

# PARSHAS CHUKAS

תשפ"ו

This week we read Parshas Chukas. It begins with the words: זאת חוקת הַתּוֹרָה. Onkelos translates it as: דא גזירת אורייתא.

In Jewish history, the 3rd of Tammuz is a famously tragic day. It was the day of a decree against the Torah. 783 years ago on that day, Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas, was the burning of all the copies of Shas in Paris.

What happened and why did it happen?

At that time, the center of Torah in Europe was the yeshivos of the Baalei HaTosfos. Although there was much Torah learning in Spain, the Ramban and his cousin/mechutan Rabbeinu Yonah still traveled from Spain to Northern France – to a city called Ivreh – to learn under the Baalei Tosfos. They were there for three years, and the Ramban went back to Spain and Rabbeinu Yonah went on to Paris to study under Rav Yechiel Mi'Paris. The centers of Torah were in France. Great Jews – like the Maharam Mi'Ruttenburg – came from all over to study there.

In Paris, there was a meshumad who complained to the French king that the Talmud is full of insults to Oso Ho'ish. There was a debate between Rav Yechiel Mi'Paris and this meshumad. Rav Yechiel won the dispute but the king was resentful about his victory, and out of revenge, ordered that all the copies of Shas in France be rounded up and burned publicly in the city center – in front of the Church of Notre Dame.

This happened on erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas on the 3rd of Tammuz. They called it the gezeirah against the Torah – after the targum of Onkelos. After this event, France ceased to be the center of Torah in the Jewish world. Rabbeinu Yonah went back to Spain and the Maharam Mi'Ruttenburg went back to Germany. The centers of Torah shifted to Germany, Spain and Provence.

Rabbeinu Yonah was shaken by the whole incident. There is an important idea that people forget. When a tragedy befalls a tzibbur, there is an absolute obligation for the tzibbur to make an inventory and try to figure out which spiritual failing brought it about.

There is a big difference between the cheshbon of sechar and onesh for an individual, and the cheshbon for a tzibbur. For an individual, there can be many complex factors which can go into the cheshbon and it is very difficult to pinpoint a particular cause for a particular thing that happens to him. But for a tzibbur, there is an expectation that the tzibbur must introspect and figure out the message Hashem is sending through the tragedy. This is explicit in the Rambam in Hilchos Taanis. To neglect to make that introspection, the tzibbur is putting itself in danger because Hashem will need to send more messages.

When the expulsion of the Jews of Spain occurred in 1492, the leader of the Jewish community at the time, the Chosid Yaavetz, made a cheshbon hanefesh to figure what was the spiritual failing of their community which led to the expulsion.

After the massacres of the Jews in Poland and Ukraine by the Ukrainians in Tach v'Tat in 1648-1649, the leader of the community was the Tosfos Yom Tov. He too, made a cheshbon hanefesh to figure what caused this tragedy.

Rabbeinu Yonah did the same thing. He looked at the burning of Shas in Paris and deduced that it was middoh k'negged middoh for what the French Jewish community did with the Rambam's seforim. The Rambam was dealing with a certain difficult situation in Spain and Egypt where he felt it was necessary to write seforim like the Morah Nevuchim and Sefer Hamadah to address these people. Not everyone agreed with the Rambam's approach. In France, some were so incensed by these seforim that they were burned. Rabbeinu Yonah felt that this insult to the kovod of the Rambam was so severe that it justified ending France

as the center of Torah for Klal Yisroel. He went to Spain and wrote his sefer, Shaarei Teshuvah.

What was going on in Rabbeinu Yonah's mind? It is very simple. If you respect the Torah, then you should automatically respect those who learn Torah and represent Torah. The gemara in Kiddushin says how foolish the Babylonians are for standing up before a sefer Torah and neglect to stand up for a talmid chochom. Rabbeinu Yonah saw this burning of the Rambam's seforim as a deep display of disrespect for the Torah itself. No-one could deny the Rambam's greatness in Torah from his seforim, and to disrespect him was to disrespect the Torah.

Last week we read Parshas Korach which is a difficult parsha to understand in many ways.

We have Moshe Rabbeinu who had accomplished so much for Klal Yisroel during his leadership. The ten makkos, kriyas Yam Suf, and kabbolas HaTorah. Hashem designed ma'amad Har Sinai to deliberately show the Jewish people that Hashem is authorizing Moshe Rabbeinu to give over His Torah to Klal Yisroel. They all hear Hashem speak face-to-face with Moshe. They all knew Moshe didn't make anything up.

Moshe Rabbeinu davens to save Klal Yisroel from annihilation due to the cheit ho'egel, and he is even willing to sacrifice himself for the Klal.

Parshas Shlach has its disaster. The generation which left Egypt cannot come to Eretz Yisroel. Their children will have to spend 40 years in the desert until the Torah will penetrate to the core of their being. This will prepare them to enter Eretz Yisroel and be able to see the hand of Hashem behind everything that happens in nature. And they will feel Hashem guiding them without constant nissim like falling man or a special well and a protective cloud.

But immediately afterward, after the punishment sinks in, Klal Yisroel blame Moshe for not davening hard enough on their behalf! People are able to tolerate Moshe Rabbeinu as long as he is giving to them what they want. But when they feel the giving has stopped, they rebel.

The Ramban points out that Korach calculated that the best time to make a rebellion is after Moshe fails in some way – after he sent the spies and disaster ensues. It is because until that point, Moshe Rabbeinu always is the one fixing their problems and davening for their safety. But after they are condemned to die in the desert, and there is no way for Moshe to save them, they turn on him.

The Netziv points out that there were three factions in this story:

We have the regular trouble-makers – Dason and Avirom. By themselves, no-one would have paid too much attention to them.

But then Korach tries to take down Moshe's leadership. Korach is fabulously wealthy and very influential. He is jealous of his lower position. People think money entitles you to everything.

Then you had 250 sincere people who were misguided by Korach. They thought they could serve Hashem in the way that they feel is right for them.

The overall feeling of the people is that Moshe Rabbeinu let us down this time. He didn't come through for us to fix the cheit of the meraglim and we are condemned to die here.

At the end of Parshas Beha'alos'cha, Rashi explains that Moshe separated from his wife because he was now operating on an entirely different level than all other nevi'im in history. This is why Miriam was struck with tzoraas – she didn't appreciate Moshe Rabbeinu's true level. The entire nation recognized this because they all waited for Miriam to be restored before they continued traveling.

Yet with Korach, Chazal say one of the things they accuse Moshe of is infidelity because he separated from his wife! It's ridiculous! But Klal Yisroel didn't appreciate their own level and Moshe Rabbeinu's level. This is why they felt they could serve Hashem in any way they saw fit.

Moshe Rabbeinu makes a sign – if Hashem will make an open miracle that has never been seen, then it will prove I am not making things up. And when the miracle happens and the earth swallows up Korach's entire camp, Klal Yisroel deny the message! They say Hashem only did it to preserve Moshe Rabbeinu's kovod! It is all Moshe's fault!

The problem is that Klal Yisroel suffer from an acute lack of perspective. They are not able to perceive things correctly – not the situation of Eretz Yisroel, not their own level and not Moshe's level.

At the end of Parshas Korach we find that Shevet Levi are made distinct from the rest of Klal Yisroel – they have no share in the land and they will devote their entire lives to serving Hashem. In turn, Klal Yisroel are commanded to support them.

We now have Parshas Chukas and the mitzvah of Poroh Adumoh. The problem is that Chazal tell us this mitzvah was given much earlier in Moroh – at the end of Parshas Beshalach! What is it doing here?

The answer is that the mitzvah of Poroh Adumoh gives us some very important lessons that were crucial at this time in Klal Yisroel's development. The mitzvah has some very peculiar aspects. It makes those who are tomei tahor and those who are tahor tomei. Shlomo Hamelech declared that of all the mitzvos of the Torah, this one is distant from my understanding.

Torah is the chochmoh of Hashem. We put in tremendous mental effort to understand the Torah to the best of our ability, but we know that our understanding ultimately falls short.

I have learned Meseches Chullin many times, and each time, my understanding of very difficult sugyos gets clearer and clearer. Yet there are still things that I haven't gotten to the bottom of. Hopefully next time around I'll master those things as well.

Chok doesn't mean there is no logic. It means the logic isn't clear and obvious.

The posuk alludes to limud HaTorah when it says: זאת התורה אדם כי ימות יאמרה. This is how one learns Torah – by killing yourself to understand it. Torah isn't easy. When you get to a certain stage in your learning, you feel that understanding Torah is the most enjoyable experience in the world that any human being can have. It doesn't come at the beginning. It comes only after years of effort to train your mind to be tuned into the logic of Torah. To be able to take a difficult sugya and make a fundamental breakthrough that makes everything fall into place is the greatest pleasure imaginable. But getting to that stage isn't easy.

When I was your age, I heard about this experience, but didn't have it myself. But I trusted those who told me about it and decided I'll put in the effort to get there eventually. It paid off.

Klal Yisroel are now going to be spending 40 years in the desert to prepare themselves to enter Eretz Yisroel. The end of this parsha is when they begin conquering the surrounding nations of Sichon and Og. They will become farmers and merchants and they will be supporting Shevet Levi who is devoted to learning and teaching Torah. This lesson about the nature of Torah is vital for their understanding of how Torah will prepare them for this new life. Ho do you get to the point where the Torah is absorbed so deeply that it will never leave you? It is by killing yourself over it – by putting in tremendous toil and effort.

Another incident in Chukas which needs our attention is the statement of the 'Moshlim' – בואו חשבון. Chazal explain that it means one needs to make the cheshbon of the world – weighing up sechar mitzvah and hefseid mitzvah, to sechar aveiroh and hefseid aveiroh. That is how to look at the world.

There is another posuk explained by the gemara in Eiruvim daf 54: ומתוך כך מתנה ומתנה נהליאל ומנהליאל גמות

Chazal say that only when you make yourself like a desert – without

ego and without putting yourself as the center, then you will receive the Torah as a gift. When you approach the gemara with your own ideas and you don't approach it with humility, then you can't understand the Torah properly. Only when you come to learning with an attitude that you are trying to listen and open your mind to understand how Rashi understood the gemara, how Rabbeinu Tam understood it, then the Torah is given to you. And when you receive it this way, it becomes a nachaloh – you can acquire it and give it over to other people.

And then Torah uplifts you and transforms you into a superior person. But then you have to be careful not to fall into gaivoh. אִתְּכֶם הַיְמִינִים

The Torah can transform a person. Moshe Rabbeinu dedicated 40 years in the desert putting more and more Torah into Klal Yisroel until finally they were ready. But you still have to keep focus and not lose your balance.

We then have an interesting series of confrontations with other nations. Klal Yisroel first wanted to go through Edom's territory, but they weren't allowed through. Yet Hashem did not let them fight Edom to get through. Hashem said Edom has a problem with middos. They are vicious and bloodthirsty. But nevertheless, we have to treat them as family. We don't reject them if they want to convert. We deal with their middos problems in various ways.

The Rambam saw from this in Moreh Nevuchim that the Torah is giving us a general rule – you don't make rifts within the family. A family always stays united. The best example is from Yaakov and Eisov. You couldn't ask for a worse brother than Eisov. Yet generations later, we need to embrace them as brothers.

But when it comes to Amon and Moav, we are not able to accept them into Klal Yisroel. Why? In this parsha we see that they lacked hakoras hatov. They didn't offer us food and water when we traveled near their territory. As a result, we can have nothing to do with them for all generations.

Again the Rambam says we see a tremendous lesson about the depth of the debt of gratitude. These two nations were named after ancestors who were saved by Avrohom. These were the nations who came from the daughters of Lot and were conscious of it. They owed their existence to Avrohom Ovinu, and therefore, 440 years later, they had a debt to pay by offering food and water to Klal Yisroel! They were expected to remember their debt. If they lacked hakoras hatov, they are not able to join our community.

The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvoh says an interesting thing. The main sechar of olom haboh comes from limud Torah. But without middos tovos, you aren't worthy of getting in. Nothing gets started without making yourself a decent human being with good middos. They are essential to being a Jew.

Klal Yisroel lacked appreciation of the high level they were on, and the high level Moshe Rabbeinu was on. They needed 40 years of training themselves to learning Torah constantly until it became part of them. Then they are ready – but only with the middos which are the definition of being Jewish. Without these middos, you can't marry into Klal Yisroel – forever!

Torah changes a person and uplifts you when you put in all your effort into understanding the Torah without ego and without expecting to understand everything at the beginning. You keep at it, and soon, things will come to you more naturally as a gift and you are uplifted. This is how Klal Yisroel became worthy of entering Eretz Yisroel.

The 3rd of Tammuz is a frightening day. Rabbeinu Yonah saw from the zizul of the kovod of the Rambam that it caused France to be removed from being the center of Torah learning. We have to understand how severely we need to be careful of kovod haTorah. There are disagreements, but it cannot lead to treating others disparagingly. Rabbeinu Yonah felt that crossing that line led to enormous tragedy. It is a deep lesson for all of us.