

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

## From Rav Binny Freedman

### Portion of Chukat

Ask any Israeli soldier who ever served in the armored corps what part of his army service he hated the most, and he will answer unequivocally: '*Tipul shvui*' the weekly tank inspection.

After completing 10 weeks of basic infantry training, followed by an additional 10 weeks of tank crew school learning the rudimentary skills of serving as tank crew members be it gunners, loaders or drivers, we began one of the most difficult courses in the Israeli army.

For twelve grueling weeks we averaged less than 15 hours of sleep a week, training day and night in our tanks in the field, with no showers, eating cold battle rations in the blistering heat of the Middle Eastern summer. Heading out of base in our tanks to the simulated battlefield environment on Sunday mornings, the entire week was one long nightmare of dust and diesel fumes, shell blasts and grease.

In an effort to simulate battle we trained all Tuesday and Wednesday nights without sleep until we were so tired it was too dangerous to maneuver in tanks at which point, we would finally head back to base in the early dawn hours of Thursday morning.

And then the dreaded inspections would begin. Forbidden to sleep and forced to work on our tanks all day Thursday and into the night, we were not allowed to sleep or shower until our commanders were satisfied that every last screw was tightened, every last nozzle properly greased and every corner of the tank cleaned and scrubbed until it practically sparkled. And every week, no matter how hard we tried, we always failed the inspections time after time until they were finally satisfied the tank was ready for battle.

Often, the failed inspections would be followed with forced runs around the tanks or similar exhausting consequences, such that we were extremely motivated to pass inspection as early as possible, especially when we were due for weekend leave; if the Commanders did not think we were taking the inspection seriously enough, we could lose our weekend pass in an instant.

But it seemed that no matter how hard we tried, it was never good enough. Our commanders would always find something wrong, be it a smudge of grease left on the main gun, a few drops of water missing from the battery, not enough oil (or too much) on the heavy machine gun and on and on.... And then you had to start all over again....

Some guys just could not accept that all their efforts were meaningless, and they were often the ones who lost a weekend because they just could not cut it and just got more and more frustrated. They did not understand that we were never going to pass on the first inspection, or even the third.

Life does not always make sense.

This week we read the portion of *Chukat*, which is all about the aspects of life we will never understand. The portion begins with the laws of the *Parah Adumah* (the Red heifer) and the system applied to purify those individuals who had become impure by virtue of their direct contact with death. Called the ultimate '*chok*' or law we can never fully comprehend, the process purified those who were impure, but concurrently made impure those who administered the process and had been pure. In fact, many of the rules for this system make little sense, such as the fact that a cow meant to purify had to be red, usually the color of impurity.

Indeed the theme of this portion seems to be all about death as we are told of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, and the decree that Moshe will not enter the land of Israel and will die in the desert.

Rav Moshe Feinstein in his *Darash Moshe*, points out that the portion begins by saying “Zot Chukat HaTorah”, this is the (incomprehensible) law of the Torah, instead of calling it the law of the Red heifer, precisely because in every aspect of Torah and life in general, there will always be that aspect which is incomprehensible.

Even Mitzvot (commandments) which seem eminently reasonable contain some element of the incomprehensible. We are commanded not to charge interest, and yet as well to lend money to those in need. A person killing someone accidentally must take refuge in a special *Ir Miklat* (city of refuge) yet some might be forced to remain there a lifetime whilst others might be free to return home after a day (depending on when the Kohen Gadol, the High priest died...) and so on.

And as such, suggests Rav Moshe, our fulfillment of these precepts can never depend on our comprehension; we will always need to accept that there are aspects to any commandment or experience we will never be able to understand.

Such is the nature of death; we can never fully comprehend it, and if we are dependent on being able to rationally make sense of all the experiences in our lives, we will always be left wanting.

I remember the first time my cousin Danny, whose son Benjy was killed in the second Lebanon War just a few weeks after his wedding, came to Yeshivat Orayta on the eve of Israel's Memorial Day. After sharing Benjy's story, he opened the floor to the students' questions, one of whom asked him whether the loss of his son under such difficult circumstances had affected his faith. “Not at all” he responded, and then obviously realized his response had shocked his audience.

So he explained: You either have faith, or you don't; but it cannot be dependent on whether it makes sense, because then it was never really faith to begin with. And he added that he truly felt for the families he had met who had suffered similar losses but without the accompanying faith, because theirs must be a much more lonely and painful lot.

Ultimately, one of the most important lessons in life is to learn to accept that we are not always going to get it; we don't get to make it all make sense.

On one level, it is precisely when we finally understand that we will never fully ‘get it’, that we actually start to get it.

That is both the hidden question, and the point of the portion of *Chukat*; after two thousand years, and an endless series of impossible ‘inspections’, the Jewish people never stopped believing that there was a point to the exercise, even while realizing we might never get to fully understand it. And after all we have been through; we will persevere yet again, precisely because our enemies do not understand that what does not break us only makes us stronger.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Binny Freedman