanded to talk to the rock, and he hit it instead. However, Nahmanides is unhappy with this interpretation because everything Moses did during his ministry was performed by the striking of the staff. Besides, as we indicated above, Moses and Aaron were not commanded to speak to the rock, but about it. Maimonides maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was their anger. They lost their temper when they said, “listen here, you rebels.” Nahmanides, however, criticizes this interpretation as well because, first, Moses

was right in expressing his anger, and second, there are other occasions when Moses appeared to lose his temper and he was not reproached. Nahmanides therefore follows the interpretation of Rabbenu Hannanel and maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was to use the first person, “shall we bring forth water,” rather than, “shall He (the Lord) bring forth water.”

My own interpretation, which I respectfully submit to you, is an expansion of and modification of that offered by Abarbanel and certain modern exegetes. And that is, that the misdeed of Moses and Aaron was that of -- weakness. The first reaction of Moses and Aaron when they heard the rebellious complaints of the Children of Israel was not the immediate response of challenge, but of fear and retreat.

Moses and Aaron retreated from before the congregation, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and there they fell on their faces. When they should have stood up, they fell back.

More precisely, I believe we can pinpoint the sin of Moses in the second strike of the staff. Permit me to explain.

Moses and Aaron started to assert themselves when they confronted the Children of Israel and said, “listen here, you rebels.” However, they kept themselves back. They restrained their response. Now, psychologists, especially psychoanalysts, have taught us that inhibited aggression is usually directed against the self or against inanimate objects. If I am angry at someone and secretly wish to harm him I will stamp my foot or slap my thigh.

Now, the first time that Moses struck the rock, that was understandable. Everything he did, from splitting the Red Sea to bringing forth water, was performed with a strike by the staff. However, the second time that he did so, it was an act which expressed misplaced hostility, originally felt toward Israelites, now redirected towards the rock.

Why was that wrong? What should he have done? Simply this: he should have expressed his anger directly at the Israelites, rather than the inanimate rock. Crudely put, he should have wielded the staff not on an innocent rock, but on the heads of this ungrateful and recalcitrant people who, after 38 years in the desert, still proved that they were immature slaves, still whining, “why did you take us out of Egypt?” One could expect this from a generation that was born in slavery and still primitive and immature — not from a generation born in freedom in the wild desert.

Moses and Aaron should not have fled, not have feared, not have conceded, not have compromised, not have taken it out hysterically on a rock. They should have encountered the Israelites with force and indignation.

In other words, Moses and Aaron were taught -- and through them, we are taught -- that weakness in a leader can be a fatal flaw.

Jewish leaders have always been commanded to be tender and loving. Moses and David are, in our tradition, the archetypes of gracious leadership. The Midrash teaches us that they were taken from the sheepfold to become the shepherds of Israel. Just as a shepherd must learn to look after every stray lamb, to pick it up tenderly and hold it close to his breast, so must the leader of our people be a shepherd to human charges. But -- not always! There are times that strength and power and courage and resistance are called for in a leader. So, the first King of Israel, Saul, was deposed because he was too merciful, too compassionate, too soft, where he should have been hard and manly. The Talmud (Ket. 103b) tells us about the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was both the most eminent scholar of his generation and the political leader of all of Israel. On his deathbed, his children came in to bid him farewell. Rabbi Gamliel, his son, entered, and his father transmitted to him the orders of leadership, telling him how to conduct himself as his successor. And he said to him, my son, conduct your presidency with strength! with courage; lead from on high, with dignity and power and pride.

Leadership is not meant for diffident weaklings. A leader must often act against the masses. A leader need not necessarily be a “consensus president.” He must be at the head of his people and sometimes demand of them, reproach them, rebuke them. That vox populi is vox dei, that the voice of the people is the voice of God -- is not a Jewish idea! Despite the fact that the proverb קול המון

בקהל שקי, which means the same thing in Hebrew, is often quoted, it does not come from any sacred Jewish text, but is merely a translation from the Latin.

This interpretation I have offered is both text and pretext for my comments on certain Jewishly significant news that has come to our attention this past week or so.

The abdication of Jewish religious leadership years ago and today as well, has produced an ugly harvest which we only now are reaping.

In the beginning of the opening up of the Jewish communities to the Western world, Jews began to acculturate. Now, from our point of view, that was perfectly understandable. To cull the best of Western culture -- that is commendable. But what happened was that certain people began to approach the Western world with inferiority feelings, and with the desire to break down the discipline of Halakhah. Thus, the Reform rabbinate yielded to the social-cultural pressures of their newly prosperous congregants. They cut out almost all Hebrew from the prayerbook; did away with mention of Zion and Jerusalem (because, after all, Germany was our mother-land and Berlin our Jerusalem); legislated that the Sabbath always begin at 6 P.M. and end at 6 P.M. winter and summer; and then changed Saturday services to Sunday.

What was the rationale for this radical surgery performed on the Jewish tradition? Simply, that this is what people demanded; especially, “give youth what it wants!” What they forgot was that, first, youth does not always know what it wants (that is the special privilege of youth); second, youth changes its wants every few years; and third, the word of God is permanent and the complaints of whining youth are temporary, and Halakhah must always remain superior to fashion.

Where has all this weakness led us? This past week or so we were startled to read in our daily press that the Central Conference of American Rabbis -- the Reform rabbinic group -- had commissioned a statistical report of its body, and that this report known as the Lenn report, informed them of its most shocking finding: 41% of Reform rabbis will officiate at mixed marriages, by which is meant marriages between a Jew and non-Jew where the non-Jew has not even converted according to Reform standards.

I do not mention this because of any feelings of institutional rivalry, or any kind of parochial glee that I derive from this news. Those who attend regularly know that I rarely speak out against Reform and Conservatives because we have plenty of our own work left undone.

Indeed, I welcome -- with modifications -- the new trend towards tradition by some Reform rabbis. But I am heartbroken at the news of this catastrophic failure of the Reform rabbinate.

Worse yet, the report of the 41% is only the tip of the iceberg. Consider the following facts, culled from the Lenn Report, which constitutes a fairly thick volume:

1. "Over one fourth of Reform rabbis do not believe in God in the traditional Judaic sense, or as modified 'in terms of my own views of what God is and for what He stands.'"

2. Concerning the congregation of Reform temples: "less than one fifth of Reform congregants believe in God in the more or less Judaic sense. Another 50% add, 'or as modified in terms of my own views of what God is and for what He stands.'"

3. "Two thirds of Reform congregants say 'I remain a Jew because it is simply the most convenient thing to do.'"

4. "The vast majority of Reform congregants do not consider themselves religious."

Now, consider the seminarians, students at Reform rabbinical schools. What do we have to look forward to from them?

5. "Some 44% of Reform seminarians identify themselves as agnostic."

How about the youth of the Reform temples?

6. "On every issue of Jewish identity on which they were queried, Reform youth seem to be more detached from Judaism and Jewishness than their parents."

7. "Some 50% of Reform youth believe in God 'in the more or less traditional sense'; 32% are agnostics, and 4% are atheists."

8. "Only two out of three Reform youngsters are solidly pro-Israel. Many express strong anti-Israel positions."

Moreover, on the major issues of performing mixed marriages, one half of the 59% that do not preside at such weddings, regularly refer the mixed couple to a colleague who will perform such marriages! Here the failure is not so much religious as moral. I am told that there are certain Orthodox rabbis who do similar "referring." If that is true, they are no less and far more culpable.

A few months ago, I was invited together with four other Orthodox rabbis to attend an unpublicized meeting of the CCAR Commission on Mixed Marriages. The Reform rabbis were assigned to study the problem of mixed marriages, and to recommend whether or not their rabbinic group should enforce discipline against those who preside at such mixed marriages. The committee wanted

to test the opinions of those outside their group. And so, they asked us questions and we answered as honestly as we could. Afterwards, I asked one of their number who was advocating the performing of mixed marriages, and who does so regularly himself, what his reasons were. His answers - first, compassion for the couple, especially the parents and grandparents who earnestly seek Jewish approval; and second, this is a way of keeping them in the fold and not losing them altogether to Judaism.

Is this leadership, or pettifogging Milquetoastism?! If these people were really leaders, they would have raised their staff over the heads of their congregations and brought it down in a sharp line and said, NO! Even Reform has certain limits. Even the breaking of Halakhah cannot go beyond a certain point.

Let us not lose our sense of proportion. Sometimes, Orthodox Jews chafe at the machmirim in our Orthodox camp, those who always take the more strict or stringent view and seem to delight in issuing prohibitions. I object to that too. But there is an infinitely more serious charge against the other extreme, those of the non-Orthodox groups who seem to have one answer for all problems: everything is permitted. But in such an attitude of permissiveness, religion cannot grow. If everything is permitted, there is no religion, there is no morality, there is no civilization.

And what is the result of this submissiveness to the "waters of contention" of Reform congregations?

I quote again from the Lenn Report: "more than one in three congregants, of the age of 20 to 24, is now married to a spouse who was born non-Jewish. One in four of this group is married to a spouse who has not converted." This corroborates an intuitive feeling I have had from my limited experience with Reform congregations: they are, to a very large extent, the centers of those Jews who have married out and still wish to retain some tenuous connection with the Jewish community. It is important to remember that the practice is so wide-spread, that certain Temples do not engage a rabbi who does not promise he will preside at mixed marriages! Let us bear this in mind where Reform and Conservative groups lobby for the government of Israel to recognize them as valid rabbis in matters of marriages and divorce, and with regard to the "Who is a Jew" problem.

If a young Jew wants to marry out, let him do so. This is a free country. But to provide a rabbinic presence is to grant him or her the illusion of sanction, that is dishonest. For a

“rabbi” to be present and preside at such an occasion is a matter of fraudulent posturing, as if the berobed eminence of a sacerdotal rabbinic personality is the imprimatur of the Jewish tradition granted to one of the greatest transgressors of our faith and our tradition. The occasion calls for sitting shivah, not for co-officiating with a priest or minister, with caterer, band, dancing and drinking. And compassion or the desire to hold a Jew in the fold this way -- that is not an answer, but is a self-defeating and fraudulent rationalization. Solomon had already taught us: don't be too much of a קדיש, too moralistic, too self-righteous.

The bitter failure of Reform is no consolation to us Orthodox Jews. It increases our sense of pessimism and depression about the survivability of the American Jewish community. But it must be a lesson to us in many ways -- religiously, communally, and in matters of family and personal life.

For the Torah teaches us something of historic

Try Again

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha we are told of the mitzvoh of Parah Adumah, or the Red Heifer, which is used in the process of purifying someone who has become defiled through contact with a human corpse. Many commentators raise the question, why is this mitzvoh mentioned at this point in the Torah. Rashi to parshas Beshalach tells us that the mitzvoh of Parah Adumah was first given at Marah, before the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai. Although this opinion of Rashi is based on an alternate reading of a midrash and is not followed by most commentators, the Talmud in Gittin, 60a, states explicitly that the section of Parah Adumah was one of the eight sections of the Torah that were given on the first of Nissan in the second year after the exodus from Egypt. Moreover, Rashi there writes that the first Parah Adumah was actually burned on the next day, in order to purify the people in preparation for bringing the Pesach sacrifice. Why, then, is this mitzvoh mentioned in the Torah only now, in parshas Chukas, when the nation is about to enter the Holy Land after a sojourn of forty years in the wilderness? I believe that the key to answering this question lies in a remark cited by Rashi in the name of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan.

Rashi tells us that the mitzvoh of Parah Adumah is a

importance in recording the punishment meted out to Moses because of that second strike. Weakness is a fatal flaw in Jewish leadership. Sometimes you think you are being good, when you are really doing evil. You think you are helping, and you are destroying. You submit to momentary compassion, and in the process you lose the Promised Land.

A Jewish leader must be gentle, but must be strong. He must be considerate, but he must know how to use power. Power, of course, can corrupt. But the attainment of a good life requires the benevolent use of power. Without it, we are in contempt of faith and we have failed to perform the sanctification of God's Name.

When we do use power benevolently, then it becomes a source of blessing: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who girds Israel with strength.”

And blessed is Israel when it responds with its own strength.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

classic example of a chok, or a mitzvoh whose purpose is not readily understood, and for which the nations of the world criticize the Jewish people. Still, after explaining the basic meaning of the twenty-two verses in which this mitzvoh is presented, Rashi cites an additional approach to explaining these verses which does shed light on the purpose behind the mitzvah. According to Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan, as cited by Rashi, the red heifer comes to serve as an atonement for the sin of the golden calf. Just as a mother needs to come and clean up the mess that its child makes, so, too, the cow, who is the mother of the calf, needs to clean up the mess that was generated by her offspring. Rav Yerucham Levovitz, who was the great mashgiach ruchani, or spiritual guidance counselor, in the yeshiva of Mir in pre-World War Two Poland, noted, in his commentary Da'as Torah, that the crucial idea mentioned in this explanation of Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan is that the same element that is used for sin can be used to rectify the sin. Although Rav Yerucham does not say this, I believe that this is a restatement of the element of the Parah Adumah process that is generally considered to be its essential mystery, namely, that it can both purify the impure and defile the pure. I believe that it was this crucial

message that was needed to be taught to the generation that was about to enter the land, and that connects the section of Parah Adumah to the sections that follow it in the Torah.

After the section on Parah Adumah, the Torah relates the death of Miriam. Rashi, citing the midrash, writes that this juxtaposition teaches us that just as sacrifices bring atonement, so too does the death of the righteous bring atonement. Although, in last year's Netvort (available at Torahheights.com), we elaborated on this concept and how it relates to the Parah Adumah, I would like to approach it, now, in a different way, in the context of Rabbi Levovitz's explanation of the lesson to be gleaned from the Parah Adumah. The notion that the death of the righteous brings atonement is grounded in the assumption that, when a righteous person dies, we reassess his/her life, learn from their example and incorporate these lessons into our own lives. In the case of Miriam, we know that during her lifetime, the people did not learn from her example. As Rashi taught us, the meraglim, or spies, should have learned not to engage in *leshon hora*, or evil talk, from Miriam, who loved Moshe and did not speak in criticism of him out of malice but rather out of concern, but was still punished for what she said. Because they did not learn this lesson, they spoke of the Holy Land in a negative way, led the nation astray, and ultimately caused them to wander in the wilderness for the next thirty-eight years. Now that Miriam died, they had another chance to learn that lesson.

When Miriam died, the well that had supplied the people with water dried up, and the people complained of their thirst to Moshe. God told Moshe to gather the people in front of a rock and speak to it, which would, in

turn, produce water for them. Why did God tell Moshe to speak to the rock, rather than to hit it, as He had told him to do at Refidim, thirty-eight years earlier, when they complained about a lack of water? Rabbi Moshe Sofer, known as the Chasam Sofer, explains that Moshe was now being given a chance to correct the wrong that the people had done in connection with the evil report of the spies. In that instance, the spies, and with them the nation, sinned through the improper use of speech. Now, Moshe was to demonstrate to them that the same gift of speech could be used in a positive way, to produce the water they needed to slake their thirst. On a wider level, this was actually, the message that the people needed to learn in regard to Eretz Yisroel, in general. As Rabbi Chaim Ya'akov Goldvicht, founding Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva Kerem B'Yavneh, often taught, Eretz Yisroel was the location where the worst possible moral outrages were performed by its local inhabitants, the *Cana'anim*. It was the mission of the Jewish people to take that same land and use it for the purpose of *kedusha*, of holiness. In essence, this was the lesson of the Parah Adumah, as explained by Rav Yerucham, and the lesson that Moshe was to have taught the nation by speaking to the rock. Because Moshe, by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, failed to teach them this lesson, which had such important implications for their future life in Eretz Yisroel, he was not allowed to lead them into the land. Thus, the placement of the mitzvah of Parah Adumah at this juncture, on the eve of the nation's entrance into Eretz Yisroel, though the mitzvah had actually been given long before, is understandable, because it serves as a framework for understanding the task of the nation once they would enter the land.

Cheshbono Shel Olam

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim given on Jul 7, 2016)

In this week's Parsha, we read: *Al kein yomru ha-moshlim, bo'u Cheshbon, tiboneh ve-tikonon ir Sichon.* This pasuk talks about *moshlim*, the soothsayers, who said—regarding how Sichon conquered Moav—*Bo'u Cheshbon.* This is relevant to all the geopolitical dynamics described in this week's Parsha. But there is a Midrash Chazal in maseches Baba Basra made famous by the Mesilas Yesharim: *Al kein yomru ha-moshlim, bo'u cheshbon—Al kein yomru ha-moshlim be-yitzram, bo'u*

ve-nechshav cheshbono shel olam. That is the origin of the phrase *Cheshbon Ha-nefesh. Havei mechashav schar aveira keneged hefseida* is a guiding principle that teaches us how to make the right decisions. This drasha is a great idea—*Bo'u cheshbon: make Cheshbon Ha-nefesh. I am all in favor.* But it has very little to do with the pasuk, which describes a war between Moav and Sichon.

I heard an excellent hesber that this drasha is, in fact, *pshuto shel mikra.* What is going on there? *Al kein yomru*

ha-moshlim, bo'u cheshbon. What did these moshlim see? A war between Sichon and Moav. Sichon Melech Ha-Emori was the big winner, Moav—the big loser. They saw what was right in front of them—right here, right now. Sichon is successful. He is on top of the world because he conquered so much. The future of the world is with Sichon Melech Ha-Emori. What did they not realize? They didn't understand that, as Chazal explain, *Amon u-Moav tiharu be-Sichon*. Meaning, Sichon first conquered the lands of Amon and Moav.

Everything is part of a Divine plan. Hashem commanded us: *Al totzar es Moav ve-al tisgar bam milchama*. We have an *isur* to fight against Moav because they descended from Lot, who helped Avraham. Hashem arranged things so that Sichon would have a pretext to start a war between Amorites and the Moavim, allowing him to conquer a sizeable portion of their territories. Why? Not because he was an emergent world power. Sichon's conquest was just an excuse in Hashem's plan for him to conquer Moav, something forbidden to us. This way, we could come, utterly defeat him, and take those territories for ourselves. The pundits in that story—*Al kein yomru ha-moshlim, bo'u Cheshbon*—were most brilliant, immensely insightful, and had prodigious political influence. And they said: We look at the world, and we project that Sichon will be the ruler of the world now. He is the most powerful. They downright misunderstood what was happening in

front of their faces and got it one hundred percent wrong! They did not recognize that Hashem's plan would come to fruition shortly, and He would reward Bnei Yisroel and punish the *resho'im*. Why does the pasuk tell us this? It shows us how foolish people are when they look at what is in front of them and don't consider that maybe something is going on in the long term. They don't think Hashem has a plan for the world, and there is a spiritual dimension to the current events—something beyond the overt. The pashut pshat of this pasuk is *Ve-hevei mechashev hefseid mitzvah keneged s'chara u-schar aveira keneged hefseida*. Why do people do the wrong thing? Because they look at the here-and-now and say: Oh, that's too hard for me. I don't want to sacrifice for not doing the *isur*. I really enjoy doing that, etc. If you only look at the present, you end up being just as stupid as those *moshlim* who said *bo'u Cheshbon*. You think that the state of the world is one way, yet you don't realize that it's *le-gamrei* the opposite. And therefore, what we learn from this pasuk—*al pi pshuto shel mikra*—is that if you really want to make the right decisions and understand what is really going on in the world, don't just look at what is in front of your eyes right now. Realize that everything has something deeper behind it. What looks good now might be unfavorable later, and what looks hard now might end up being beneficial later. And then you will succeed and achieve what you want to achieve. You will become a winner, doing what is worthwhile in this world.

Why We Get Angry

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Many are familiar with the “golden mean” or the middle path of the Rambam. Regrettably, some misunderstand this as a prescription for religious mediocrity. Under no conditions did the Rambam endorse lukewarm religious adherence or “middle of the road” religious passion. Lethargic or middling religious experience is anathema to the Rambam. What the Rambam does advocate is balanced and well-adjusted character development. As we sculpt our personalities, there is a tendency to develop our traits in “extreme” degrees; the easiest way to build a quality is to radicalize it. Opposed to radical or extreme character traits, the Rambam encouraged a more temperate calibration: no trait should be developed to its extreme but, instead, should be moderated or adjusted to the middle “mean”. For

example, a person should not act too solemnly, but also, should not behave too exuberantly. Instead, they should strike a healthy balance between jubilation and seriousness. Likewise, a person shouldn't be too frugal but, just the same, shouldn't recklessly squander funds. A third example pertains to our interface with our physical world. Too much indulgence can lead to hedonism or decadence and too little can invite ascetism or extreme self-deprivation. While religious passion and experience must be extreme and intense, personality traits should be balanced.

Having proposed the middle road and having warned against radical character traits, the Rambam does support radicalization in two areas of human character. A person should labor toward extreme humility, eliminating even traces of arrogance and haughtiness. Humility is a

gateway to integrity, honesty and selflessness and healthy relationships. Secondly, the Rambam cautions against any trace of anger or temper. Anger is a temporary insanity which overwhelms our reason and clouds our moral conscience. It is, literally, a foreign force which invades our reason and even manifests in physical changes: our palms begin to sweat, our heads become dizzy, and we feel overheated. Mishlei (14;29) portrays the emotion of anger with the term *kozer ruach*, or shortened breath. Amidst anger-induced hysteria, all moral restraints vanish, and we become capable of unthinkable crimes. Realizing the unrestrained danger of anger, the Rambam urged “elimination” not moderation.

Anger is so menacing precisely because it threatens everyman. It also afflicted the greatest moral human being to ever walk our planet- Moshe Rabeinu. He had waited forty years, watching as the older rebellious generation faded into history. A new generation ascended, arousing great expectations for more faith and less confrontation. When those expectations were dashed at the “rock”, Moshe’s anger flashed. It certainly wasn’t the type of rage or fury we are familiar with. Judging Moshe by our own conventional standards is both morally inappropriate and intellectually dishonest. The anger Moshe expressed would be common for most people, however, for a person of Moshe’s stature it was unacceptable. Aside for the anger itself, Moshe’s tone at the rock set a poor example for this younger generation who looked to him for guidance and for moral example. Unable to fully repress his anger – even for a passing moment- Moshe was replaced with a new leader.

In general, we experience two very different types of anger. Typically, our anger is felt toward our adversaries, rivals, or just strangers who happen to inconvenience us or harm us. We become angry at the situation, or we express our anger toward people we believe have slighted us or compromised our interests. Road rage is an example of this type of anger: one motorist has little or no relationship with another motorist. Feeling victimized by aggressive or inconsiderate driving, can bring a person to verbal or even physical violence. In this instance anger is directed at a “stranger”.

The second type of anger is directed to people we are close with or share a relationship with. We care about the people we are close with, and that care and concern often generates expectations. When these expectations aren’t met, we are addended, frustrated, or both, precisely because we care so deeply. Sadly, our frustration sometimes

bleeds into anger.

Obviously, Moshe, the consummate leader, cares deeply about the people who he constantly defends. When the nation fails to live up to his expectations, he is understandably frustrated, and, ultimately, allows his frustration to vent as anger. This occurs most blatantly at the “rock”, but his irritation was discernable during two episodes before this incident and during one episode afterwards. Forty years before the rock incident, Moshe had descended Sinai, bracing the *luchot* in his arms, only to witness the religious depravity of the golden calf. Angrily, he shattered the *luchot*. A few months later, during the inaugural celebration of the *mishkan*, tragedy struck, as the two sons of Aharon were incinerated by a Heavenly fire. Presuming that various sacrifices were improperly suspended, Moshe angrily expressed his disagreement. Finally, after a crucial war with Midyan, Moshe greeted the victorious soldiers returning from battle, but notices that his specific instructions were ignored. Facing these careless soldiers, Moshe is angered.

In each of these instances Moshe’s anger was a product of his deep concern for his people and the heavy consequences of their flawed behavior. Additionally, in each instance, Moshe faced a fragile situation or an emergency. He confronted the *egel* rebellion, the tragedy of death on a celebratory day of inauguration and a critical war with a sworn enemy. It is one thing to remain composed when we are otherwise in a state of clam. Under normal circumstances we possess enough inner tranquility to bear our anger and bear our frustration. Living through a crisis, it becomes more difficult to maintain our calm. Sadly, Moshe was unable to completely transcend these moments, and his relationship with the Jewish people was damaged.

The midrash narrates a scene toward the end of Moshe’s life. He apologizes to the nation for the pain he has caused them while trying to prod them toward greater religious experience. They forgive him and beg Moshe to forgive their own truculence. Moshe grants them forgiveness and all the anger subsides. It is a sad and poignant scene to cap Moshe’s career of extraordinary dedication, care and emotional investment.

Afterword: My Rebbe, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, urged us to navigate moral challenges by considering how our “role model” would behave in a similar situation. Abstract distinctions between “right” and “wrong” is less helpful in the heat of a moral struggle. Though we often can

identify proper behavior, frequently, our conviction fails in the heat-of-the-moment. Imaging the behavior of our role models produces more compelling moral guidance. Personally, I have found this strategy very helpful in many

Because He Said So

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

“Because I said so” ... the words that each of us hated hearing from our parents growing up, and we swore we would never say them to our kids ... and yet, somehow, we end up doing so anyway, during moments of weakness.

Fundamentally, we realize that being told to do something, or act in a certain way, without being given an explanation or reason for doing so, is extremely challenging. Our natural instinct is to refuse, or at least argue, with such a request. That is why we hated hearing that phrase as kids, and resolved never use it as parents.

And yet- in this week's parsha, we encounter what seems to be a classic example of G-d telling us to a mitzvah “because I said so.”

As many of us are aware, the Mitzvot can be divided into two general categories. “Mishpatim” refer to commandments that are more logical and sensible in nature- laws that society would likely have created if Hashem had not commanded them- such as the prohibition to kill, steal, kidnap, etc. In contrast, “chukim” refer to mitzvot that possess reasons which are not intuitive; mitzvot that are harder for us to understand- such as the laws of kashrut, sha'atnez, and many more.

Perhaps the most well-known chok is the mitzvah that opens up our parsha, the mitzvah of Parah Aduma, the Red Heifer. The Torah commands that any person who becomes impure through contact with a dead person or animal must go through a 7-day purification process, during which he is sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer. Our parsha introduces this mitzvah with the phrase “zot chukat haTorah”, “this is the chok of the Torah”- implying that of all the mitzvot in the Torah, the Parah Aduma is the quintessential chok, the hardest to understand. And in fact, the Midrash maintains that King Shlomo, the smartest man to ever live, was able to understand the logic behind all the mitzvot in the Torah, except for Parah Aduma, the logic of which evaded even his intellect.

Given the above raised frustrations we naturally feel

areas of self- improvement. Particularly in battling anger, this approach has proven extremely effective. We are all familiar with people who manage anger skillfully. Thinking about their response may help us steady or own behavior.

when we receive instructions without explanation, why would Hashem command us to do mitzvot that we don't understand?

This question is compounded when we consider the opinion of Rashi. Based on a certain reading of a number of Midrashim, Rashi repeatedly describes chukim as mitzvot that “have no reason- they are a decree from the king, and we have no permission to challenge them”. According to this position, not only are chukim beyond our comprehension, we aren't even meant to try and understand them at all- we are meant to observe them as heavenly decrees, without question!

In essence, G-d is telling us that we need to do these mitzvot “because He said so”! Why would he command them in such a way?

Rashi Gemara Megillah 25a explains that these mitzvot are designed for us “to show that we are His (HaShem's) servants, and that we obey his commandments”. One of ways that we are meant to relate to Hashem is as our Melech, our King. When a King decrees, his servants obey without question. In order to develop this dedication and submission to Hashem's authority, He commands us to do certain mitzvot that make no sense to us; mitzvot that even seem arbitrary or random. By committing to do these mitzvot regardless, we concretize our complete deference to Hashem as our King and Ruler.

As we have noted in the past, Rav Soloveitchik often writes of the important role that submission plays in Judaism. Each of us must submit our wants and needs to a higher authority, thereby committing an act of “tzimtzum”, a “withdrawing” of ourselves and our natural desires, for the sake of G-d and in deference to Him.

In sum, there is great reason for G-d to command us to do mitzvot “because He said so”!

Given the critical role that chukim play in establishing HaShem's authority over us, we might be tempted to require similar obedience from our children. It is, after all, certainly true that there is a clear hierarchy between parents

and children; and that children are meant to view their parents as authority figure. And yet, we must realize that our relationship with our kids is fundamentally different from the relationship between G-d and Man. Our role as authority figures stems from the fact that we are adults, and therefore have more life experience to share, and a deeper understanding of what is good for the child and what is detrimental. This is why the authority that we have over our children wanes as they get older- because as they gain more knowledge, life experience, and wisdom, they become more equipped to make their own choices and decisions. We will always be their parents- and a certain level of kavod and yirah will always be expected, appropriate, and commanded- but our role as authorities over them will have ended.

Therefore, even during the earlier years, when we do function as authorities over our children, we should recognize that our relationship with them is fundamentally different from our relationship with Hashem. We are not looking- at least we should not be looking- for our children to submit themselves to our authority, or to obey us without question or understanding. Rather, we should strive to cultivate a relationship based on communication, trust, and respect. We should communicate to our children the reasons for any rules or standards we place on them, or any expectations we have of them. We must also create space for a genuine conversation surrounding these standards or

expectations- where we are able to listen to our children and hopefully have them listen to us. Ultimately, they may not agree with our decisions- but at least they will appreciate that our conclusions have been based on sound logic and reasoning, rather than arbitrary whims.

There will certainly be moments where we don't have time to explain ourselves fully to our children- or situations where a proper explanation will be beyond their comprehension at their age. During those moments, when challenged, we may be tempted to simply respond "because I said so" in order to assert our authority and save ourselves time and mental energy. But even in those situations, a better reaction would be to transmit the message that said rules are for their own well-being and benefit, even if they don't fully understand it. Such a response will relay a message of love and care, rather than authority and power.

Our relationship with G-d is multi-faceted and complex. Among many other roles, he is both our Father and our King. Our Mitzvot are fashioned to highlight both of these roles in our own lives. Chukim are specifically designed to highlight our relationship with Hashem as our King- by tasking us to submit ourselves unquestioningly to His authority. At the same time, as parents, our relationship with our children is totally different- and we should therefore strive to avoid asking them to listen to us simply "because we said so".

Our Mysterious Destiny & The Coming of Moshiach

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha (chutz la'aretz), Parshas Chukas, we learn of the laws of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, whose ashes purify one who has become tamei meis (ritually defiled by proximity/contact with a corpse). While its ashes, mixed with mayim chaim - 'living water' - purify one who is impure, at the same time, it causes the one who is pure to become impure! No human mind can make sense of such a law, and so, it is known as zos chukas ha'Torah - the classic 'chok' of Torah, the greatest mystery, the most unexplainable of laws of the Torah.

As the very first Rashi of the parsha teaches us:

זאת חקת התורה. לפי שהשטן ואמות העולם מונין את ישראל, לומר מה המצוה הזאת ומה טעם יש בה? לפיכך כתב בה חקה — גזרה היא מלפני, אין לה רשות להרהר אחריה

Because the Satan and the nations of the world aggrieve Israel (over this law) by saying: What is this commandment?!

What reason is there to it? Therefore, the Torah calls it a 'chok' - a statute, which implies: It is a decree before Me, you do not have the right to question it (Rashi to Bamidbar 19:2).

From the topic of this great enigma, parah adumah, the parsha abruptly moves us thirty-eight years forward (!) to the deaths of Miriam and Aharon, and the punishment of Moshe (Num.20), all of which occurred in year forty. We learn of the tragedy of our three great leaders who were condemned to die on the eastern side of the Jordan River, and would never enter into the Promised Land.

The deaths and burial of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam on ever la'Yarden are such an enigma, that commentators from across the spectrum - as well as across the ages - have offered their own interpretation of what their sins were. From the Medrash, to Rashi, to the Ibn Ezra, to the Ramban, Rambam, Abarbanel, Sforno and forward

throughout the ages, each commentator offers his thoughts on their actions (and words) that caused them to die, and lay eternally, on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

And yet, in grouping Paraha Adumah, the great mystery of Torah, in the same parsha as the end of Miriam, Aharon and Moshe; even more so, placing their narratives immediately after that of Parah Adumah, the Torah is teaching us a very great lesson indeed ... Parshas Chukas begins with 'chok', and continues with 'chok.' The first chok is the law of the Red Heifer. The next chok is the chok of the mystery and inexplicability of human life, and human death. The chok of our three greatest leaders being banished forever from Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav zt'l, teaches, "King David could not build the Temple for the same reason that Moshe could not cross into the Land of Israel. Had Moshe crossed the border, the Land of Israel never could have been taken away from the Jewish people. And since Providence planned differently [namely, that it should, and would, be taken away from the nation], Moshe died on the far shore of the Jordan. Had David built a Temple, no power in the world could have destroyed it. But Providence has decreed differently for our people. A Sanctuary built by David would have had to usher in an era of peace and salvation for all, forever. In the time of King David, the world was not ready for the King Messiah.

"From the viewpoint of human reason, the redemption in Egypt should have been the only one in Jewish history. The messianic era should have commenced with the Exodus. G-d said, 'I will take you to Me for a people ... and I will bring you into the Land' (Ex.6:7); why, then, did those who left Egypt die in the desert and never enter the Land of Israel? Why were the Jews exiled from their land the first time? Why the second time? Why all the suffering in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and particularly in our time - the Holocaust? Are not the words of זאת חוקת התורה (*this is the mystery and inexplicability of the Torah*) applicable to

The Chukas HaTorah

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Parshas Chukas begins with the mitzva of para aduma – the cow that was slaughtered and then burned to prepare ashes which were used to prepare the special purifying waters. People and articles that became tamei through contact with a human corpse would be purified

our total historical experience? Our whole existence is a mystery, an enigma!

"The entire Haggadah is permeated with the question of why we are still slaves, not to Pharaoh, but now to others. It not the phrase 'hashata avdei - this year we are slaves,' self-contradictory? Declaring ourselves to be slaves contradicts the very sanctity of Leil Shimurim, the Night of Watching, the night of the Exodus and our celebration of freedom.

"Yet we believe that at some point in time all contradictions will be resolved and the Almighty will purge the historical order of contradictions and antithetic elements. At present the redemption from Egypt - whose end goal was never realized with that generation, as G-d originally foretold - is still classified under זאת חוקת התורה, zot hukkat ha'Torah. It will be explained through the intervention of G-d, 'וְהִזָּה הַטָּהוֹר עַל-הַטָּמֵא - *the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean*' (Bamidbar 19:19). [A reference and allusion to G-d, the Clean One (keviyachol), who will sprinkle the cleansing waters upon us, the unclean ones, in the end of days.]

"The Exodus will finally be completely realized; the eschatological era [the era of Moshiach] will begin; only then will the redemption from Egypt be endowed with its final meaning" (Vision and Leadership, p.221-222).

There are so many difficult, painful and perplexing mysteries which we are confronted with in life - personally and nationally. From the laws of the Red Heifer, to the deaths of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, to our long national exile and suffering through the ages, to our own individual trials and tribulations. The parsha of Zot hukkat ha'Torah is our story, our destiny, our journey and the enigma of Klal Yisrael.

Only in the end of days, will we be sprinkled with the purifying, cleansing, illuminating waters, when all the mysteries will be explained and our destiny will finally be realized. May it be immediate and in our days.

through this water.

The Torah introduces this mitzva in unusually grandiose fashion: זאת חוקת התורה – "*This is the statute of the Torah.*" Rashi explains that this mitzva is referred to as a חוק, a term which denotes laws which elude human comprehension.

The underlying reason of this mitzva is impossible for us to understand. The notion that specifically the ashes of an unblemished, red cow which had never been used for labor, when mixed with water, can bring purity is something which we cannot comprehend. Moreover, this mitzva features a glaring paradox, as the waters bring purity to those who had been impure, but brings impurity to those who handled them while in a state of purity. Indeed, the Midrash tells that even Shlomo Ha'melech, the wisest of all men, was incapable of comprehending this mitzva. Hence, the law of para aduma is referred to as a חוק.

However, the Or Ha'chayim asks, why does the Torah refer to this mitzva of חוקת התורה – implying that this is the foundational mitzva of the Torah? Is this not an overstated description of the law of para aduma?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, in Sichos Mussar, answers that a relationship is defined by the way the parties respond to requests which they do not understand. If my wife makes a request of me, and I understand why this is needed, how it benefits the family, then my compliance does not necessarily reflect my devotion to her. It is very possible that I grant

Our Song

Rabbi Chaim Metzger

The Song of the Well (Bamidbar 21:1718) is the first time Bnei Yisrael sing to Hashem on their own. The verse prior (21:16) explains that this took place in Be'er (literally 'well'), where Hashem had told Moshe to gather the nation and give them water. The full song is not even two verses long. "Then Israel sang this song: Rise up O well, proclaim to it. The well dug by officers, excavated by the nobility of the nation, with sceptre and their staffs."

The initial Hebrew words of the Song of the Well are strikingly similar to the Song at the Sea (Shemot 15:1), "*Az yashir Moshe uvnei Yisrael et hashirah hazot laShem.*" Here it begins, "*Az yashir Yisrael et hashirah hazot.*" But where the Song at the Sea is explicitly sung to Hashem, there is no obvious word in the Song of the Well referencing Hashem at all. In fact, Chaim Nahman Bialik utilized the words of the Song of the Well in a secular context, for a song apparently devoid of Hashem, about drinking of a well's golden waters from a filled bucket. Did the Jews not recognize Hashem at the Well? First, we need to answer a question: what well was this?

her request because of the benefit which I realize it will bring to the family, myself included. But when she asks me to do something and I cannot understand why she wants this done, how this will bring any benefit to any of us – my response reflects the nature of the entire relationship. If I honor my wife's request even when I do not understand it – then this shows my devotion.

This is the answer to the Or Ha'chayim's question. Para aduma is the חוקת התורה specifically because it is inscrutable, a law which we cannot possibly begin to understand. When we observe such a mitzva, then we express the nature of our devotion to all the mitzvos. Our observance of the rational mitzvos, those which we understand, or from which we receive some tangible benefit, does not prove our unconditional commitment and absolute submission to God's authority. It is only when we surrender our reason, and observe the mitzvos which make no sense to us, that we demonstrate our full-fledged devotion to Hashem's will. And thus, indeed, para aduma is חוקת התורה, the mitzva which sheds light upon the nature of our observance of all the other mitzvos.

The Second Well

The simplest explanation is that this is the well at which Moshe was punished for striking the rock. (20:12) This well was mentioned in the verse right before the song. (21:16) Indeed, Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor points out that Moshe also isn't mentioned as singing in the song despite his being present, because that well was also the source of his inability to enter Israel. (Commentary to Bamidbar 21:17)

The First Well

Commenting on this passage, Rabbeinu Behaye follows the midrash-based approach of Rashi (21:1617), that the officers and nobility referenced are Moshe and Aharon. The song harkens back to the beginning of the forty years in the desert, when Hashem told Moshe to hit the rock to produce water. That water came in the merit of Miriam. The drying up of the well, and Moshe's inappropriate second striking of the rock occurred because of Miriam's passing. The impetus for the new song was a river of blood and bones that began to flow after Hashem miraculously destroyed an Emorite ambush.

But within this approach, why isn't Hashem directly

mentioned in the song? Why the ambiguous officers and princes? Why not mention Miriam, Moshe, or Aharon directly?

Perhaps it is because the postMiriam well didn't turn out as planned. Rabbi Menachem Leibtag explains that the second drawing of water from the rock was supposed to be an opportunity for Moshe to make a miraculous and lasting impression on the new generation,

akin to the miracles that began in Egypt and continued through the presentation of the Torah at Sinai. The process was meant to inspire, but when Moshe squandered the chance, choosing to hit instead of speaking to the rock, and calling the Jews "rebels", this opportunity was lost. (Bamidbar 20:10)

A Tribute to Miriam, Our Sister

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parshat Chukat, sadly informs us of the death of Miriam. Numbers 20:1, reads:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר צֹן, בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, וַיָּשָׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ, וַתָּמָת שָׁם מֵרִים, וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם

The Children of Israel, the entire assembly, arrived in the Wilderness of Zin, in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

The following eulogy for Miriam might have been delivered on the 10th of Nissan, in the Hebrew year 2487, (1274 BCE).

Precious Israelites, we are gathered here today to pay our final respects to a great historic personality and a great woman. Miriam, daughter of Yocheved and Amram of the tribe of Levi, sister of Moses and Aaron, has been taken from us and is now with the Creator.

While she was yet a child, she had the courage of an elder. As an elder, she possessed the pure faith of a child. The 126 years that she lived were years of total and selfless devotion to her family and especially to her extended family--the entire People of Israel.

When she was but 6 years old, she reproached her father Amram, who was at the time the leading figure of the People of Israel. Speaking firmly to him for separating from his wife after Pharaoh had decreed that all the newborn male children be cast into the river, she declared: "Father, you are worse than Pharaoh! Pharaoh's decree is only against the male children, but by separating from your wife and encouraging all the Jewish men to do likewise,

The golden tongue that Moshe gained and used to sing at the Sea and lead Bnei Yisrael for forty years appears to have worn out. Now, Bnei Yisrael were thrust into a new age, not quite ready or fully formed. They drew inspiration from the Song of the Sea and retold their impressions of the water coming from the rock, but their experience was incomplete.

This song initiated by Bnei Yisrael has its flaws, but "The Song of the Well" ushered in a new era, when all of Bnei Yisrael began to feel inspired and tried to recognize Hashem around them. While short on words, their energy and enthusiasm was contagious, and exactly what the nation needed before entering the land of Israel. May we all merit to sing this song and others, together in Israel.

your decree will eliminate the girls as well! When Pharaoh ordered his victims to be cast into the water, he deprived them of life in this world. But, by preventing Jewish children from ever being born, you deprive them of a life in the "World to Come" as well. Pharaoh is a wicked man. His decrees are unlikely to be fulfilled. But you are righteous, so your resolutions will be upheld by G-d." Upon hearing his daughter's rebuke, Amram reunited with his wife, resulting in all the other Israelites returning to their wives as well. So, we see, dear Miriam, that were it not for you, there would be no Jewish people today!

As is stated in the biblical text (Exodus 1:15), Miriam, you were known as "Puah," the midwife. You acquired this name because you would "coo" to the agitated newborn infants and calm them (Talmud, Sotah 11b).

Miriam, you were also the heroic young lady about whom the bible (Exodus 2:4), reports that you stationed yourself at a distance to keep watch over your little brother, Moses, whom your mother, Yocheved, had placed him in a little ark in the river to save his life. When the daughter of Pharaoh rescued the child, you were the one who courageously approached the princess to ask whether she would like you to summon a nurse for the child from the Hebrew women. Thus, it was you, Miriam, who, not only, insured that this child's life would be saved, but that he would also be raised in his infancy by his biological Jewish mother, Yocheved.

And, Miriam, you were the one, when the children of

Israel were rescued at the Red Sea that split, who led the women with drums in hand, in song and in dance (Exodus 15:20). You provided the example of exalted faith, and because you were so certain that the Jewish people were going to be rescued, you and the women of Israel brought along your musical instruments that you played after the rescue at the Sea. (The Israelite men, unfortunately, did not have that faith!)

It is you, about whom the Talmud in Taanit 9a, declares that there were three good leaders who arose for the people of Israel--Moses, Aaron and Miriam. You, Miriam, a woman, no less than the two men, played an essential role in the success of this great triumvirate.

And now that you've passed on, sister Miriam, there is suddenly a lack of water for our people to drink. Obviously, it was in your merit that a rock that housed a well followed the people throughout their journey in the wilderness for 38 years and supplied the people with plentiful fresh water.

Your departure, Miriam, leaves behind a great void. But you also leave behind a brilliant legacy. Together with your dynamic husband, Caleb, you raised a son, Chur, who confronted the worshipers of the Golden Calf and paid for it with his life (Talmud Sanhedrin 7a). Your grandson, Bezalel, is the marvelously gifted architect of the beautiful Tabernacle, which serves as the spiritual home of Israel. How proud you must be of him! Eventually, Miriam, it will be your offspring who will bring King David into this world, and will ultimately be the progenitors of the Messiah. You see, Miriam, you are not only a leader, you are a redeemer!

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes in his commentary (Numbers 20:1), regarding the death of Miriam:

She finished her earthly mission. She was buried at

Kadesh to record for posterity that she didn't leave the world until she had prepared the next generation for its promised future. Throughout the long journey in the Wilderness, the women of Israel were never partners in the rebellion against G-d, which were ultimately rooted in despair. With heartfelt joy they trusted in G-d and yearned for Him with total dedication. It was for this reason that the death sentence pronounced on the generation of the Wilderness did not impact on the women of Israel. Mothers and grandmothers were now poised to enter the Promised Land along with the new generation. Ensclosed in their hearts was a live memory of the past in Egypt and the Divinely directed travels through the Wilderness granting them the ability to give the souls of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren to drink from the spiritual springs of their experiences with G-d. The Jewish women throughout the generations filled themselves with true Jewish spirit, allowing it to penetrate the depths of their souls. This is the spiritual heritage they received from Miriam, the prophetess, who lit up the path for all Jewish women and mothers.

We cry for you, beloved sister, Miriam. Not only for the physical loss of a wonderful woman, but also for the spiritual nourishment that you provided for us throughout your life. You were not only a sister to Moses and Aaron, you were truly a sister to all of us, to all the people of Israel. Bereft of you, we are now parched, withered and thirsty. We will have to search far and wide to find anyone with talents that are anything like yours. And, we are quite certain that no one will ever be found who will measure up to your incomparable accomplishments.

Go in peace, Miriam. And, from your heavenly abode, watch over your people, Israel.

The Chok of Parah Adumah

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

Our parsha opens with a discussion of the mitzvah of parah adumah (red heifer), which is described as the quintessential chok of the Torah, that is, a mitzvah whose reason cannot be fathomed by the human intellect.

Throughout our history, there have been numerous parah adumams, of which Moshe's was the first. And yet, the Midrash² informs us that Moshe's parah adumah

impacted on all subsequent ones, for some of the ashes of his parah was mixed in with the water of every subsequent parah adumah. This statement requires our contemplation. Was not each subsequent red heifer that was used a parah adumah in its own right? Why should it need some ashes from Moshe's original heifer? Was the parah adumah in Moshe's time redder than those of subsequent times?

Does the Parah Adumah Atone for Sin?

The Gemara in the beginning of Maseches Yoma (2a)

¹ See Midrash Tanchuma Parshas Chukas sec. 8 with Commentary Eitz Yosef.

makes a point of stating that the parah adumah does not come to atone for any sin, it comes only to purify from tumas meis (impurity through contact with the deceased). Thus, even when verse nine refers to it as a “*chataf*”, which normally means an offering that atones for sin (*chet*), Rashi explains that here it means that it wipes away (*mechateh*) the tumah impurity.

However, the Gemara elsewhere indicates very clearly to the contrary. In Maseches Moed Katan (28a) it states that from the Torah’s juxtaposition of the death of Miriam with the parah adumah, we learn that just as korbanos bring atonement, so too does the passing of the righteous. The Gemara is explicitly categorizing the parah adumah with other offerings that offer atonement! How is this to be reconciled with its non-offering status as emphasized above?

The Uniqueness of the First Parah Adumah

The Netziv in Haemek Davar explains that, in fact, Moshe’s parah adumah had a quality that did not exist with any of the later ones. In addition to the normal function of the parah, which we classify as a *chok*, the first heifer had the additional function of atoning for the sin of the Golden Calf, as the Midrash² states, “*Let the mother [the Red Heifer] come and clean up the mess of the son [the Golden Calf].*” This was relevant specifically for that first time, for the Jewish people who had recently worshiped the Egel.

Indeed, this additional element within the first parah adumah even finds practical expression in the way the Torah commanded its procedure to be performed. Verse three states “*You shall give it to Elazar the Kohen.*” The Gemara in Yoma 42b notes that on this occasion, the parah adumah was to be given over specifically to Elazar – the deputy Kohen Gadol – to oversee, while on subsequent occasions, there is no such insistence: its service can be entrusted to any Kohen, including the Kohen Gadol. Why was this time different? The Midrash explains that since Aharon was physically involved in the making of the Egel – albeit for idealistic reasons – his deputy needed to perform the procedure, but he could not be involved. Thus, we see the unique nature of this first parah adumah affecting the halachos that applied to it.

In the Realm of Parshanut: A Two-Tiered Introduction

This idea will also explain the order in the introductory verse: Hashem tells Moshe:

2 Tanchuma Chukas sec. 8, cited in Rashi to verse 22.

זאת חקת התורה אשר צוה ה' לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל ויקחו אליהם פרה אדומה וגו'

This is the statute (chok) of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying, “Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a red heifer etc.”

The commentators point out that the phrases in this verse appear out of order, for is the idea that the parah adumah a *chok* not also part of what Moshe was to tell the people? If so, the verse should have read “Speak to the Children of Israel saying, ‘This is the stature of the Torah... and they shall take a red heifer etc.’”!³

Rather, says the Netziv, once we recognize the unique nature of this first parah adumah, we can understand the order within the verse. Hashem opens by telling Moshe “This is the statute of the Torah,” which is a categorization that applies to the parah adumah generally. However, this is not part of what Moshe is to tell the people, since the parah adumah at hand will include elements that are beyond the *chok* designation of the mitzvah!

Returning to Our Opening Questions

We can now understand how the Gemara can derive from the juxtaposition of Miriam’s death with parah adumah the idea the passing of the righteous atones like korbanos, even though elsewhere it states that there is no atonement associated with the parah adumah. The latter statement refers to the parah adumah generally, which exists only for purity, but not atonement, while the former statement relates to the original parah adumah which helped achieve atonement for the Chet ha’Egel.

We can also understand why some of Moshe’s parah adumah ashes were mixed in with all subsequent ones. We asked, are they not parah adumams in their own right? Why should they need ashes from Moshe’s? In light of our discussion, we see that Moshe’s parah adumah did indeed contain an element not present within any others, namely, atonement for the Chet ha’Egel. Although atonement for that sin was effectively achieved in Moshe’s time, nevertheless, the Gemara states that the atonement was not complete, rather, it is an ongoing process, and that every generation receives some measure of retribution for that sin. This ongoing atonement is represented by mixing in

3 In fact, there is a more nuanced point here, for the phrase “[This is the statute...] which Hashem has commanded,” referring to Hashem in the third person, implies that these are actually part of Moshe’s words to the people! If so, why is it placed before Moshe is commanded to speak to them? See Commentary of Ramban *ibid*.

some of the ashes of the original parah adumah whose goal was to atone for that sin, into all later parah adumahs.

Will We Ever Know the Reason for Parah Adumah?

As we have mentioned, the mitzvah of parah adumah is looked upon as the classic chok, that is, a mitzvah whose reason we cannot understand. However, there is a very intriguing comment in the Midrash⁹ which states that it is only beyond our understanding in this world; in future times, the reason for this mitzvah will be revealed to us.

From a certain point of view, this idea actually makes the parah adumah even more puzzling. If its reason would be completely and fundamentally beyond human understanding, then that would be that. However, now that we discover that the reason will become revealed to us in the future, apparently it is something we can understand. Why, then, can it not be revealed to us already in this world?

Wherein Lies the Chok?

To answer this question, we need to examine what we mean when we say that the parah adumah is a chok. While we tend to look upon the totality of parah adumah as a chok, the Gemara¹⁰ interestingly identifies one specific aspect of the mitzvah which is responsible for its chok designation, namely, that it generates two opposite and counter-intuitive effects:

- On the one hand, the impure person upon whom the water with the parah adumah ashes is sprinkled becomes pure.
- At the same time, any pure Kohen who comes into contact with the water becomes impure.

The Gemara states that it was with regard to this contradictory effect of the parah adumah that Shlomo Hamelech exclaimed in Koheles 7:23:

אֲמַרְתִּי אֲחֻכְמָהּ וְהִיא רְחוּקָה מִמֶּנִּי.

I thought I would be wise, but it is beyond me.

This, then, is the aspect of the mitzvah that currently remains elusive, but yet will be revealed in the future. What does all of this mean?

A Chok in the Torah for the Chukim of Life

A very beautiful and profound explanation of this matter is presented by R' Yosef Zvi Salant in his Be'er Yosef. Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish people, not only as a source of instruction for how to lead their lives, but also as a source of strength with which to do so. In this vein, the

Midrash¹³ explains that the verse ה' עוֹז לְעַמּוֹ יִתֵּן, *Hashem will give strength to His people*" (Tehillim 29:11) refers to the Torah. Yet life itself, in the current imperfect state of the world, is often baffling, mystifying and confounding, with the most vexing question of all being the righteous who sometimes experience suffering in this world and the wicked who so often seem to prosper. It is a question whose full answer cannot be fathomed within our current frame of life. Yet in the absence of the answer, we need the fortitude to persevere in the presence of the question.

Our faith in and faithfulness toward Hashem in all of life's confusing situations comes from the mitzvos known as chukim, whose reasons likewise are unknown to us. At the center of this category of mitzvah is the parah adumah which contains a contradiction, whereby the impure becomes pure and the pure becomes impure. This mirrors those situations when life itself seems to act in a contradictory way – purifying and rewarding the impure while generating impurity and hardship for the pure.

This idea is expressed in the verse in Tehillim, 15 by David Hamelech, who himself experienced many hardships, often in hiding from those who sought to kill him:

זְמֵרוֹת הָיוּ לִי חֻקֶיךָ בְּבֵית מְגוּרֵי

Your statutes (chukim) were a song for me, in the place of my sojournings.

The sojournings to which David refers were all the places where he needed to find refuge from his opposers and enemies. At those times, with so much of his life containing adversity and hardship, the chukim of the Torah were his song, and from them he drew strength in engaging with the chukim of life.

Statutes and Decrees

Indeed, perhaps the relationship between these two types of "statutes" can be seen in the Sages' formulation regarding the chukim (Bamidbar Rabbah):

חֻקָּה חֻקְתִּי, גִּזְרָה גִּזְרָה גִּזְרָתִּי, אֵין לָךְ רְשׁוּת לְהַרְהֵר אַחֲרֵיהֶם

I have established statutes, I have issued decrees. You do not have permission to question them.

What is behind the double expression, "statutes... decrees" with regards to the chukim? Are these not one and the same? Rather, Hashem is informing the Jewish people that He has established unfathomable statutes (*chukim*) in the Torah, paralleling the equally unfathomable decrees (*gezeiros*) He has issued to the world as we know it – for it

⁴ Yalkut Shimoni Parshas Beshalach sec. 242.

is the former that give strength regarding the latter.

Indeed, this idea may give us insight into an intriguing comment of the Midrash which links the terms used to describe the parah adumah with the exiles of the Jewish people:

- *Heifer* – this is Egypt.
- *Red* – this is Babylon.
- *Completely* – this is Persia.
- *Who has no blemish* – this is Greece.
- *Who has never carried a yoke* – this is Rome.

Nowhere is life more inexplicable and unpredictable than when the Jewish people are in exile. Their evil oppressors appear to be enjoying boundless success while they themselves endure hardship. It is for these exiles especially that parah adumah is given as a chok.⁵

Toward Redemption

We can now understand why although the reason for parah adumah cannot currently be made known to us, in the future it will be revealed. When the Jewish people are finally redeemed and the world achieves its rectified state, not only will the confounding “decrees” of life no longer occur, we will even be able to understand in retrospect how all the experiences of the exile were for our ultimate benefit. In this state, with no chukim in life, there will be none necessary in the Torah, and the reasons for all mitzvos can be revealed.⁶

May the transfer of this mitzvah from chok to mishpat occur speedily in our days!

⁵ This may give us further insight into the statement of the Sages that the parah adumah comes to clean up the mess of the child, namely, the sin of the Golden Calf. The Gemara informs us (Eiruvin 54a) that had we not sinned with the Golden Calf, the world would have reached its rectified state and we would never have incurred exile. If so, we would never have had to endure the type of situations that require the reason for parah adumah to remain withheld from us. However, having committed that sin, the mother comes to clean up its mess in the form of a chok to help us with the chukim of life that we now need to endure.

⁶ See also, Beis Halevi, Parshas Bo s.v. Vayomer (12:43).