

Understanding our actions...

Chukat 5782/2022

When we think of the incredible leaders of the past few centuries; the Abraham Lincolns, the Martin Luther King Jrs, the Nelson Mandelas, the Sherryl Sandbergs, the Ruth Bader Ginsburgs, the Rav, the Rav Aharon, the Nechama Leibowitzs. Do you think that they fully comprehended the legacy that they would leave behind because of their actions?

Do you think that Abraham Lincoln knew that slavery in the USA would fully be eradicated more than a century on? Do you think that Martin Luther King Jr knew that segregation for Black America would have ended, and that the dream of a black child playing with a white child could be a reality? Do you think that Nelson Mandela would have known that he would inspire a world? Do you think that Sherryl Sandberg or Ruth Bader Ginsburg would have known that they would become a voice of modern day feminism? Do you think the Rav knew that he would be quoted around the world as a father of Modern Orthodoxy, or that Rav Aharon would have had talmidim spread across the four corners of the earth propagating his Torah? Do you think that Nechama Leibowitz knew that she would inspire thousands of women to engage with Torah, and become leaders of Torah text study?

Seldom do we realise the power of our actions. In fact oftentimes, we act on a whim, with no explanation, we blurt out a word, or dive deep into a situation, with no explanation. When asked why, we have no answer, just because. Oftentimes our actions are mere *chukim*, unexplainable actions, modes of speech, or even silence, yet they have the power to send ripples across space and time, changing the course of history, inspiring worlds, and defining our legacy.

This week's Parasha opens with the quintessential *chok*, the rule or statute with no explicit reasoning behind it¹. Basically, the reason why we have *chokim* according to Rashi, is so that God can say, I said this, you have no right to criticize. I am what I am, I will be what I will be, I will say what I will say, and ultimately you will do what I tell you to do². The Midrash on the verse tells us the awesomeness of Hashem's power, the absoluteness of it all³. Both Rashi and the Midrash explain this nature of *chokim* as the status of God – the authority that he has, the power, his limitlessness.

Perhaps this modality was inspired *yiras shamayim*, a fear of heaven in the world of the desert, but in the world of the selfie, when one's actions and statements are infinite and seemingly without repercussion, is this mode of God one relevant to the masses? Does this modality bring people closer to Hashem, or allow them to forget and slowly fade away? The Sefas Emes establishes a different reason for the idea of a *chok*, not to decree absoluteness, but rather to understand the power of one's words and actions⁴. For in that moment God made a statement, allowing an action that had seemingly little to do with purification, in fact the *halachot* of the *parah adumah* seem to be contradictory, yet they come and change a person in a metaphysical way.

So too our seemingly absentminded actions or conversations; our ability to take a stand, our ability to call out immorality, our ability to bring that person off a ledge, or create a moment of laughter, our ability to hug a child, our ability to engage an idea, our actions and words, have the ability to change lives and the world around us. We don't have to spend all day pondering about ways to solve refugee crises, or reuniting families, or creating an accepting and open society, or trying to solve mental health issues – sometimes we can just act, we can smile, laugh, extend a hand, share an embrace, be silent, be loud – our actions have incredible consequences, we just have to begin to understand them.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**