



## Trying to Understand a Chok?

*By Keren Weinberger*

Mitzvot generally fall into three categories: Chukim, Mishpatim and Eidot. Mishpatim are Mitzvot that appear rational and we can understand using human intellect, Eidot are Mitzvot that are commanded for reasons of commemoration (such as commemoration of holidays). The former two Mitzvot we can understand the reason post commandment; however, Chukim are Mitzvot that defy human understanding. We fulfill Chukim solely because Hashem commanded us despite the difficulty understanding "why".

The Mitzvah of Parah Adumah, using the ashes of an unblemished, slaughtered red heifer to purify one who comes into contact with a dead body, is clearly a Chok. We do not understand why the ashes of a red cow mixed with water changes one's status from "impure" to "pure". Parah Adumah is actually the Torah's quintessential example of a Chok. Even Shlomo HaMelech said "I will become wise, but it was far from me." (Kohelet 7:23).

The Jews are commanded to bring a Korban Pesach on the 14th of Nissan and consume it on the night of the 15th. Before bringing a Korban, one had to be ritually pure. The most severe form of impurity comes from contact with a dead body, which is reversed by using the ashes of the Parah Adumah.

We read from the Torah Parashat Parah before Pesach to remind the Jews to purify themselves if necessary.

Let's revisit the concept of the three categories of Mitzvot. Ultimately, each and every mitzvah is a commandment from Hashem. All Mitzvot are some form of a Chok – we follow solely because Hashem commands, whether we can use human intellect to reason the action or not. Even Mishpatim, such as "don't murder" seems overwhelmingly obvious except we are living through

times now where Russia is murdering the innocent and in the past Germany annihilated indiscriminately. They lost the moral understanding of not taking human life. It is essential we treat each Mitzvah as a command without understanding the reason.

When traveling through life with limited ability in understanding Hashem's will, we are met with various trials and tribulations along the way. Sometimes deeply personal issues will arise such as (God forbid) sickness or struggles with Parnassah, and sometimes we face massive challenges like Covid, or the passing last week of Rav Chaim Kanievsky ZT"L, our world's Torah giant. We must face these trials with the knowledge that Hashem has a master plan, one we may not understand, and one that befuddles us such as the many Mitzvot that seemingly have no reason. Perhaps if we understood every Mitzvah we would struggle as humans when faced with challenges we could not understand.

When the ashes of the Red Heifer were available to physically purify those who were defiled, the Parashah itself had to be read according to some Poskim (see Yoma 5b and Magein Avraham 685:1). It was not only the act of sprinkling the ash and mixture water, but the words were required to be read as well as part of the purification process.

How remarkable! It is a Mitzvah De'Orayta to read this Parashah before Pesach. The Ohr Gedalyahu concludes poetically, "when Parashat Parah is read, a spirit of purification descends from heaven which the listener must accept as his purification process." What exactly does this acceptance entail? He explains that each of us must subjugate ourselves to our Creator, in the spirit of Avraham Avinu (see Chullin 89a).

When we sit in Shul this Shabbat, let us reflect on the essence of Chukim – everything is HaKadosh Baruch Hu's will and simultaneously, this is our Shabbat of

purification. Let us prepare for the upcoming holy Chag of Pesach.

## King David's Devotion

By Eytan Goldstein ('24)

*Editor's Note: This article was written about the Haftarah that we usually read for Parashat Shemini. As this year is a leap year, we will be reading the Haftarah for Parashat Parah.*

King David sharply scolds his wife Michal after she yells at him for dancing hysterically as the Ark is brought to the Temple. He justifies his excitement by saying, "I was in the presence of Hashem Who chose me over your father... I will hold myself even more lightly esteemed than this" (Shmuel II 6:21-22). This can all be found in Shemini's usual Haftarah. However, two questions can be raised. Why do the Pesukim address Michal as "daughter of Shaul" (Shmuel II 6:16), and why does David HaMelech seemingly bash Shaul HaMelech?

These two questions can be answered with one answer. In both of these quotes David is saying I am not like your father Shaul. Shaul was a great king and had faith in Hashem. But that trust stopped when Shaul did not understand why Hashem was commanding certain things. King David in his humility was able to accept that he wouldn't understand everything in order to honor Hashem. This is why he danced eccentrically and this is also why Michal rebuked him, because she was not used to this.

It would be challenging for us to all go out and be like King David, due to how holy he was. But when we fulfill the word of God we should do it with joy and love. David Hamelech, himself, expresses this idea: "Serve God with happiness; come before him with joyous song" (Tehillim 100:2). This idea is a major theme of Lubavitch. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe once said: "There are many ways to serve Hashem. However the ultimate way is to serve him through joy." Even if one does not know how to do Mitzvot, if they just serve God with happiness, maybe with dancing or singing, they fulfill a big Mitzvah. And in the end, a little happiness won't hurt.

## Eish Zarah: Understanding the Aveirot and

### Punishment of Nadav and Avihu

By Azarya Tiger ('25)

In this week's Parashah, Parashat Shemini, Nadav and Avihu are killed by a fire from Hashem for bringing a Ketoret in the Beit HaMikdash without being commanded: "ויקחו בני־אהרן נדב ואביהוא איש מהתתו ויתנו בהן אש וישימו עליה קטרת ויקרבו לפני ה' אש זרה אשר לא צוה אתם: ותצא אש מלפני יהוה ותאכל אותם וימתו לפני ה' "Now Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Hashem alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from Hashem and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of Hashem" (VaYikra 10:1-2).

In his Sefer, Shalom Rav, Rav Shalom Rosner says that there must be more to the death of Aharon's sons than the bringing of Ketoret that they were not commanded to bring; there must have been a bigger Aveirah. Rav Rosner brings three sources to answer his question. The first of these sources comes from Rav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer. Rav Kornitzer says that in VaYikra Rabbah there are examples of other Aveirot that Nadav and Avihu may have committed. These examples include either them not getting married, getting married but not having children, or being too eager to take over for their father and uncle. Rav Kornitzer says that of course Nadav and Avihu were Tzadikim, but how could they not get married or have children?! You can't decide to not do Mitzvot, especially when you are on the level that they were on!

Rav Kornitzer explains that it must be that Aharon's sons believed themselves to be on the level that they couldn't be distracted by marrying or having children because their lives were so enveloped by Torah. The problem with this is that the Ribbono Shel Olam does not want the leaders of Klal Yisrael to adopt such an approach. He wants the leaders of Klal Yisrael to be able to understand and connect to people. Nadav and Avihu thought that as the leaders, they should have been entirely connected to Torah, which caused them to not marry, and think that Moshe and Aharon should not lead Klal Yisrael because while they were connected to the Torah, they also had connections with the people which is a necessity for good leadership.

The second source Rav Rosner presents is the Ketav Sofer. The Ketav Sofer asks how the Aveirot mentioned in VaYikra Rabbah are considered an “Eish Zarah”. He explains that the children of Moshe were not as righteous as Moshe, which Nadav and Avihu interpreted to mean that getting married and having children would lead to their children not being as great as they, because they would be engrossed in their leadership positions and not pay attention to their children. Because of this, they would not marry and have children but rather be one hundred percent committed to their jobs as leaders.

The Ketav Sofer says that this was their biggest mistake; you cannot judge a parent because of their children’s outcome. Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest leader in Klal Yisrael’s history and for all we know he was the best father as well. As long as the parents Daven, set the right examples, and give each child the attention they need, the parent has done exactly what they need to do and the rest is up to Hashem. This is the “Eish Zarah”, the idea that Nadav and Avihu took matters into their own hands because of what they saw with Moshe, when in reality the turnout of children is ultimately dependent on them.

The final source brought down by Rav Rosner is from the Netziv. The Netziv explains that the “Eish Zarah” was exactly what the words literally translate to: “a strange fire”. Nadav and Avihu had a burning desire to come closer to Hashem. The Ribbono Shel Olam gave us the Torah and Mitzvot, which are not suggestions but rather a guide for how to serve Him. The Ketoret that Nadav and Avihu brought were them trying to do what felt right to them, but wasn’t what they were commanded to do. The only ways can you get closer to Hashem are Torah and Mitzvot, not what you think you should do.

What we can take from this, is that we should focus on what Hashem commanded us, not what we think we should do. We should understand that the Torah is our guidebook and we need to use it to do the Mitzvot and do them the right way.

## Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv Relinquishes His Miracle-Inducing Powers: A Stunning Story

*By: Rabbi Jachter*

The Gemara (Ta’anit 23b) tells a most intriguing story: “Rav Mani was a student of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv. Once, he came crying to his Rebbe, saying, ‘The rich members of my father-in-law’s house trouble and afflict me.’ ‘May they become poor,’ Rav Yitzchak told him. Sometime later, he again came to complain before Rav Yitzchak, saying, ‘Now, they are pressuring me to support them. They tell me they have nothing to eat.’ ‘May they become rich,’ Rav Yitzchak prayed, and so it was. A different time, Rav Mani came before Rav Yitzchak and complained, ‘My wife is unattractive, and I find it difficult to look at her.’ ‘What is her name?’ R’ Yitzchak asked. ‘Chanah.’ ‘May Chanah become beautiful,’ Rav Yitzchak prayed, and so it was. A short while later, Rav Mani again came with the complaint. ‘She is beautiful now,’ he cried, ‘and treats me in an arrogant way.’ ‘If so,’ R’ Yitzchak said, ‘May she again be plain.’ And so it was. Two students of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv once asked him, ‘Rebbe, pray for us that we should become Torah scholars.’ ‘Once, I could do this,’ he answered them, ‘whatever I would pray for, the heavens would grant me. Now, I have returned this gift to heaven.’

Why would Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv give up his extraordinary ability to induce miracles? Let us explore three possible explanations for this shocking choice.

### **Explanation #1 – Rashi**

Rashi (s.v. Imi Hayeta) argues that Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv did not choose to forfeit this ability. Instead, Hashem used to accept each of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv’s Tefillot, but in his later years, his Tefillot are no longer readily accepted.

Maharsha (ad. loc.) finds Rashi’s explanation difficult for two reasons. First, why would a Tzadik’s Tefillot become less acceptable in his elder years relative to his younger years? The concluding Mishnah of Masechet Kinim emphasizes that Tzadikim become greater as they age, not the opposite. Second, the Gemara uses the word “VeShilachtiha,” which indicates that the miracle-inducing powers’ cessation resulted from a choice made by Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv.

In defense of Rashi, we suggest that Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv realized that his actions caused him to forfeit his ability to generate wondrous acts. His asking Hashem to make miracles regarding petty matters caused him to lose his power. The word “VeShilachtiha” means that his actions caused the ability to be lost. His miraculous interventions failing to help his student Rav Mani indicated that the miracles wrought were misguided.

Similarly, Metzudat David (Melachim II 5:26 s.v. HaEit) explains Elisha (who was renowned for his unparalleled ability to bring about miracles) as saying that we do not induce miracles unless it is necessary. Thus, since Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv wasted his miracle generating powers on frivolous matters, when needed for essential issues, such as for the two students to become great Torah scholars, his ability was lost.

We learn from Rashi to be exceedingly careful about what we ask Hashem in our Tefillot. We should not ask Hashem to intervene in trivial matters, for if we do, then we may find that He does not respond when we beseech Him for help in cases of genuine importance.

Years ago, I attended an exhilarating Yeshiva high school championship hockey game. As the game went into overtime, the goalie's parents (who happened to be a descendant of Rashi and the Maharsha) asked me to "invoke" their son's Zechut Avot, the merit of his righteous ancestors, that he would emerge victorious in this game. I responded that we do not use Zechut Avot for success in a sports match. Instead, I asked Hashem that the student's Zechut Avot should serve in his stead to marry a fine observant Jewish woman with whom he would be pleased (which Baruch Hashem happened a few years later).

#### **Explanation #2 – Maharsha**

Maharsha explains that Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv chose to relinquish his powers after realizing that Hashem prefers to work through natural means. Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv arrived at this conclusion from the lack of success of nature's violations brought about through his prayers.

Hashem prefers a Neis Nistar, a "hidden" miracle in which Hashem intervenes subtly and does not override the laws of nature, over a Neis Nigleh, an overt miracle such as Keri'at Yam Suf (splitting of the Red Sea) that involves a violation of the laws of nature. Hashem prefers a Neis Nistar since people must make an effort to discover Hashem, allowing an authentic relationship to develop between humans and Hashem.

The following story, recorded in Shabbat 53b, illustrates this principle: "There once was a man whose wife died and left him with an infant to nurse, and he could not afford to pay a woman to nurse the baby. A miracle occurred, and the man grew breasts like a woman, and he nursed his child. Rav Yosef said: 'Come and see just how great this man must be that such a miracle was performed for him!' Abbayei countered: 'On the contrary. How bad this man must be that the order of nature was changed for him.'"

The fact that Abayei is given the last word in this passage demonstrates that his opinion is accepted.

The Maharsha sees the following story told in the Gemara as corroborating his interpretation of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv. The next incident condemns one who induced a miracle for a

tree to produce its fruit before its time. Maharsha sees his interpretation as fitting into the broader context of the Gemara.

Binyamin Jachter sees the Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv story fitting into the broader Sugya, which contrasts Abba Chilkiya and Chanan HaNechba's modest means of bringing rain with the dazzling methods of their grandfather Choni HaMa'agel. Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv shunning flashy heavenly interventions fits this theme. The father of Rav Mani, recounted immediately before the Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv story, also induced rain in a manner that even his family was unaware of his having provoked a Neis.

#### **Explanation #3 – A New Approach**

We suggest that Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv did not relinquish his powers. Instead, he indirectly communicates to the two Talmidim that their request is inappropriate. Greatness in Torah, by definition, must be earned and not acquired by a miracle.

The Gemara (Megillah 6b) famously instructs us not to believe someone who claims he has achieved greatness in Torah without investing enormous effort (Matzati VeLo Yagati Al Ta'amin). The Gemara (Niddah 30b) recounts that we forget the Torah taught to us by a Malach in the womb. Rav Soloveitchik explains that Torah acquired with no effort is not worth knowing.

The Berachah on Torah study, according to Ashkenazic tradition, is "La'asok BeDivrei Torah" (Sephardic Jews say "Al Divrei Torah"). The Taz (Orach Chaim 47:1) explains that the message conveyed is that Torah study's very essence involves the investment of all of one's efforts – "La'asok."

Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv politely indicates to the two students that their request to miraculously achieve greatness in Torah is misguided. There are no shortcuts with Torah study. The effort is part and parcel of outstanding Torah achievement. Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv gently refuses to deprive the two students of genuine Torah achievement.

#### **Conclusion**

We could make the story of Rav Yitzchak ben Eliyashiv's miraculous interventions into a full-length movie. Instead, it is compacted into a few sparse lines in the Gemara. We argue that the richness of these stories is expressed in their brevity. The stories' conciseness leaves ample room for us to unravel and discover the many levels of meaning and interpretation just waiting to be revealed. Manifold and multiple meanings are the rewards for those who deeply ponder the depths of the Gemara's deceptively simple stories.

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[webmasters@koltorah.org](mailto:webmasters@koltorah.org)