

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Matos

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Kaila bas Shmuel a"h

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Fire, Water, and the Afterlife

The concept of “*kashering*” (rendering utensils ritually fit) is a rather massive and complex body of ritual law. Some basic parameters are delineated in the Mishnah in Avodah Zarah (5:12):

אֵת שְׁדֵרְכּוֹ לְהַטְבִּיל, יִטְבִּיל. לְהַגְעִיל, יִגְעִיל. לְלַבֵּן בְּאוּר, לְלַבֵּן בְּאוּר.

“Those vessels which need only be immersed (i.e., they possess no inherent *kashrus* issues [for example, brand new utensils], but require immersion [like any utensils produced by a gentile]), need simply be immersed (in a *mikvah*); those vessels used with boiling water (e.g., to cook non-kosher food), must be boiled in water (to remove the absorbed non-kosher taste); those which had been fired up to white-hot temperatures (e.g., to roast non-kosher food), must be exposed to equivalent heat” (*translation based on Rashi [Avodah Zarah 75b]*).

In large part, these laws are derived from this week’s *parshah* (*Bamidbar 31:21-23*). What is noteworthy is the manner in which this section is introduced. The *passuk* states: “זֶה חֻקְתָּ הַתּוֹרָה” “The following is the law of the Torah...” (v. 21). The term חֻקָּה appeared earlier in Sefer Bamidbar (19:2) – at the beginning of the *parshah* bearing the same name (*Chukas*). There it was used to introduce the section of the *Parah Adumah* (red heifer), where Rashi explains its significance: The Torah aimed to stave off the potential scorn the Satan (and his agents amongst the nations) might hurl against a mitzvah whose rationale might seem unfathomable. It therefore characterized the law as a “*chok*,” intimating a Divine decree that must be faithfully adhered to regardless of one’s ability to comprehend its hidden meaning.

Kashering Souls

However, the employment of this term here may seem problematic. The arrangement works well in the instance of the *Parah Adumah*, which serves as the quintessential “*chok*”: its nature and particulars do appear to lay beyond the realm of human comprehension (e.g., it purifies those that are impure, while simultaneously defiling those who previously were ritually pure). Even the wise Shlomo Hamelech declared in reference to it: “I said I would understand – but it remained distant (from my grasp)” (*Koheles 7:23; cf. Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3*).

But *kashering* utensils is another matter. This body of law appears to have rational basis, based on the concept of “*k’bolo kach polto*” (according to the means of absorption will be the means of extraction). As seen from above, if non-Kosher taste was infused into a vessel through the process of boiling, this process is subsequently utilized to expel the absorbed matter. Seems logical enough; so why refer to it as an unfathomable “*chok*”?

It must be – contends the Chofetz Chaim – that the “*chok*” aspect of this section refers to another dimension reflected in these verses. “This is the *chok* of the Torah” alludes to Torah itself, the study of which contains an element resembling the *kashering* process, but which cannot be ascribed to natural means.

The Chofetz Chaim explains: Torah study can accomplish within a person what *kashering* effects in utensils. We find in Scripture the Torah being compared alternately to fire (“Are My words not like fire” [Yirmiyahu 23:29]) and to springs of water (“May your wellsprings spread outward” [Mishlei 5:16]). As such, Torah has the power to “*kasher*” the individual from the defilement that may have engulfed him from his sins. As a *mikvah* of water, immersion in Torah study can remove the impurity that he had brought upon his self (“Just as water enables the impure person to attain purity, so, too does Torah lift one from impurity to purity” [Sifri, Eikev, 12]). Even someone so steeped in iniquity that the impurity has permeated his very essence has recourse, just as intense heat can purge a vessel from every vestige of undesirable absorbed taste (*Likutei Halachos, vol. 1, Introduction*).

A Report from Over There

The following account has come down to us from the greats of previous generations (recorded by R’ Chaim Berlin, son of the Netziv, and appearing in the introduction to *Kochvei Or*). It provides a rare glimpse into the proceedings of the Heavenly Tribunal, and can perhaps be best understood in light of the Chofetz Chaim’s revelation about the purifying power of Torah.

R’ Yitzchok Blazer (“R’ Itzele Peterberger”) was a legendary figure, known for his piety, scholarship, and furtherance of the Mussar teachings of his spiritual mentor R’ Yisrael Salanter. In his humility, he left a will stating that no eulogies were to be delivered upon his passing.

When the time came, R’ Chaim Berlin was in a quandary; how could the passing of this spiritual giant go by without appropriate remarks? On the other hand, there was the matter of the will, of course. He decided that while no formal eulogy could be presented, the community must still display suitable grief over the enormity of the loss. While avoiding outright praise, he shared some Mussar thoughts geared to the occasion, bringing the assemblage to tears.

On the following Shabbos night, R’ Chaim received a nocturnal visitor: R’ Yitzchok appeared in a dream to thank him for adhering to the will. R’ Chaim used this rare opportunity to query this august figure. “What transpired with your judgment in That World?” he asked. In response, R’ Yitzchok related that he was not initially granted permission to visit with R’ Chaim; only with the arrival of Shabbos was he accorded a reprieve.

Not surprisingly, R’ Itzele divulged few further details about the World of Souls. He did, however, share the following sobering realities with R’ Chaim: “The judgment of the Next World is extremely severe, more so than any living person can imagine. *This is especially so regarding speech-related transgressions* (such as evil gossip).” (When R’ Elya Lopian would relate this story, his listeners were shaken to the core. From the depths of his heart he would proclaim: “The sins of speech are so terrible indeed!” [Yalkut Lekach Tov, parshas Metzora].)

R’ Itzele did add that Torah scholars, in particular, are accorded special angelic advocates for mercy; an idea in keeping with the abovementioned quality of Torah to purge from sin.

The Chofetz Chaim adds a caveat to this notion, focusing on one of the laws associated with the immersion in a *mikvah* to attain ritual purity. One agent for transmitting impurity is the *sheretz* (certain unclean crawling creatures), as contact with one necessitates ritual immersion. But one must first release the creature – by immersing with the *sheretz* in hand, obviously nothing is accomplished. Similarly, Torah study provides atonement; but one must first relinquish the *sheretz*! He must regret and rectify his misdeeds in order for the purification to take effect.