

Zos Chukas HaTorah.

What is a chok? A chok is something whose entire justification is simply the will of Hashem. In davening we talk about the laws of nature being a chok – “chok nosan velo yaavor”. This is the way nature works. There are basic laws and constants, and everything results from that. These laws and constants are absolute and there is nothing we can do to change them. The source of their power comes from nothing other than Hashem’s will.

There are many chukim in the Torah. But the quintessential chok is the poroh adumoh. As far as we are concerned, there is no justification for it other than it being Hashem’s will. Although we can get deeper and deeper understandings of the chok, there comes a point that our understanding stops. This is the will of Hashem.

The midrash in the beginning of Bechukosai says there are three types of chukim:

1) Chukim of nature. There are Newton’s laws of gravity, there are the basic laws of mechanics and there are the laws of thermodynamics, etc. There are many other laws. But, in the end, it is the will of Hashem. There is only one power in the world that can override the laws of nature – Hashem Himself.

2) There are many chukim in the Torah – shatnez, poroh adumoh, bosor b’cholov, etc. They are unchanging even though we have questions and difficulties with them. We are not allowed to question their legitimacy no matter what convincing rationale I come up with. They are immutable. They differ from the laws of nature in a fundamental way. I cannot violate the laws of nature. It is forbidden to violate the laws of the Torah, but I have the power to violate them.

3) Then we have “laws” of the core human personality. Hashem created the human personality with certain fundamental characteristics. These are universal and part of every human being. A normal human being starts with certain basic characteristics which naturally condition his behavior and mindset in many situations. They are fundamental to the very makeup of his neshomo – they are at the root of the human personality. There can be things that happen to a person in life which distort these principles – social pressures, abuses, traumas, etc. But those core principles of the underlying human condition always remain embedded inside him. These are the bases of the chazokos that Chazal talk about. Since they are fundamental to Hashem’s creation of the human personality, they do not change. Therefore the halachos that result from them do not change. These are chazokos which don’t fundamentally change with culture and social forces.

The human personality has been a subject of intense study in modern times with all kinds of theories about human psychology and the subconscious. A fundamental part of the Rambam’s and many other meforshim’s outlook on human beings is that Hashem created men and women with different core personalities. These laws of personality aren’t the same as laws of nature. They are more subtle and flexible. They can be distorted and twisted by social and psychological pressures. But, they still always lie at the root of the human personality. If a person’s body becomes deformed, we try to restore it to normalcy – so too with the human personality. However, just as people can be born with physical deformities and defects, they can be born with psychological distortions. Just as we try to restore a physically distorted human being to physical normalcy, so too we should attempt to restore the psychologically distorted human being

to the Torah’s view of a normal personality.

There are many maamorei Chazal which describe what normalcy is. It is not a product of some psychological evaluation based on what Chazal observed in their society and point in history. They are unchanging core elements of the human personality for all time. This is why we have halachos that are based on them – halachos which we live by for all time.

Every year when we come to Parshas Chukas, I tremble. Onkelos translates chukas haTorah as “doh gezeirah d’oraishon”. The simple interpretation is that this is the quintessential decree of the Torah. One can read it also as a gezeirah against the Torah. It has been interpreted that way referring to tragic events in history, like that of 757 years ago on 9 Tammuz. There was a major disaster that struck the Jewish people. It shook up all of Klal Yisroel and affected the course of Jewish life in the Middle Ages.

Rashi was born in France and he travelled to Germany to learn – which was the center of Torah at the time. It had been established by Rabbeinu Gershon. When Rashi came back to France, the center of Torah moved to France with him. His family started the dynasty of the Baalei Tosfos. The Ramban and Rabbeinu Yonah went to the Yeshiva in Evreux in Northern France to learn from the Baalei Tosfos. After three years the Ramban returned to Spain. Rabbeinu Yonah went to Paris to learn under Rav Yechiel M’Paris, and the Maharam Miruttenburg came from Germany to France to learn in Paris as well. During that time, the king of France forced a debate between the Jews and a priest who was a meshumod. The outcome inspired the king to issue a decree to burn all the copies of Talmud Bavli in France. It effectively ended the period of the Baalei Tosfos in France.

The people who lived through it saw it clearly as a decree from Heaven against the Torah. No one thought of it in political terms – that it was just because of an evil king and an evil meshumod conspiring to stop limud haTorah. They used it as a sign to do a serious internal cheshbon hanefesh. Which aveiroh could have caused the center of Torah of France to be destroyed? Rabbeinu Yonah did a very deep cheshbon hanefesh because of the incident. He saw the bonfire where they burnt the Shas and realized that many years ago there was another bonfire where many French talmidei chachomim burned the Rambam’s works because they thought it was kefiroh. Rabbeinu Yonah saw this violation of the kovod of the Rambam as the underlying cause of the burning of the Shas in Paris. This act must have brought a gezeirah against the Torah in France.

The yeshivos in France were disbanded and the talmidim went their separate ways. The Maharam Miruttenburg went back to Germany and wrote the kinoh “Sha’ali serufoh bo’aish”. Rabbeinu Yonah went back to Spain and wrote the classic mussar sefer Shaarei Teshuvah.

This year was a very interesting year. In the beginning of the year there was celebration after celebration about the siyum haShas and then, bang! – everything closes – the yeshivos, the kollelim, the shuls. Everything came to a grinding halt.

When Rebbi Akiva’s talmidim died during the days of sefirah he realized it was a decree against the Torah and made a cheshbon hanefesh. He realized they weren’t giving enough kovod to each other and had to start over. When all the copies of Shas in France were burned, they realized it was a gezeirah against the Torah. They realized they didn’t give sufficient kovod to the Torah of the Rambam. So when we are

seeing all the yeshivos and kollelim close world-wide for months and months, we have to make a serious cheshbon hanefesh. We have to realize it is a decree against the Torah because of something we are doing or aren't doing. Do we have too much machlokes? Do we tolerate machlokes too easily? Are we giving enough kovod to talmidei chachomim? I don't know the definitive answer – just offering possibilities of where we have to think hard about what is happening.

Besides the crisis the world is going through, there is a personal crisis of limud haTorah. Our whole system of yiddishkeit functions around kehillos and being connected to a tzibbur. When that tzibbur is shut down and our yiddishkeit is disrupted, we have to make a deep cheshbon hanefesh. We have to appreciate even more the very things that have been taken away from us by the pandemic. Tefilloh b'tzibbur, learning in a place that is dedicated to limud Torah, etc.

Chazal interpret the posuk "odom ki yomus be'ohel" that a person needs to treat divrei Torah as something to which he sacrifices his life. It is dvar Hashem – it is precious and vital beyond comparison. It connects me to Hashem and is the source of everything.

Maybe Hashem is putting us through a test. Having a grand siyum haShas with filled stadiums and speeches about the greatness of Torah is very nice, very inspiring. But how much does Torah really mean to you at the end of the day? How are you going to live your daily life without all the external social pressures and communal structures that we set up to insure our limud haTorah? Is Torah going to remain central to your day even when there is no structure and you can basically do whatever you want? Is it going to be your primary mental preoccupation when there are so many other things to be distracted by? How serious are you taking the Torah now in these times?

When I think of the major disasters of Jewish history and when Torah learning has a major setback, there is a need to reflect on the things that seem small and insignificant to us. When I disagree with my chavrusoh and I call him stupid or all kinds of names to belittle him, do I think I am doing something so terrible? This is just how we learn! But this is the aveiroh of talmidei Rebbi Akiva to their chavrusos. Belittling the stature of talmidei chachomim took France off the map in terms of limud haTorah and it never came back! It moved to Germany and then to Eastern Europe. Why? They violated the kovod of the Rambam.

The Tosfos Yom Tov said the reason why a million Jews were killed in the gezeiroh of Tach v'Tat was for nothing more than Jews talking in shul! What would we think if a million Jews were killed chas v'sholom? We would try to come up with something much more serious. Would we come up with talking in shul? I don't think so. But the point is that talking in shul is serious.

When we go further in the parsha we read about a pivotal part of the Chumash, and one of the most mysterious: the sin of mei merivoh. Klal Yisroel are finally coming to Eretz Yisroel and Moshe Rabbeinu is still leading them. They have recovered from the cheit ho'eigel, the cheit hameraglim and everything – 40 years in the midbor. They built themselves back up to the level they need to enter Eretz Yisroel. They are almost there!

Miriam dies and there is no more water. For 39 years in the midbor, all of Klal Yisroel had water in the zechus of Miriam and now it is suddenly gone. They get thirsty and quarrel with Moshe and Aharon and wonder why they were taken out of Egypt. These people had never seen Egypt!

Then they say a key phrase – "why should we and our flock die of thirst?"

When a person thinks about his personal needs – for food, for water, for parnassoh, etc. – it could be for one of two reasons. It could be he needs to worry about how he can continue to function in order to serve Hashem better, or it could be a basic animal instinct for survival – no different from any animal with an instinct for self-preservation. These are two totally different attitudes which reflect the core identity of a person. Klal Yisroel have been taken care of by Hashem through open miracles for almost forty years. This stopped and they missed water for a day and they think they are going to die – and they worry about their animals? What about their human needs and ruchniyus needs?

There is a massive problem among the meforshim: what was Moshe Rabbeinu's aveiroh?

The Rambam tells us a very interesting thing. He says Moshe Rabbeinu didn't appreciate the high level of Klal Yisroel. The Rambam says Klal Yisroel – for all forty years in the midbor – remained on the same level of nevuoh which they received during the gilui Shechinoh they had at kriyas yam suf! They slipped for just a second because they were thirsty and they panicked. Moshe Rabbeinu responds very harshly: "Shim'u noh hamorim." The Rambam tells us that because Moshe Rabbeinu could not appreciate their high level, and the pain and panic that Klal Yisroel were going through, he could no longer lead them. A leader has to be able to feel the pain of the tzibbur, and recognize their true level and understand that sometimes they slip.

This is an unbelievable lesson for leaders of Klal Yisroel generally and for each of us individually. We have to learn how not to judge other people when they are in pain or going through a crisis and momentarily fall prey to weakness. We have to appreciate the true level that they are normally on and realize that people slip up every once in a while. Until you can do that, you cannot be a leader of a tzibbur and you cannot fulfil your obligations of bein odom lechaveiro to appreciate the qualities of another Jew.

Moshe Rabbeinu wasn't able to be sensitive to the needs of the tzibbur and it prevented him from leading them further. Aharon was included in this punishment because they both failed in this joint mission to lead Klal Yisroel.

It is an important lesson in how to deal with other Jews – understand their level and be sympathetic to their failings. The Torah is not just a religion with a lot of magical, hocus pocus rituals. It is extremely practical – it teaches us how to deal with other human beings – each on his own level. It talks about the gezeiroh de'oraisoh – the grave consequences to limud haTorah when infringing on the kovod of talmidei chachom, and even ordinary Jews.

Because of their treatment of the Rambam, the yeshivos in France never recovered. Because they did not respect their chavrusos, all the talmidim of Rebbi Akiva could not be saved. Rebbi Akiva had to start over from scratch. Because Moshe Rabbeinu was not sensitive to the pain of the tzibbur, he could not continue to lead and to teach Klal Yisroel and had to die in the midbor.

We have to take our relationships with talmidei chachomim, chavrusos, and all Jews with utmost seriousness.