

PARSHAS CHUKAS

תשפ"ב

There is a gap of 38 years in the Torah where no events are described. There is a machlokes if the story of Korach happened before the events of Parshas Shlach and the story of the meraglim, or afterward. The lesson of Korach is so critical that Moshe demanded Hashem make an open miracle to make sure everyone knows it is unacceptable to question the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu. There was a permanent memorial of this incident placed in the mishkon to make sure this lesson is never forgotten. It may have happened before the event of the meraglim, because once the meraglim sinned, the Shechinoh departed from Moshe Rabbeinu. On the other hand, it may have been so important that Hashem made an exception and brought back the Shechinoh after the incident of the meraglim just to teach this critical lesson.

This parsha now describes what is happening to the next generation of Klal Yisroel – the ones who will be entering Eretz Yisroel. In between these two parshiyos which describe the ongoing historical development of Klal Yisroel, we have the parsha of the Poroh Adumoh. In reality, this parsha was given much earlier because Klal Yisroel needed it to be tahor from tumas meis in order for the mishkon to function.

In the middle of this parsha, the verse says “Zos haTorah, odom ki yomus b’ohel.” Chazal say a person does not acquire Torah to become a permanent part of him unless he is willing to kill himself over it. What does this mean? The idea is to make Torah the highest priority in his life. If you are willing to be killed for something, it means it occupies the highest value to you. It is more valuable than your very own life. We have seen during this war between Russia and Ukraine, that the Ukrainian people are willing to sacrifice everything – and even their lives, to repel the Russian forces. They are dying – every day – for a free Ukraine. It means they are making a statement that an independent Ukraine is what gives their lives value. People are coming from other countries to fight and give up their lives in this war as well. Why? Because they believe protecting a free country against tyranny is the highest value and is worth dying for.

A Jew has to be willing to give up his life to avoid committing the three most serious sins of avodo zoro, znus and murder. If you commit any of these aveiros, your life lost its meaning. A Jew's life is not worth living if it means committing one of these three aveiros. But here, the Torah is saying something else. The Torah is so valuable to you that it becomes the most important thing. You are willing to give your life for it. Then it will become a part of you.

We have pictures of people in the financial district jumping off buildings to their death because of the great stock market crash during the Great Depression. They made a statement that without money, their life has no meaning. Success in learning Torah requires you make it the highest value in your life. This is who I am.

This comes into play when people choose their career. There are many different types of careers a person can choose – each with its various levels of commitment of time and energy. If you choose a career which doesn't leave any room for serious limud haTorah and it will totally take over your life, you are declaring that this career is really what gives value to your life. Torah, yiddishkeit, they are on the periphery. Those things aren't as important.

This lesson about the importance of Torah is being taught specifically in the parsha of the most mysterious chok – the Poroh Adumoh. This is not an accident. We are being told the Torah is so deep and so

vast that you won't ever fully understand it. There are infinite levels of understanding. It is really above your understanding – like a chok. But you aren't exempt from learning and trying to understand as much as you humanly can.

If you do manage to learn and understand a lot of Torah, the Mishna in Ovos says don't take credit for it. This is the reason you were put in this world by Hashem. This is an amazing Mishna. What are we doing here in this world? Why did Hashem create it all? Torah is not something extra to life. It is life. We were created and made Jewish in order to connect to Hashem in the highest way. How far does one have to go? He has to view Torah as the most valuable thing and it is what gives his life meaning. We have to be willing to give up our lives for it. It is just like Ukrainians are giving up their lives to keep it independent from Russia.

There is an important historical aspect connected to this time of year. In the year 1243 on the 3rd of Tammuz, Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas, there was the s'reifas hatalmud in Paris. What happened? The King of France set up a debate between Rav Yechiel M'Paris and a meshumod. The result was that all the copies of Shas in France were gathered and burned publically right there in the middle of the town square in front of the Notre Dame. The Maharam Mi'Ruttenburg wrote a kinoh which we read on Tisha B'av describing the tragedy. The targum for “zos chukas haTorah” is ‘this is the gezeirah against the Torah’!

After this burning, the yeshivos in France basically closed down, and the center of Torah moved from France to Germany. Before this incident, the Ramban and Rabbeinu Yonah spent time together in the yeshiva in Ivrah, France. After a few years, the Ramban returned to Spain while Rabbeinu Yonah stayed in France until the Talmud was burned. He was there and he witnessed the tragedy. How did he react? He made a cheshbon hanefesh. Why did this happen to French Jewry? He went back to Spain and wrote his sefer Shaarei Teshuvoh as a first step of kapporah for the tragedy.

He said many of the Jews in France got too involved in a machlokes over the Rambam's seforim and burned them. In Rabbeinu Yonah's eyes, the reason why the main Torah center in Europe was destroyed was because the Jews of France didn't give proper respect to the kovod haTorah of the Rambam.

We have a 33-day period of aveilus every year for the deaths of the 24,000 talmidim of Rabbi Akiva between Pesach and Shevuos. But we can ask, yes, it was a tragic event, but there have been many tragic events over the course of Jewish history. What is their deaths so many years ago supposed to tell us, living 2000 years later?

Let us look into the gemara and see how it describes the context in which this tragedy took place.

Klal Yisroel were still reeling from the tremendous loss of the beis hamikdosh. Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai asks the Romans to spare Yavneh and her chachomim. He said we will rebuild ourselves around Torah learning. Rabbi Akiva was leading a renewed flourishing of Torah Shebaal Peh. It was a significant comfort to the Jewish people to see that they had a future of Torah after the churbon. But these talmidim didn't show enough respect to each other. As a result, just as this renewal and comfort was taking root, bang – suddenly almost all the talmidim of Rabbi Akiva died and the world was made completely desolate. Hashem says that He is not interested in all the Torah they learned. It was a devastating blow to the morale of Klal Yisroel that

made the tragedy of the churbon habayis even deeper. Rabbi Akiva had to start over with five talmidim and rebuild once again.

Limud haTorah is critical. It has to become an integral part of a person and make him who he is. The Torah has the power to change and uplift the human being to tremendous heights. But it depends on learning Torah lishmoh and having proper respect for other talmidei chachomim and their Torah. Even if you believe they have the wrong approach, if enough respect is not given, Rabbeinu Yonah realized that Hashem isn't interested in our Torah.

It was not a coincidence that this occurred in the very week where we are told that Torah is the most important thing in the world and you must give up everything for the Torah. But if it doesn't change you and refine your personality, Hashem doesn't want it. This is why we were created.

We live in a very interesting generation. We are given so much opportunity to learn. When I was growing up, you could count on your fingers the number of people who devoted themselves to limud haTorah. Now everything is completely different. Limud Torah is very popular and very widespread.

People are talking about Moshiach coming right around the corner. But there is a midrash in the beginning of Bereishis which tells us the process that leads to Moshiach. The world will first be dominated by the culture of Rome – Christianity. We are living in a post-Christian world where the dominant culture in the West is just taavoh and znus. Then there will be a time where Torah will spread in a massive way and

then Moshiach will come. But this parsha tells us it is not just limud haTorah. Your learning has to change you and refine you and uplift your entire personality. Otherwise, it won't bring anything.

We read this parsha after Klal Yisroel spent 38 years in the desert doing nothing but listen to Moshe Rabbeinu's shiur and review it. Why? Hashem wanted Klal Yisroel to be so immersed in nothing but Torah so that it will be completely integrated and become a part of their being. Then they will be ready to enter Eretz Yisroel.

There is an important Netziv in Parshas Shlach. He says we create our own reality. Why were the meraglim afraid of going to Eretz Yisroel? They didn't believe that they were on the proper level to go into Eretz Yisroel after the sin of the golden calf. It was because of this belief that they created the reality where they in fact couldn't go to Eretz Yisroel.

We create our own reality in yeshiva as well. If we have the attitude that we are here to learn Torah in order to change and become a better person, then it will happen. But if we are ready to blame our chavrusos, or our rebbeim, or our roommates to explain why we didn't change, then we won't change.

Does our tremendous chashivus for the Torah spill over to giving respect to other people's Torah? Some people are religious tourists. They go here to get a geshmak and go there to get some other geshmak. But at the end of the day, it doesn't change a person on a fundamental level. If we take our learning seriously and really make Torah the highest value in our lives, we need to make sure that it changes us – that it naturally spills over into valuing the Torah of others as well.