

Naso 5778

BS"D Parashat Naso 5778

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The Torah as a Way of Life

The holiday of Shavuot, when we receive the Torah every year anew with great satisfaction and pride has now passed. However, in the first year when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai there is an apparent contradiction in the attitude of our ancestors' willingness to receive it.

On the one hand the Torah states (Shemot 24,7):

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Then he (Moshe) took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we shall obey."

Rashi explains that Moshe read the Book of Bereishiet and the three mitzvot that were given at the Mara encampment, to which the nation agreed wholeheartedly to accept.

However, the Gemara (Shabbat 88a) states that HaShem uprooted Mount Sinai and held it above the people saying, "If you accept the Torah now then all is well; however, if you refuse then here will be your burial place".

So, which is it. Did the Jews readily accept the Torah or did HaShem have to coerce our ancestors to do so?

We will return to this.

How can the Torah be a chok?

The Torah contains two types of mitzvot; mishpatim and chukim. Mishpatim are those laws which are conducive to human understanding and may be found in the law books of other nations. Chukim are beyond logic and are not to be found in any other society. For example, the laws dealing with tuma (ritual impurity) and, of course, the Red Heifer.

Parashat Bechukotai begins, “If you follow My chukim (laws. Vayikra 26:3) you will be blessed.

The use of the word bechukotai (My chukim) describing the Torah as a “Chok” is problematic, because the Torah consists of many laws that we can understand (mishpatim)?

I suggest:

When we, as individuals or as a nation, perform a single mitzvah or a number of mitzvot, such as avoiding usury or fulfilling the laws of interpersonal relations between neighbors, we reap blessings and a good life. Yet living according to the entirety of the Torah presents daunting challenges, as the Torah, itself, recognizes.

Regarding the Sabbatical year we read (Vayikra 25,20):

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“In the seventh year, you might ask, ‘What will we eat [in the seventh year]? We have not planted, nor have we harvested crops.”

In an agricultural society, such as existed in Biblical times, it seems impossible that an entire nation could stop working the fields for a year. In response HaShem says:

ANSWER

"I will direct My blessing to you in the sixth year, and the land will produce enough crops for three years" (verse 21).

HaShem makes clear that He knows that in those days an agricultural society could not survive while following the Sabbatical laws. So, He promises that He will intervene miraculously to make it possible.

The same applies to the thrice-yearly pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, as the Torah says (Shemot 34, 23-24):

Three times each year, all your males shall thus present themselves before HaShem the Master, Lord of Israel.

How can entire cities empty out all their inhabitants, when society contains thieves, and foreign enemies who could easily occupy our country? So, the following verse states:

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When I expel the other nations before you and extend your boundaries, no one will be envious of your land when you go to be seen in HaShem's presence three times each year (verse 24).

HaShem promises that He will guard the Jewish homes when everyone is in Jerusalem for the pilgrimages.

From here and other examples we see that the Torah in its entirety, as a political, religious and economic system transcends nature, and cannot succeed if HaShem does not intervene in the functioning of society. Therefore, the Torah in its entirety is indeed a chok; a way of life beyond human understanding.

No turning back

To return to the apparent contradiction regarding our receiving the Torah.

When Moshe read from the book of Bereishiet and the three mitzvot that were given to the Jews at the Mara encampment, as Rashi explains, the nation enthusiastically proclaimed וְאֶذְעָה וְאֶתְּנָה – – We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey". However, when the full gamut of mitzvoth were presented to them as well as its impossible implementation as a rational, practical national program, there were calls of regret. At that point HaShem uprooted Mount Sinai and held it above the people saying, "if you accept the Torah now then all is well, however if you refuse here will be your burial place".

The die was cast the moment they said וְאֶתְּנָה וְאֶתְּנָה – there was no way of return.

The Ultimate Chok

The Torah is not yet the law of the land in Medinat Yisrael, nevertheless HaShem intervenes in every aspect of our lives. In no natural way could the small population of 650,000 people in 1948 with no tanks, planes or heavy weapons have repelled five standing armies of surrounding Arab states if not for HaShem's intervention.

In 1967 we fought a coalition of Arab states backed by Russian advisors, including pilots and others, and increased the area of the State threefold in only six days. And without the help of HaShem in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the Syrian army could have easily walked into Haifa and the Egyptian army into Tel Aviv.

Our precarious security position in the midst of 22 Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa, as determined by HaShem in the Torah, is the very heart of the paternal relationship we have with our Father-in-Heaven.

As absurd as it is for a doctor to deny the godly miracle of the human body, or for an astrophysicist to deny the presence of a master intellect behind the trillions of heavenly bodies; it is ever more absurd and bizarre that a Jew could doubt that HaShem has brought about and sustains the Jewish State.

The ultimate CHOK which is beyond all human understanding is the day to day lives we lead in Eretz Yisrael, with our phenomenal success in all walks of life.

Why would any believing Jew want to live anywhere else except in HaShem's Holy Land?

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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