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## On the Parsha

The first Possuk in Parshas Chukas (BaMidbar19:2) introduces the Mitzvah of Parah Adumah (red heifer) whose ashes are used to purify one who has become impure. This Mitzvah is puzzling because even though the Parah Adumah's ashes make the one that is impure, pure; it makes the one who is preparing the ashes to be used, impure. The Torah tells us that this Mitzvah is a "Chok" which is a commandment of the Torah that we must observe whether we understand it or not.

The Torah introduces the Mitzvah of the Parah Adumah with the words, "Zos Chukas HaTorah" – this is the Chok of the Torah. There is a debate between the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh and the Akeidas Yitzchok as to what these words are referring to. The Ohr HaChaim believes that the Torah only means to call this particular Mitzvah of Para Adumah a Chok. The Akeidas Yitzchok believes that the Torah means to say that Mitzvahs in general should be viewed as a Chok. Accordingly, we should therefore observe them regardless of whether we understand the reasons for them.

The author of the Yemin Yaakov who was a student of Rav Chaim Visoker ZT"l of the famed Mir Yeshiva in Poland, expounds on the view of the Akeidas Yitzchok. His approach is that if we overdo searching for the reasons of the Mitzvahs, then we could possibly end up rationalizing away the Mitzvah when we think that the reason that we found for the Mitzvah no longer applies to us. Therefore, we should treat all the Mitzvahs as a Chok – not to unduly concern ourselves with finding a rationale for the Mitzvahs and observe them whether we understand them or not.

This would have particular application to the Mitzvah of "Midvar Sheker Tirchak" – distance yourself from any matter of falsehood. We may say that the rationale for this Mitzvah is because telling a lie can be damaging and harmful. That being the case, we may consider that the Torah would permit one to tell harmless "white lies". We may think that telling a story

with a lie or a bit of an exaggeration here and there is harmless. We may rationalize that telling a story is much more entertaining that way. However, white lies are still not permitted. Harmless as they may be, telling white lies can make it easier to lie in general and could make lying habitual. Therefore, to observe "Midvar Sheker Tirchak" properly, treat it as a Chok, observe it without delving into the potential reasons for the Mitzvah.

Towards the end of Parshas Chukas, Bnei Yisrael are told to send messengers to the nation of Edom to ask them to allow Bnei Yisrael to pass through Edom's land. Yet nowhere in this Parsha does it tell us the reason why Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to do this. It is only later in Sefer Devarim that we are informed of the reason – Edom is the nation that descended from Eisav, and Eisav is effectively our brother (by being the brother to Yaakov Avinu). We must remember that brotherhood and not anger Eisav's nation. The Yemin Yaakov cites this as a support to the view of the Akeidas Yitzchok – even though this commandment to ask for safe passage was not a Chok (i.e. Hashem gave us the reason later on), we should view it as such and that is why when it was first introduced, it was introduced without a rationale.

Rav Mordechai Gifter ZT"l explained that reasons for Mitzvahs are called, "Taamei HaMitzvos" because of the dual meaning of the word "Taam". Taam means "reason", but it also means "taste". Hashem provides us with food to nourish ourselves with the necessary minerals and nutrients. However, Hashem could have given us tasteless or bland food to accomplish this. In His great kindness, He gives us food that also tastes good. By the same token, Rav Gifter explained, we should look at every Mitzvah in the Torah as if it was a Chok – that is, we must observe it simply because it is the will of Hashem. The fact that we may be provided with reasons to keep the Mitzvah is an "extra benefit" – no different than the extra benefit of Hashem providing us with food that is not only nourishing, but is tasty as well.

## Halacha – Jewish Law

**QUESTION:** Francis Suarez, the mayor of Miami who is running for president, was asked the following question by Hugh Hewitt, a talk show host: “Will you be talking about the Weegers (spelled Uyghurs) during your campaign?” (The Weegers are a Turkic ethnic group that is allegedly being mistreated by China.)

The mayor responded, “The what?”

Mr. Hewitt responded, “The Weeger.”

The mayor asked, “What’s a Weeger?”

Mr. Hewitt responded, “Okay, we’ll come back to that...You’ve got to get smart on that.”

My Halacha question is, would the mayor have been allowed to lie and respond in a manner that gives the impression that he had heard of the Weegers? For example, could he have said, “We are looking into that. It seems that few people are experts on how the Weegers should be handled or have a strong knowledge of the proper way to go in that direction...” Answering in this way would have made the mayor look far better than he did when he admitted that he never heard of the Weegers.

**ANSWER:** It is permitted under certain circumstances to give the impression that one knows something when one does not if the embarrassment would be too much for the individual to bear. This can be seen from the Gemorah in Rosh HaShanna 26b. A man approached Levi to complain about what was done to him. The man said “Kavan Pelanya” (which means someone robbed me). Levi did not know what “Kavan” meant so he went to the study hall to inquire about the meaning of the word. They told him what it meant. Rava of Barnish responded that, “Had I been there I would have said to him? How did he Kavach? With what did he Kavach, and why did he do it? Through his responses, I would have figured out in context, the meaning of the word.” We see from this Gemorah, that Rava of Barnish would have proceeded with a course of action that made it appear that he knew what the word meant even though he did not.

The Gemorah provides a reason why Levi did not follow this course of action, however the reason given was not because it would be a lie. Therefore, we may conclude that it would be permitted. However, the first caveat is that the response should not be an outright lie (e.g. to say explicitly that one knows something that one does not) and the second caveat is as referenced above - it could be done if the embarrassment in admitting that one does not know something is overbearing.

## Chizuk - Inspiration

Rav Yaakov Yoseph (who became Chief Rabbi of New York City in 1888) was a student of the famed Netziv in the Yeshiva of Volozhin (“Yeshiva”). In the Yeshiva and in fact, throughout Europe, he was known as Rav Yaakov Charif (the “sharp one”) because of his remarkably brilliant mind. One time, he heard a dazzling Talmudic lecture from Rav Yisroel Salanter ZT”L. A student at the lecture, asked a very strong question that questioned the validity of the lecture. Rav Salanter responded, “That is an excellent question. At this point, I do not have an adequate response. Later, Rav Salanter explained that he actually had five responses to the question that would have satisfied the questioner. However, he did not present the responses because he felt that they were not the truth – the genuine answers to his question, even if the questioner would believe them to be. Rav Salanter further explained that it was no simple feat to overcome human nature and rationalize to oneself why it would be appropriate to provide the responses even if they were not ultimately truthful.

When Rav Yaakov Yosef heard this, he was so impressed with Rav Salanter’s intellectual honesty, that he became a lifelong student of Rav Salanter.

This is noteworthy because Rav Yaakov Yoseph was a student of the Yeshiva of Volozhin where the study of Mussar (virtue-based ethics) was discouraged. Rav Salanter strongly encouraged the study of Mussar and was known as the father of the Mussar Movement. Rav Yaakov Yosef was so impressed with Rav Salanter’s honesty that he became a lifelong student of Rav Salanter, effectively joining Rav Salanter’s Mussar Movement which his original yeshiva discouraged.