YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat CHUKAT**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**Facing the Challenges of an Imperfect World**

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**Introduction**

Between the controversy stirred up by Korach and his company in the previous *parasha* and the sin committed at Mei Meriva in our *parasha, Parashat Chukat*, there is also a transition from the second year after the exodus to the fortieth year. This transition is not only chronological, but also educational: it contains an important message, one that can be seen in three different places in *Parashat Chukat*.

**The Paradox of Purification from Corpse Impurity**

The transition from the second year to the fortieth year is not immediate even in the verses; between the controversy stirred up by Korach and its consequences, and the death of Miriam and the sin at Mei Meriva, we find chapter 19, which explains the laws governing the red heifer. What is it doing here? Clearly, this is not its chronological place; in fact, *Chazal* (*Gittin* 60a-b) even taught us that it was given already on the first of Nissan of the second year!

To the best of my recollection, I heard an answer to this question from Rabbi Soloveitchik, during the summer that I stayed with him and learned from him. He explained that by inserting the section dealing with the red heifer between the second year and the fortieth year, the Torah essentially wishes to paint all the years in between with the brush of the red heifer. It is essentially telling us that everything that happened during this period reflects the following verse: "This is the law: when a man dies in a tent, every one that comes into the tent, and everything that is in the tent, shall be impure seven days" (*Bamidbar* 19:14). This is a very harsh message. Essentially, if we ask what the people of Israel did in the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth year and so on, the answer will be short and bitter: they buried their dead.

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s explanation emphasized the negative dimension: according to him, after the sin of the spies, the "story" of the generation that left Egypt was one of burying the dead – a story of despair. They already knew they had no future. There is a chilling *midrash* (found in *Eikha Rabba, petichta* 33, and also in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4:7) about the manner in which those who left Egypt died (in a continuous manner): on the night of Tisha be-Av every year, they would all go outside the camp, dig graves, and sleep in them – and every year, fifteen thousand of them did not wake up in the morning.

Nevertheless, when I look at the section dealing with the red heifer, it seems to me that the Torah is telling us not only about despair, but also about a certain hope, about how to deal with failure.

Indeed, there is no greater failure and tragedy than death. As the Ramban explains in his commentary to the prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge – "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for on the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (*Bereishit* 2:17) – death is the greatest failure of the material, or physical:

Now in the opinion of men versed in the sciences of nature, man was destined to die from the beginning of his formation, on account of his being a composite [of the four elements, and everything that is composite must revert to its original components]. But now He decreed that if he sins, he will die on account of his sin, like those who are liable to death at the hands of Heaven for sins… There the intent is that they will die prematurely on account of their sin. This is why in stating the punishment [after Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge], He said: "Till you return to the ground; for out of it were you taken; for dust you are, and to dust shall you return" (*Bereishit* 3:19), by your nature… But in the opinion of our Rabbis, if Adam had not sinned, he would have never died, since the higher soul bestows life forever, and the will of God which is in him at the time of his formation would always cleave to him and he would exist forever, as I have explained on the verse, "And God saw that it was good."
Know that composition indicates destruction only in the opinion of those wanting in faith, who hold that creation came by necessity. But in the opinion of men of faith who say that the world was created by the simple will of God, its existence will also continue forever, as long as it is His desire. This is clear truth. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 2:17)

Impurity is created when matter decomposes and decays, and it expresses the inherent imperfection in nature. Therefore, the way to be cleansed from impurity is to return to nature and complete it. Seeds which became impure are purified when they are returned to the soil; water that became impure is purified when it is returned to natural water. When a person becomes impure, it is usually sufficient to immerse in a *mikveh*; a natural *mikveh* is a spring that contains "living water" (*Vayikra* 15:13), and the status of an artificial *mikveh* derives from the spring that provides the source of its purification. A person removes his clothing and enters the water, and emerges from it in a pure state, as if he had now been created anew.

But in the case of corpse impurity, we encounter a problem – there is no way to fill in what is missing. Death is an irreversible reality, whether since the creation of the world according to the men of science mentioned by the Ramban, or whether "only" since the sin of the tree of knowledge, as argued by the Ramban himself. In our reality in this world – until the resurrection of the dead – there is no way to repair death, which is why it is so tragic.

Here, however, *Parashat Chukat* teaches that there is a way to purify oneself even from corpse impurity – by way of the ashes of a red heifer mixed with "living water." But how do these ashes purify?

The paradox of purification from corpse impurity is precisely the paradox of the laws of the red heifer themselves. The heifer that is taken in order to purify a person from corpse impurity is nature, the material, in its perfect form: "That they bring you a red heifer, faultless, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came a yoke" (*Bamidbar* 19:2). And it is precisely such an animal that they take and burn – that is destroyed. This is because, on the one hand, "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (*Bereishit* 1:31), but on the other hand, in practice, not everything is good: there are troubles in the world, there is failure and tragedy, there is death, and all of these cannot be ignored.

When I visit mourners, I tell them that "consolation" does not mean the same thing as "salvation." Consolation does not mean the trouble is over and no longer exists. Trouble remains trouble, and loss remains loss. Consolation will not fix these – but it does constitute a way of dealing with trouble and loss; through the consolation, the loss and sorrow become a means of progress.

This is the deep idea reflected in the purification that is achieved through the ashes of a red heifer: in order to become purified from corpse impurity, we must first acknowledge the existence of the affliction. Death is symbolized by the ashes of the red heifer; there is no illusion here or attempt to ignore the problem. But it is precisely from seeing death as an existing reality that it is possible to deal with it and move forward; precisely from the recognition of loss and imperfection, it is possible to reach purity. "And they shall take, for the impure person, of the ashes of the burning of the purification-offering, and add living water to it in a vessel" (*Bamidbar* 19:17). One must combine the recognition of the trouble, with tools of coping and progress – taking the ashes of the red heifer and mixing it with living water. This mixture is sprinkled on the impure person, and in that way he becomes pure.

The Torah refers to the combination of the ashes of the red heifer and the living water as "*mei nida*" (*Bamidbar* 19:9), creating an association with a menstruating woman. What is the connection between a *nida* and purification from the impurity of death? There is one connection, and that is the cyclicality. The impurity of a *nida* appears in accordance with a regular cycle. This is the intent of the rebuke, "their way before Me was as the impurity of a *nida*" (*Yechezkel* 36:17) – the problem was that the people of Israel acted in a cyclical manner: impurity, purity, impurity, purity yet again, and so on. While this cyclicality is problematic when we are dealing with a repetition of one's sins, the cyclicality connected to life and death is absolutely natural: in life, loss is a fixed and permanent reality, but it is nevertheless possible to deal with it and keep moving forward.

**Retreat in Contrast to Progress: *Mei Meriva***

As mentioned, in *Parashat Chukat*, after the section dealing with the red heifer, the Torah moves on to the fortieth year of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, beginning with the story of Mei Meriva. There, Moshe strikes a rock out of frustration and disappointment after the Israelites complain about the lack of water. The immediate question is why Moshe is so disappointed specifically now, in contrast to all the previous times that the people voiced their complaints. What was unique about this instance?

I also heard the answer to this question from Rabbi Soloveitchik that summer: Moshe sensed that there was a retreat here. He understood the complaints about the water and food during the first two years of Israel's time in the wilderness; after all, this was a nation of slaves who had lived all their lives in Egypt. But in the fortieth year, that entire generation had already passed away; Moshe was dealing with a new generation, who had grown up in the wilderness, outside Egypt. This was a generation that Moshe Rabbeinu raised and personally educated. In light of this, he expected the people to be on a different level, that they would not repeat the sins of the previous generation. But that expectation shattered against the bitter reality. When he heard them complain about the water just as their ancestors had done, he was filled with disappointment – a sense that nothing has changed, and nothing has helped. In an analogous manner today, we understood that the people of Israel are liable to sin in the harsh reality of the diaspora; but now, from the time we left the exile and headed to the Land of Israel, we created the religious Zionist Jew. Moreover, we even established a state, which we viewed as the beginning of the redemption. Why do the people of Israel continue to sin even now?

The degree of disappointment is therefore understandable, and it seems that we may draw two lessons from it. First, that history repeats itself. The next generation repeats the mistakes of the previous generation. Moshe Rabbeinu believed that the people of Israel complained and sinned because they had grown up in Egypt, and therefore he expected that the generation that grew up in the wilderness would not do the same. But it turns out that Israel's complaints and sins did not stem from Egyptian slavery, but rather are part of human nature. Human beings will always lean toward grumbling and complaining; it will always be easy for them to sin.

But in the same breath, another lesson must be remembered: The fact that history repeats itself does not mean that it is impossible to move forward. The Gemara in *Kiddushin* (30b) says about a father and son, and also about a master and disciple, that "they become enemies of one another, yet they do not stir from there until they come to love each other." They undergo a process; it is possible to move forward. This idea is not always understood. A dispute may arise – even in the *beit midrash* – in which each side is so sure the other cannot be right that even when the other side adduces proof for his position, he interprets it according to his own conception. However, though there is a risk that disagreements will take this form, it is not the only possibility.

This phenomenon was demonstrated in *Parashat Korach*,which we read last week. Moshe Rabbeinu performs miracles and brings Divine proof that he is right – and the people respond: "You have killed the people of the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 17:6). And again, a plague breaks out among the people and Moshe and Aharon stop it, and yet the response is: "Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone" (*Bamidbar* 17:27). In our *parasha* as well, the people of Israel complain, and again Moshe is disappointed, apparently just like in *Parashat Korach*. But later in the *parasha*, we suddenly see that there is in fact a change here; something has moved. "And the people came to Moshe, and said: We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord, and against you" (*Bamidbar* 21:7). The people of Israel are prepared to recognize their sin and to repair it. Similarly, in the war against Arad later in *Parashat Chukat*, we find: "And he [the Canaanite, the king of Arad] fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord, and said: ‘If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities’" (*Bamidbar* 21:1-2). Instead of complaining, the people of Israel act and turn to God with an oath, and they are answered: "And the Lord heard the voice of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 21:3).

Thus, *Parashat Chukat* presents the ability to change, demonstrating that it is possible to emerge from one's set of preconceived assumptions; it is possible to move forward and improve. It is true that at first, with the complaints of Mei Meriva, it seems that everything remains the same; however, in the appeal to God during the war against Arad, and in the recognition of their sin and the miracle of the bronze serpent, it turns out that there was indeed a great change – for the better.

Educating one's children and students is not an easy job. The parent and the teacher try to mold the child and the student, and it is natural that they will react with resistance, certainly in the short term. However, there is still a long-term effect. An educator who expects everything to be smooth, that the student will progress and not fail at all, will be full of disappointment and frustration, and has no place in education. One has to recognize that processes advance slowly and that history repeats itself – but that nevertheless, it is possible to move forward. One who recognizes this can proclaim the words of the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 30b) that "they do not stir from there until they come to love each other." Perhaps this is also the reason Moshe Rabbeinu did not enter the Land of Israel, in the wake of the sin of Mei Meriva: he is disappointed by the fall of the people and thinks nothing has changed, even though, as we see later in the story, they have made a great deal of progress. Perhaps it is because of this that Moshe was not allowed to bring them into the land of Canaan.

**The Call to Peace**

So far, we have talked about contending with the imperfect realities of our world both in the context of death, as is taught by the mitzvaof the red heifer, and in the context of education, as is taught by the story of Mei Meriva. *Parashat Chukat* also deals with this confrontation in a third context, namely, the relationship between the people of Israel and the neighboring nations:

And Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the travail that has befallen us… Let us pass, I pray you, through your land…” (*Bamidbar* 20:14-17)

Moshe speaks to Edom as a brother. He knows there is tension between Esav and Israel, but he tries to open a new chapter. It is important to remember that there is a dispute among *Chazal* even about Esav himself and his relationship with Yaakov, and whether the "reconciliation" that took place between them was real or not.[[1]](#footnote-1) In any case, in Moshe's view, the potential for brotherhood and good relations exists, and therefore he expects empathy and assistance from the people of Edom toward the people of Israel who were recently freed from the slavery of Egypt. But Moshe did not receive the response he was looking for: "And Edom said to him: ‘You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you’" (*Bamidbar* 20:18). After further discussion, a military threat was posed against the possible passage of Israel through their land, and thus the attempt at reconciliation came to an end: "Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border; and Israel turned away from him" (*Bamidbar* 20:21).

We see, then, that Moshe made an attempt but quickly realized that he would not get the response he was seeking from Edom – and after recognizing this, he decided to break contact and move on. This conclusion is generally correct: one must accept the reality that the call for peace is not always answered, and also know how one can nevertheless move forward. Even if the attempt with Edom failed,[[2]](#footnote-2) Moshe did not give up on the call for peace; he sends messengers to Moav as well, and then again to Sichon, king of the Amorites. And again, even when these calls for peace are not answered, the people of Israel do not despair of the hope of living as a people within the broader context of the nations around them, with good relations, with the expectation that in the end, "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day shall the Lord be One, and His name One" (*Zekharya* 14:9).

May we all merit to internalize the lessons of *Parashat Chukat* and live by them: to contend with reality with all its flaws, and to continue to move forward.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Chukat* 5782.]

1. The Torah states: "And [Esav] kissed him [Yaakov]" (*Bereishit* 34:3), but there are dots above the letters. According to Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, the dots come to emphasize that Esav "kissed him with all his heart," and the reconciliation was indeed true, whereas according to Rabbi Yannai, "this teaches that he wanted to bite him," and it was only by virtue of a miracle that Yaakov was saved (*Bereishit Rabba* 78, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The attempt to draw Esav back failed not only here, but also later, in a more absolute manner – as is stated in the book of *Ovadya* regarding the fate of Esav: "And the house of Yaakov shall be a fire, and the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Esav for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esav; for the Lord has spoken" (*Ovadya* 1:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)