

# CORRECTING CHARACTER FLAWS AND ADHERING TO GOOD MIDDOT (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)



## The Path To Follow CHUKAT

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### GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

#### Everyone Can

Some believe that an ordinary person is incapable of observing the mitzvah of not speaking or listening to Lashon Harah. They have the impression that their efforts to guard their tongues will prove useless, and so they lose hope and do not even try. Such an attitude is completely erroneous, for we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not demand the impossible of man. Since the Torah commands us to guard our tongues, it is clear that each and everyone can do so.

If a person is not careful about what he says, and if he does not apply all his strength to refrain from disparaging others, then how can he stand before Hashem three times a day in prayer and request, "My G-d, guard my tongue from evil"?

**T**he mitzvah of the red heifer is, as we know, one for which no reason has been given. The Torah describes this mitzvah by stating: "This is the chukat [statute] of the Torah, which the L-RD has commanded.... They shall take to you a completely red heifer, which is without blemish" (Numbers 19:2). The law concerning the red heifer is called a chok, which even we Jews do not understand. Examining this statute more closely, we will notice things that are completely beyond human comprehension. Which things are these?

First of all, why a heifer? Why not take a calf or a sheep? Furthermore, why does this heifer have to be red, to the exclusion of all other colors (not to mention that even two black hairs disqualify it)? Why are the heifer's ashes mixed with water and sprinkled upon a person who is impure? Above all, why are those who burn the heifer and gather its ashes rendered impure?

Everything about the heifer is designed to teach us how to live, even if we cannot actually understand the reasons behind it. Even King Solomon wanted to understand this statute, yet he was forced to conclude: "I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). Nevertheless, let us try to learn a lesson from everything concerning the heifer, a lesson we can apply to our own lives.

The Sages have said, "If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. ... If he examines and finds nothing, let him attribute it to a neglect in the study of Torah" (Berachot 5a). Since the Torah decreed that a person is rendered impure by contact with a dead body, whenever that would happen in the time of the Sanctuary, a person was to examine his deeds. He was to determine why this had happened to him, and in what way he had sinned. Why had Hashem shown him that he deserved to become impure, given that we received the commandment to be holy and pure? This person therefore had some sin within himself, and Hashem was showing it to him so he could repent. Such a person would therefore examine his deeds, find his sin, and completely repent of it. However his repentance had to be flawless, for partial repentance is worthless. Nevertheless, many people fail in this regard because they do not repent completely and flawlessly. The Torah has said that the red heifer must be burned and its ashes mixed with water and sprinkled upon the impure. This alludes to the fact that dust returns to dust, the realization of which will lead a person to complete repentance. As the Sages said, "Let him remind himself of the day of death" (Berachot 5a), for in this way a person will be protected from the evil inclination.

With regards to the red heifer, we note that the word parah ("heifer") is formed by the same letters as rapheh ("weak"). This means that a person endures the trial of becoming impure because he weakened in the study of Torah. This is similar to what the Sages have said concerning the phrase, "They encamped in Rephidim" (Exodus 17:1), which is that they weakened in the study of Torah (Tanhuma, Beshalach 25). The heifer's red color evokes the concept of strict justice, meaning that a person who fails to study Torah draws the attribute of justice upon himself.

This is what the Sages meant by stating, "If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. ... If he examines and finds nothing, let him attribute it to a neglect

of the study of the Torah." In other words, when a person becomes impure he must examine his deeds and determine which sin was the cause. If he examines his deeds and finds nothing, let him attribute it to a neglect of Torah study, for he has certainly weakened in this regard and drawn the attribute of justice upon himself. The red heifer points to these two subjects, weakening and justice. Its ashes are therefore mixed with water and sprinkled upon a person in order for him to recall the day of death and completely repent before Hashem.

However we still need to explain why the priest who burned the red heifer becomes impure as a result. The answer is that the Torah, which understands the human heart, is concerned that the priest who burns the heifer will become proud of the fact that among all the other priests, he alone was chosen to burn the heifer that renders the impure pure. Therefore to cleanse his heart of pride – which ruins and destroys all that is good – the Torah states that he becomes impure. In this way pride will never make its way into his heart. According to our explanation of the subject, it would seem that we know the secrets of the red heifer. However the Torah states, "This is the chukat [statute] of the Torah," meaning a law that we have no right to question (Tanhuma, Chukat 7). In other words, nobody knows the true secret of the red heifer. What we have said up to now are simply minor allusions. With regards to Korach, the Midrash is amazed at why he felt the need to contest the leadership of Moses. Korach saw the red heifer and understood some of its secrets. He thereby knew that a person must fully repent, recall the day of death, and realize that the attribute of justice comes upon him when he weakens in Torah study. Korach also understood that the priest who burns the red heifer becomes impure, thereby preventing him from becoming proud. As such the red heifer testified against Korach, for he understood these allusions, yet failed to learn from them. He failed to repent and eliminate his pride.

My dear friends, if we want to follow the path of Moses, not the path of Korach, we must think about the account of the red heifer and what we can learn from it. We must think about improving our ways in order to arrive in the World to Come in a state of purity.

This lesson applies to us all. Because of our sins, we see people who endure hardships and yet fail to examine their deeds. We see people speaking in the middle of prayer, which is forbidden (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 124:7), or people speaking Lashon Harah, which the Torah prohibits by stating: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Leviticus 19:16). However instead of learning a lesson and not speaking in these ways, they continue to speak and sin. This stems from pride, for people know that what they are doing is forbidden, yet their pride does not allow them to reflect and repent. Instead they go about pretending that they are sinless. We must be extremely careful about this and engage in repentance. Above all, we must rid ourselves of pride and submit to Hashem.

# MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

## The Greatness of Peace

It is written, "When the entire assembly saw that Aaron had perished, they wept for Aaron thirty days, the entire house of Israel" (Numbers 20:29).

Rashi explains: "The entire house of Israel. The men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace. He promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife." Menorat HaMaor (Ner 6, Klal 2, Part 1, Chapter 2) affirms that 80,000 children named after Aaron the High Priest followed his funeral procession. These children had been born after Aaron had intervened to establish peace in their families. The Mishnah cites Hillel in teaching, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the Torah" (Perkei Avot 1:12).

Peace is great, for the Torah states that in all the journeys of the Children of Israel, "They journeyed...and encamped." That is, they journeyed with strife and encamped with strife. However when they arrived before Mount Sinai, everyone encamped at the same time, as it is written: "Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (Exodus 19:2), meaning as a single person, with a single heart. The Holy One, blessed be He, said at that moment: "Now is the time that I shall give the Torah to My children. As long as they live in peace with one another, the Shechinah will dwell among them." The same happened during the construction of the Sanctuary, for everyone was of a single heart to fulfill the will of their Father in Heaven. So too when the Sanctuary was completed, for during its inauguration each of them began to look for ways to perform the will of the Holy One, blessed be He. Nethanel the son of Zuar, the leader of the tribe of Issachar, advised them to all bring the same offerings, meaning that one should not bring more than another. This prevented jealousy from arising if anyone brought more than others, as was the case with Cain and Abel. It also brought so much satisfaction to Hashem that He said, "You have organized yourselves in such a way as to be connected to one another, thereby preventing jealousy and hatred from arising among you. Take Me among you as well, and I will give you My Sabbath." In other words, even though individual offerings are not made on Shabbat, the tribal leaders were able to bring their offerings on Shabbat. Furthermore, the Torah mentions each tribal leader separately. It does not say that the tribal leaders all brought the same offering. That would have constituted an affront to their honor, since they had demonstrated respect for others. It is to their great honor that the Jewish people recount their offerings each year.

Peace is so great that holy books cite the Zohar in stating that if peace were properly observed, be it in a single synagogue, it would be enough to bring about the arrival of Mashiach. We therefore have a great deal to learn from Aaron in trying to acquire this trait! Let us not content ourselves with loving peace in theory, but instead let us pursue it in practice. Even during a dispute in which it is clear that we are right, let us carefully consider whether it might be worth dropping the issue in order to draw the Shechinah upon us.

– Leshichno Tidreshu

## A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: 'So said your brother Israel...please let us pass through your land...'" The king of Edom said to him, 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come against you with the sword'" (Numbers 20:14-18).

In his book Pahad David, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks how Moses could have called Edom a brother. How could he not have feared Edom's negative influence on Israel if they had passed through their land? How could he have agreed to such a trial?

In his holiness Moses saw the actual exile, the exile of Edom, and he wanted to teach the Children of Israel two important things:

1. Esau's hatred for Jacob is a blind hatred, one without reason. Despite Esau and Jacob being brothers – despite the fact that the Children of Israel were

enslaved in Egypt for 210 years, endured 40 years in the desert, were on the verge of entering their land, and were ready to pay for whatever they needed to enter it – despite all this, the king of Edom still did not agree to let them pass through his land at any price. His hatred was so intense that he would not let them pass. As a result, the Children of Israel would learn for all time to keep as far away from Edom as possible. Given that Israel wanted to pay the Edomites at the time – yet were still refused passage – what can be expected when they would be penniless? In that case the Edomites will obviously detest them and show them no mercy.

2. The Edomites are extremely wicked, and Israel must keep as far from them as possible. This is because they heard of all the miracles performed for the Jewish people, yet they did not allow them to pass through their land. They did this in order not to be influenced by the Children of Israel's recognition of the Creator. Their ways are truly reprehensible and wicked, and we must distance ourselves from them as much as we can. If the Edomites acted so wickedly when the Jewish people stood at their borders – given that they were not inclined to acknowledge the Creator even at that time – then when Jews would no longer be at such a level, how much more should they keep their distance and not learn from them!

## The Holiness of Israel

It is written, "This is the statute of the Torah" (Numbers 19:2).

It would seem that the Torah should have stated, "This is the statute of the heifer," or "This is the statue of purity," since the passage in question deals with purification. Why instead does it state, "This is the statute of the Torah"?

We may say that it is worded in this way because the entire Torah is a teaching that is beyond understanding, a chukat. Just as human intelligence cannot comprehend the reasons behind the red heifer, so too can it not grasp the profound wisdom of the Torah's other laws. It is impossible for a person to learn the laws of the Torah only by means of his intelligence, for it requires the soul and holiness of Israel. This is because the entire Torah is beyond human comprehension.

The Alter of Kelm said that even an extremely intelligent non-Jew cannot understand the Gemara's statement concerning ye'ush shelo mida'at ("unconscious abandonment"). However when we teach this subject to Jewish children, the offspring of the holy people, they fully comprehend it. This is because intelligence is not enough to understand the holy Torah, for the soul and holiness of Israel are needed. That is chukat.

– Darchei Mussar

## Both Have a Share in the Torah

It is written, "A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, with the lawgiver with their staffs" (Numbers 21:18).

The Vilna Gaon Zatzal explained that such is the measure of the Torah, of which it is said: "To sit in the shelter of wisdom is to sit in the shelter of money" (Ecclesiastes 7:12), and "It is a tree of life for those who grasp it" (Proverbs 3:18). A person who does not have the opportunity to study Torah – yet supports others so they can study it – is also given a reward, and for the same reasons as the one who studies it himself. This is because, "To sit in the shelter of wisdom is to sit in the shelter of money."

The verse states: "A well" – a reference to the Torah; "dug by princes" – the princes of Torah and its students, who dig and enlarge it by learning its secrets; "carved out by nobles of the people" – the patrons and wealthy individuals engaged in commerce, who acquire the Torah with their money. The word karuha ("carved out") evokes the concept of buying, similar to, "In my grave, which kariti [I bought] for myself" (Genesis 50:5). Scripture explains that both have a part in the Torah: The first bimchokek ("with the lawgiver"), meaning that they make the statutes (chukim) of the Torah; and the second "with their staffs," because they support those who study Torah.

– Peninim MiShulchan HaGra

## The Praises of Israel

It is written, “The people spoke against G-d and Moses: ‘Why...[is there] no bread and no water?’” (Numbers 21:5).

Rabbi Aaron Baksht said that based upon the criticism leveled against the generation of the desert, we learn its praises. A son who knows that his father is destitute will not demand anything or complain to him. Only a son who knows that his father is wealthy will end up complaining and protesting that he doesn't feed him properly. Similarly, it is possible for Jews such as ourselves to suffer from destitution, but without complaining. However this does not mean that we are wise or righteous. On the contrary, it points to our lack of faith in the fact that we have a wealthy and all-powerful Father. The generation of the desert complained and was punished, yet from this we learn its praises: They knew Who to ask and Who to complain to.

### An Absolute Prerequisite for Torah

It is written, “From the desert, Mattanah; and from Mattanah, Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel, Bamot; and from Bamot, the valley” (Numbers 21:18-19).

The Sages perceived an absolute prerequisite for acquiring Torah from this verse, namely humility. They said, “If a man makes himself like a desert, abandoning himself to all, then the Torah will be given to him as a mattanah [gift], as it is written: ‘From the desert, Mattanah.’ And once he has it as a gift, G-d gives it to him as nahaliel [an inheritance], as it is written: ‘And from Mattanah, Nahaliel.’ And when G-d gives it to him as an inheritance, he ascends to bamot [heights, greatness], as it is written: ‘And from Nahaliel, Bamot.’ Yet if he exalts himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, casts him down, as it is written, ‘And from Bamot, the valley.’ ... However if he repents, the Holy One, blessed be He, will raise him up again, as it is written: ‘Every valley will be raised’ [Isaiah 40:4]”

(Nedarim 55a-b).

### Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Chukat concludes the interruption of the Jewish people's journey after they left Egypt and raised the Sanctuary, an interruption that occurred in Parshiot Beha'alotcha and Shelach. It later continues and ends with the journey of the people to their land, until they finally encamped in the plains of Moab. From there the people would cross the Jordan to enter its land. Once the legitimacy of the priesthood and its role were firmly established in Parsha Korach, Parsha Chukat describes the reconciliation of the people to the Sanctuary by means of a red heifer that is brought to the priest. The ashes of a red heifer are to be mixed with living water and sprinkled upon a person rendered impure by a dead body, a state that prevents him from approaching the Sanctuary. Thus the red heifer enables him to approach it again. Before continuing with the account of the people's travels, the text intervenes with the death of Miriam and her burial in Kadesh. It also recounts the complaining that occurred there, after which Moses and Aaron were prevented from entering the Holy Land. The parsha also deals with the request made by Israel to pass through Edom (a request that was refused), and the journey of the people from Kodesh to Mount Hor, where Aaron died. The Canaanites subsequently attacked Israel when they passed through their territory, and serpents bit the people when they rebelled. This happened because they spoke out against G-d and Moses on account of bread and water, and G-d sent these serpents to kill the rebels. Moses drew water for Israel according to Hashem's word, and therefore they sang the song of the well. At the end of the parsha, the people march toward their land and make their first conquests in the land of the Amorite and in Bashan, where they defeat Sihon and Og.

## REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

### It is Beyond Me

It is written, “Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red heifer...upon which a yoke has not come” (Numbers 19:2).

The Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah 297) begins its discussion of the red heifer by stating: I feel powerless with regards to this mitzvah, and I dare not say anything about it. Not even with respect to its plain sense will I comment, for I have seen that our Sages have spoken at length regarding the breadth and depths of its secrets. In fact they stated (Tanhuma, Chukat 6) that with his great wisdom, King Solomon was able to fully understand the reasons for all the mitzvot except this one. For this mitzvah he said: “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (Ecclesiastes 7:23). The Midrash also cites Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Chanina as saying, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: I will reveal the reasons for the red heifer to you, but not to others.”

Since its reasons are hidden, Rashi states: “Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel by saying: ‘What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?’ Therefore the Torah uses the term chukat: ‘I have decreed it; you have no right to challenge it’” (Rashi on Numbers 19:2).

Since the basis for this mitzvah is beyond our comprehension (despite everything that has been put forward to explain it), we will try and concentrate on what we can learn from it, something that Hashem demands of us for every mitzvah. A person must focus on the fact that the most important element in serving the Creator is that he must be a “servant,” meaning one who has nothing else in mind but the orders of his Master. Such a servant does not engage in complicated calculations of what his duties entail (even if it's for the sake of Heaven), since by doing so he is no longer a servant, but rather a free man who is acting with goodwill.

Thus for all the mitzvot whose reasons we understand, it may be that even when performing them in every detail, we are still not fully prepared to accept Hashem's sovereignty. That is, we may only be doing what our logic agrees with. However with the mitzvah of the red heifer, whose reasons have not been revealed – and concerning which Hashem has said, “I have laid down a statute; I have issued a decree. You cannot transgress My decree!” (Bamidbar Rabba 19:1) – our actions indicate whether we are the Creator's servants who perform all the mitzvot, or rather people who are only interested in accomplishing their own will. This is why the Satan and the nations of the world try to make us transgress precisely by the mitzvah of the red heifer, a statute that is beyond human comprehension. In this way they attempt to undermine all the spiritual progress we have made by making us realize that we are not serving Hashem, but rather ourselves. This is why we must respond to them by saying, “This is Hashem's law and statute, one that we have no right to debate. We must fulfill His will, even when it is beyond our understanding.” The same applies to all mitzvot, for we must fulfill Hashem's will to the exclusion of all else, whether we understand the reason or not.

– Torat HaParasha

## A TRUE STORY

### The Precious Stones and the Red Heifer

The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Eliezer was once asked to what lengths a person must go in order to honor his parents. He replied, "Go out and see what was done in Ashkelon by a certain heathen named Dama the son of Nethinah. The Sages sought jewels for the ephod, which would have earned him 600,000 [gold denarii]...but since the key was lying under his father's pillow, he did not trouble him. The following year the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him his reward: A red heifer was born to him in his herd. When the Sages of Israel went to him, he answered them: 'I know...that if I asked you for all the money in the world, you would pay me. But I ask you only for the money that I lost by honoring my father.' On this Rabbi Chanina observed: 'If one who is not commanded is thus [rewarded] when he does so, how much more is one who is commanded and does so!' " (Kiddushin 31a).

## YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

### Rabbi Meir Horowitz – The Dzikover Rebbe

Rabbi Meir Horowitz Zatzal was the son of Rabbi Eliezer Zatzal, the Dzikover Rebbe, who was the son of the holy Rabbi Naphtali of Ropshitz. In his youth, Rabbi Meir was known as a genius who could absorb raw information in an astonishing way. He worked in secret, elevating himself in Torah and Chassidut to such an extent that many said he was the pillar of Torah in his generation. After the death of his father, Rabbi Meir took upon himself the yoke of leading the community. Thousands gathered around him, and every Shabbat he had three tables at which he related his Torah insights. These talks were later printed in his Torah commentary Imrei Noam, a book that was accepted as authoritative throughout the Diaspora. All during his life, Rabbi Meir said that a person must live in order to know how to die. In fact something extraordinary is said to have happened just before he died. On Tammuz 8, 5637, he suddenly sat in his chair and said: "Today there will be a sign." A few moments later he said, "The soul is Yours and the body is Your work. Have pity on Your work." At that instant his soul departed in holiness and purity towards the light of life, a light reserved for the tzaddikim in the World to Come.

Rabbi Meir Horowitz left behind sons who were well-known tzaddikim, namely Rabbi Naphtali Chaim, Rabbi Yechiel, Rabbi Aaron, Rabbi Asher, Rabbi Tuvia, and Rabbi Yehoshua (who succeeded his father as the Dzikover Rebbe). Rabbi Meir's son-in-law was Rabbi Israel Hager, the Rebbe of Viznitz and author of Ahavat Israel. May his merit protect us all.

## EISHET CHAYIL

### Prayers and Tears

The mother of the Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Israel Meir Hacoen Kagan) was an upright and extremely discreet woman. She would get up before dawn, and when time allowed she poured out her heart to the Master of the universe. She would take her book of Psalms and recite prayers in abundance, beseeching Hashem for her son to be a G-d-fearing, righteous Jew.

Her prayers were not uttered in vain, and her son became the teacher of the entire Jewish people. His many works, including Mishnah Berurah and Chafetz Chaim, guide our steps to this very day.

Many years have passed since the Chafetz Chaim's mother departed for a world that is entirely good. After she died, the old book of Psalms from which she prayed was found in her home and brought to the Chafetz Chaim. Very moved by this, the Chafetz Chaim covered his mother's book with kisses and tears. He then turned to those around him and said, "Do you know how many tears my mother shed over this book of Psalms every day? She would read from it early each morning, shedding numerous tears as she prayed for her son to be a good Jew." – Chinuch HaBanim LaTorah

## IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

### A Failure to Recognize

It is written, "Jephthah fled because of his brothers.... The elders of Gilead went...and they said to Jephthah, 'Come and be our leader....' But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Was it not you who hated me and drove me away from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?' " (Judges 11:3-7).

Human nature is such that when we need someone, be it for his money or his abilities, we gather around him, flatter and honor him, and try to please him. However as soon as someone loses his standing, everything quickly turns around. The same people who showed respect and flattered a given individual will suddenly forget him. They will pay no attention to him, turning their backs on him as if he did not exist. Not only will they be completely unappreciative to him for the past, they will even attack him!

Such behavior stems from a failure to recognize the greatness of a human being, made in the image of G-d. If we were to realize this, we would appreciate the soul that lives within every person. We would understand that Hashem's light abides in all men, and therefore none would be scorned.

This is what happened with Jephthah, for people scorned him so much that he was forced to flee in shame. No one appreciated his abilities and virtues, until they were finally compelled to see him and yield before him. They had to beg him to return and help them, promising to make him their leader and guide. Since they sought Jephthah only when they needed him, they were forced to pay a very heavy price indeed.

## THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

### The Nobles of the Peoples

Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, and Rabban Gamliel were once in Rome when the senate issued a decree that within thirty days no Jew should be found in the [Roman] world. Now one of the Emperor's senators was a G-d-fearing man, and he came to Rabban Gamliel and told him of the decree. Our Rabbis were in great distress, but this G-d-fearing man said to them, "Do not be distressed. Within 30 days the G-d of the Jews will arise to help them." Twenty-five days later he revealed the decree to his wife, and she said to him, "Behold, 25 days have already gone." He answered her, "There are still 5 days remaining." Now his wife was even more righteous than he, and she said to him: "Have you not a ring [containing poison]? Suck it and die, for the senate will be suspended for 30 days and the decree will not come into force." He followed her advice, sucked his ring, and died. When the Rabbis heard of this, they came to his wife to express their sympathies. The Rabbis said to her, "Alas for the ship that has sailed without paying her dues" [i.e., her righteous husband had died without being circumcised]. His wife said to them, "I fully understand the meaning of what you are saying. By your life, before the ship sailed she paid her dues." She immediately went into a room and brought out a box with his foreskin and rags full of blood. Upon seeing this, the Rabbis applied to him the Scriptural verse: "The nobles of the peoples gathered, the people of the G-d of Abraham; for the protectors of the earth are G-d's; He is exceedingly exalted" [Psalms 47:10]. ... Only after this assurance did Abraham circumcise himself. However he [the righteous senator] received no such assurance [yet circumcised himself all the same].