

Who We Are

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

In this week's parsha, we learn about the parah adumah, the purely red cow, whose ashes are used in the purification process of people who became tamei by being in contact with a lifeless body. How does it work? We don't know. Not only don't we know, but the Torah tells us that the reason for this mitzvah and how it works is beyond our comprehension. It is a chok.

Rashi explains the Torah writes that this mitzvah is a chok because the Soton and the gentiles mock the Jews for performing this mitzvah and ask us why we do it. Therefore, the Torah describes it as a chok to teach us that the reason we observe this commandment is because Hashem wills it so, forbidding delving into it and searching for reasons for implementing this process to achieve purity.

When outsiders and scoffers ridicule us, we need not pay heed to them and seek explanations for what we do. All throughout the ages, gentiles have been mocking Jewish service and mitzvos, and Jews have bothered answering them, mistakenly assuming that by doing so, they could temper their anti-Jewish feelings.

The Torah is the basis for laws of jurisprudence in civilized countries, yet we are regularly vilified by citizens of those very countries and characterized by old anti-Semitic stereotypes as dishonest shylocks. Wherever we have been, we have been mistreated and held to a double standard. Dialogue and debates never succeeded in winning over the hearts and minds of haters.

Yet, we persist in trying to prove the justice of our cause, hiring public relations experts and attempting to explain our way of life to those motivated by age-old bias. We need to have enough self-confidence to be able to ignore the senseless cries and know that there is not much to be gained from articulating who we are when dealing with irrational, ingrained hatred.

In fact, the Torah quotes Moshe Rabbeinu as stating, "Behold, I have taught you chukim and mishpotim as Hashem commanded me. You shall observe and follow them, for they are your wisdom and knowledge in the eyes of the nations, when they will hear of these chukim and they will say, 'This is a wise nation'" (Devorim 4:5-6).

Our laws and mitzvos, whether understood or not, are the bedrock of our lives, culture and religion, and we have nothing to be embarrassed of when we are faithful to Torah. The rules we follow and the credo

of our existence are not subject to the changing cultures and moral underpinnings – or lack thereof – of society. In times such as these, when moral values that have been accepted for centuries are wiped out in favor of deviant behavior, our values are not only out of favor, but under the very real threat of being made illegal by woke politicians.

Eighty-three percent of Americans are not happy with the economy and are dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country. And who can blame them? The administration and its allies in power across the country and in the media ignored warnings that their policies would lead to spiraling inflation. As they poured trillions of wasted tax dollars into the economy, they raised the deficit and brought us quite close to a recession. Despite the incompetent president blaming everything on Putin, people recognize that he is out of his depth, being led by agenda-driven progressives.

Under the current administration, everything has risen astronomically in price. People are having difficulty purchasing the basics. The president doesn't seem to care, nor do those who work for him. They see historic prices being paid for gas as a bump in the incredible transition to green energy.

Public safety used to be considered the government's prime responsibility, but no more. Democrats worked to defund and curb policing in cities across the country. Now, as crime rises as rapidly as inflation due to lax policing and prosecuting, the crime wave is blamed on guns and Supreme Court decisions. A society that does not police crime is destined to pay the price.

All of this pales in comparison to the cultural changes brought to this country since Biden's election. Things that were taboo until very recently are now flaunted, celebrated, and protected by law. The Supreme Court righted a wrongful right to kill babies that was instituted fifty years ago and half of the country has erupted. The leadership, elites and media have incessantly been castigating the justices and calling for amending the court system.

Last week, the professionally produced Jan. 6 show trial held a special session to feature a young former White House assistant with a fantastical tale about an out-of-control President Trump battling with Secret Service officers for control of his vehicle. Her testimony was splashed across the front page of the New York Times and every other mainstream newspaper, and loop repeated in other forms of media, along with warnings that this is really the end of Trump. They neglected to mention that the Secret Service agents involved denied that the story happened. But it doesn't really make a difference, because the congressmen conducting the so-called investigation have already accomplished their goal of reinforcing the image of their strongest electoral foe as an out-of-control crazy man.

The same people who are so concerned about the country's democracy and the former president's corruption have buried any congressional investigation of the current president's involvement with his

son Hunter and his corrupt overseas dealings. Throughout the presidential election campaign, Joe Biden promised that he was not aware of his son's dealings and never discussed them with him. Although this was hard to believe, because as vice president he flew his son with him to China and Ukraine on Air Force Two and conceivably would have spoken to him about where and why he was going, no media bothered pursuing the issue and it was allowed to drop out of sight.

That changed when Hunter's laptop was found and it included loads of incriminating evidence against the father and son. The New York Post and some Fox reporters dug into the story and revealed cascading amounts of information proving that the elder Biden was deeply involved in his son's corrupt deals in China and Ukraine. The Post was cancelled and thrown off Twitter for its reporting. Every once in a while, the issue is introduced in passing in the media, and then it is quickly shunted away. None of the politicians so concerned about the crimes of Trump, a past president, now out of office, care at all that the man occupying the White House may be compromised in his dealings with foreign heads of government.

Such is the system of jurisprudence and governing among those who mock us. The very same people who are taking the country in a sad, immoral, socialist direction are those who exhibit anti-Semitic tendencies against Jews and Israel.

So, do we care or don't we about what they say? Do we have to act in a way that finds favor in their eyes or can we simply ignore them?

Later in this week's parsha (Bamidbar 20:7-13), we confront the tragic incident of Mei Meriva, where Moshe and Aharon were commanded by Hashem to speak to a rock and ask it to produce water for the Jewish people in the desert. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe hit it with his stick. Hashem told Moshe and Aharon that because they didn't sanctify Him by ordering the rock to give water, they forfeited their task of leading the Jews into the Promised Land, and they would both die and be buried outside of Eretz Yisroel.

The Alter of Kelm taught that an examination of the posuk and Rashi's explanation indicate that Moshe and Aharon were faulted not for causing a chillul Hashem, but for not bringing about as great a kiddush Hashem as was possible. The fact that an inert stone was able to give forth water for the nation and its animals in the desert was itself a miracle (see Ramban, *ibid.*). They were faulted because speaking to the stone would have brought about a greater kiddush Hashem.

Rashi explains that the Jews would have been able to make a kal vachomer. They could have realized that if a stone that neither speaks nor hears, and has no need to earn a living, follows the word of Hashem, certainly we should.

The Alter would say that the difference in the miracle between the rock being spoken to rather than smitten is minute and so imperceptible that Rishonim struggled to understand the sin, yet the punishment was so severe.

Had Moshe brought the Jewish people into Eretz Yisroel then, they never would have been exiled and the Bais Hamikdosh would never have been destroyed. Yet, as an outgrowth of Moshe's punishment for not having caused as great a kiddush Hashem as was possible, we lost the Bais Hamikdosh and were driven into golus, where we still are.

Rav Yitzchok Eizik Chover, famed disciple of the Vilna Gaon, writes in Ohr Torah (27, 29, 81, 145) that because Moshe hit the stone, it became difficult to study and understand Torah. Forgetfulness in Torah study set in and Moshe Rabbeinu died early, causing the wells of Torah to dry up. From then on, there was machlokes in understanding Torah and arriving at the halacha.

He says that if Moshe had spoken to the rock, the Torah would have been revealed in totality and would not be as difficult to understand as it is. Had Moshe spoken to the rock, there would have been no golus, the Bais Hamikdosh would not have been destroyed, Hashem would not lead us through hester ponim, learning Torah would not be such a struggle, and we would retain what we learn.

All this came about because Moshe and Aharon failed in a small way to be fully mekadeish Hashem.

The lesson for us is that in our lives, as well, we must use every opportunity to be mekadeish Hashem as much as possible. When people fail to conduct themselves properly, whether by not learning well, or by fooling around during davening, or by being dishonest, or being nasty to people, or not being careful in the observance of mitzvos, their punishment is so much greater than if they had simply not caused as great a kiddush Hashem as they could have.

When people are in a public thoroughfare and they observe the rules of the road, extending courtesies to other drivers or pedestrians, they can bring about a kiddush Hashem, as people note how gracious and proper Jews are. But if you cut people off and make quick lefts when the light has turned red, and when you don't give people the right of way or let them enter the road from a parking lot, instead of using the opportunity to make a kiddush Hashem, you have made a chillul Hashem, as people say, "Look at how that Jew drives."

We see in this parsha the punishment for not maximizing an opportunity to make a kiddush Hashem. We can only imagine the severity of the punishment for causing a chillul Hashem.

Zos chukas haTorah. When the nations and people of the world mock us for parah adumah, for our observance of mitzvos, for our moral clarity, we need not pay heed to them. We shouldn't take their comments to heart. We don't have to answer them. But just as well, the Torah mandates that we behave in such a way as not to arouse them and not to provoke them and not to give them an opportunity to criticize us, our Torah, and our G-d.

We must always be conscious of who we are and that we are expected and required to live on a higher level of kedusha than the rest of the world, conducting ourselves according to the mitzvos and chukim of the Torah. If we did, we would be able to compensate for the sin of Moshe and Aharon, bringing an end to the golus and the return of the Bais Hamikdosh speedily in our day.