



BADERECH

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Paradoxical Sacrifices

When the beloved *tzadik* and Rav of Ramat haSharon, Rav Yaakov Edelstein, zt'l, was a talmid at Yeshivas Ponovezh, a group of students who did not have a strong background in Torah learning joined the yeshivah in the fledgling city of Bnei Brak. The Chazon Ish was aware of the happenings at the yeshivah and asked Rav Yaakov to prevail upon some of the other senior talmidim to dedicate time to learn with and strengthen the weaker, less experienced *bachurim*.

Rav Yaakov who was welcoming and generous with the new talmidim expressed his concerns to the Chazon Ish, and doubted that the most serious yeshivah students, those who were deeply engrossed in their learning, would be willing to sacrifice their time.

The Chazon Ish answered sternly: "If any

talmid resists giving of their time to strengthen a fellow student, ask them if they had put on tefillin that day, and if so, why do they not feel that putting on tefillin is a waste of time. After all, they could have been reviewing their Gemara learning then, as well."

Rav Edelstein remarked, "The Chazon Ish equated laying tefillin, a *mitzvah d'Oraysa*, a Biblical commandment, with sacrificing some of one's own learning time in order to strengthen a weaker student."

In the mid-Thirteenth Century, one of the many expressions of European Christian antisemitism was the "Trial of the Talmud", accusing it of 'heretical' statements and 'blasphemous' passages. In 1242, following this 'trial', also called the Disputation of Paris, King Louis the Ninth decreed that all copies of the Talmud must be burned. On Erev Shabbos, Parshas Chukas, twenty four wagonloads with an estimated 10,000 volumes of irreplaceable handwritten Torah manuscripts, including Gemara and Rishonim, were publicly set

ablaze. It was a staggering tragedy, especially considering that the printing press did not yet exist. Maharam of Rotenburg, zt'l, witnessed and described this horrific scene, which is detailed in the moving elegy of *Sha'ali Serufa baAish*, and incorporated into our Kinot recited on Tisha B'Av.

Gedolei Yisrael of the era searched for meaning and a message in that communal trauma. Many understood the experience in the context

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of that week's sedra — Parshas Chukas — correlating the burning of the Talmud to the verses of the *Parah Adumah*:

זאת חקת התורה אשר צוה ה' לאמר דבר אל־בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה

“This is the statute of the Torah which God commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the Children of Israel and have them take for you a perfect red heifer...’” (*Bamidbar*, 19:2)

Rashi explains that because Am Yisrael might doubt the purpose of the Parah Adumah, the Torah uses the term חֻקָּה, “statute”, a decree: אֵין לָךְ רְשׁוּת לְהַרְהֵר אַחֲרֶיהָ, “You have no right to question it.” The ashes of the Parah Adumah were to be sprinkled by the Kohein upon one who had become *tameh l'nefesh*, ritually impure, to remove that form of impurity. And yet, in the process, the Kohein would himself become ritually impure. This paradox makes the Parah Adumah the quintessential חֻק — *chok*, decree or mitzvah whose understanding is beyond all intellectual grasp and questioning. זאת חוקת התורה, “This is a decree of the Torah,” is translated by *Targum Onkelus* as דָּא גְזֵרַת אֲוֵרִיתָא, it is a *gezeira Oraisa*, “a Biblical decree”.

Some interpreted the Targum's translation as reference to the tragedy of the burning of the Talmud, as the phrase *gezeiras Oraysa* can also mean ‘a decree against the Torah’. Beyond deriving a message from the wording of the Targum, however, we should consider the connection between the Parah Adumah and the burning of the Talmud and commentaries:

Rashi frames the Parah Adumah atonement for the *cheit* of the *Egel haZahav*, the Golden Calf. He does this by way of a *mashal*, a parable: the child of a servant soils the king's palace. They say to the servant, ‘Let his mother come and clean up the mess!’ Similarly, let the Heifer, the mother, come and atone for the sin

of the Calf.”

At the *Cheit haEgel*, by forming an idol in the image of a calf, Klal Yisrael so-to-speak ‘replaced’ Hashem, the Cause and Source of all life. Yet, the *tikun* for this great *averah* is not accomplished through addressing the ‘calf’ directly, rather through addressing its source, its mother, the Parah. The Parah Adumah thus cleans up the childish mess of the Egel and reestablishes Hashem as the Source.

Perhaps the *tikun* for the trial and burning of the Talmud is not accomplished directly, through its study alone. Am Yisrael has never lacked serious students, engrossed in their studies. Perhaps the ‘source’ of the *gezeirah* is addressed when we consider the spiritual needs of others and strengthen them — even when it means sacrificing our own Torah study. In fact, the sacrifice of Torah study can paradoxically become its fulfilment: שְׂבִיטוּהָ, “For the nullification of Torah is its establishment.” (*Menachos*, 99b)

Ramchal adds that the sacrifice and burning of the Parah Adumah achieved *taharah*, purity, atonement and a process of restoration. Throughout our exile, since the destruction of the Beis haMikdash and with it the offering of the Parah Adumah, the Torah allows itself to be ‘burnt’, in a sense, for the sake of Klal Yisrael. The ‘sacrifice’ of Torah is now our *kapparah*, atonement, in place of the red heifer.

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את חוקת התורה, דא גזרת אונקטא.

This is the suprarational aspect of Torah: it is the decree against the Torah

The *Shibolei haLeket*, Rav Tzidkiyahu ben Avraham Anav, zt'l, cites a custom of fasting on Erev Shabbos of Parshas Chukas to stimulate atonement (this is also codified by the *Magen Avraham* commentary on *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chaim). While we may not be among those who have adopted this noble custom, we are called upon to reflect on the destruction of our Temple and the generations of suffering and negative decrees rooted in *sinas chinam*. We are called upon to create a tikun through *ahavas chinam* and increasing our dedication to others.

On this week of Parshas Chukas may we consider: if the Torah itself is 'willing' to sacrifice itself for the sake of the Jewish People, what we are willing to sacrifice for Torah? What are we willing to sacrifice for each other?

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