

Parshiot Ki Tisa - Parah, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

Chukim and Meaning

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *mitzvah* of the *parah adumah* (Red Heifer) is the focus of this week's additional Torah reading. It begins with the following well-known words:

This is the statute of the Torah that the L-rd commanded, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid." ... It shall be an everlasting statute for the children of Israel and for the proselyte who resides in their midst. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 19:2 and 10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The purpose of this commandment is to purify an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) as a result of contact with a corpse. It is a mystifying commandment, as those who are *tamei* become *tahor* (ritually pure) through the sprinkling of the ashes of the *parah adumah* upon them, while those who assist in this purification process are paradoxically, rendered *tamei*. Little wonder, then, that this *mitzvah* is widely viewed by *chazal* as the ultimate example of a *chok* — a commandment whose rationale currently eludes us.

My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, presents the following trenchant analysis of how to approach *chukim* such as the *parah adumah*:

The laws concerning *chukim* were classified as unintelligible, enigmatic, mysterious... However, even though it is forbidden to ask for motivation, for the motives or the reasoning pertaining to certain Divine categorical imperatives, we may yet inquire into the interpretation of the law. There is a difference between explanation and interpretation. (This and the following citations, *Derashot HaRav*: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, summarized and annotated by Arnold Lustiger, pages 226-227, underlining my own)

At this juncture, the Rav focuses upon a crucial difference that obtains between explanation and interpretation of the *mitzvot* in general, and *chukim* in particular: “I believe that regarding *chukim* (as well as *mishpatim*) [*mitzvot* whose rationale are apprehendable] we must not ask the question of ‘why,’ because ‘why’ is in general a foolish question to ask, even in regard to *mitzvos* which in our opinion are quite meaningful.” (Brackets my own)

If “why” is an inappropriate inquiry regarding the *mitzvot*, what, then, may we ask? The Rav identifies “what” as the proper approach in *mitzvot* interpretation: “However, the question of ‘what’ can be asked. What is the meaning of this *chok* as far as I am concerned? What does the *chok* tell me? Not why did Hakadosh Baruch Hu ordain that law? [Instead,] what is the spiritual message that I can assimilate in my world view?”

The Rav continues to address the crucial distinction between explanation and interpretation, and, in so doing, teaches us what our approach to all *chukim* should ideally encompass:

We have no right to explain *chukim* — we have a duty to interpret *chukim*. What does the *mitzvah* mean to me? How am I to understand not the reason for the *mitzvah*, but the essence of the latter as an integral part of my service of God? Why the *mitzvah* was formulated we don’t know. But what the *mitzvah* means to me, how I can integrate and assimilate the *mitzvah* in my total religious consciousness, world outlook and I-awareness — that is a question that is not only permissible... I am duty bound to raise this question.

The question of “what does the *mitzvah* mean to me?” is writ large in the Rav’s works. Asking it before undertaking each commandment enables us to engage in authentic *avodat*

Elokim (service of the Almighty). Unfortunately, if we fail to do this, we risk having our *mitzvot* actions reduced to the mechanical and formulaic performances that Yeshayahu the prophet decried so long ago: "... And the L-rd said: 'Because this people has come near; with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, but their heart they draw far away from Me, and their awe of Me has become a command of people (*mitzvat anashim melumdah*), which has been taught.'" (29:13) The Rav formulated this concept in the following manner:

Avodas Elokim means not only to discharge the duty, but to enjoy, rejoice in and love the *mitzvah*. But the *avodas Elokim* is unattainable if the *chok* does not deliver any message to us. If there is no idea suggested by the *chok*, how can you be an *oved Elokim* [servant of the Almighty]? In order to offer God my heart and my soul, in order to serve Him inwardly with joy and love, one thing is indispensable — the understanding of the logos [human reason] in the *ma'aseh hamitzvah* [*mitzvah* action] We cannot experience the great bliss, the great experience of fulfilling Divine commandments if the logos is neutral, shut out of that involvement. (Brackets my own)

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we ever be focused upon the question, "what does the *mitzvah* mean to me?" May it lead us on the path of true *avodat Hashem* as we strive to encounter His Divine presence and fulfil His will. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.