



# Rabbi Yisroel Moshe Guttentag

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3

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## Parshah

## NOT A MATTER OF CHOICE

Feedback from an audience during and after a shiur is a vital tool, and keeping on top of it allows you to tune in to some subtle messages.

Not long ago, a member of the audience approached me after a halachic shiur I had given. In a friendly way he expressed his disappointment with me asking me – “why the level of minutiae ... I expected better from you”?

I believe that in this case, the underlying point being conveyed was not a personal one, but rather one which underscores a general attitude to our *mitzvos*.

זאת חוקת התורה – this is the *chok* of the Torah.

The sweeping nature of the introduction to this *parsha* is pointed out by the *Ohr HaChayim*. Surely the title could have been more in tune with a *parsha* whose content revolves purely around the specifics of ritual purification – the *Ohr HaChayim* suggests ‘*Chukas HaTaharo*’ (the *chok* of purity) would have sufficed.

In resolution of this question, *Ohr HaChayim* explains that the underlying lesson of this *parsha* is relevant not just locally but indeed to the entire Torah.

None of the *mitzvos* are to be kept because we choose to; rather, the Torah, in its entirety is absolute.

Western society is comfortable with many elements of the Torah’s teachings. Social justice and kindness are highly valued. What makes our teachings different, however, is the myriad details we face when applying them. Of course, a worker must be paid back on time, but why is it important that he be paid before *Alois HaShachar*?

Although we have been educated to differentiate between *mitzvos* which are ‘*chukim*’, whose reasons are beyond us, and those which are ‘*mishpotim*’, whose basis are rational, in truth the lines are far more blurred. The attention to detail, in *mitzvos* which we feel ought to be clear-cut carries a message as to the true meaning behind these and all *mitzvos*.

*Mitzvos* – even those with a rational basis, are to be carried out not because we chose to but because we have been instructed to.

The *Sefer Shev Shmaatsa* finds this to be a recurring theme in many of the events of recent *parshiyos*. In his preface to his *sefer* which illuminates many of the most complex areas of *halocho*, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Cohen focuses on the theme of coercion to *Torah* and *Mitzvos*.

Having already said ‘*Naaseh VeNishma*’, was it necessary to test *Klal Yisroel*’s resolve?

The *Shma’atsa* explains that coercion to accept the Torah was a necessary means to ensure that the bond between the Jewish nation and the living and learning of Torah would be absolute and permanent.

The Jews in the *Midbar* had no choice but to keep *mitzvos*; even the food which they ate was conspiring as it coerced them to accept on themselves a life of Torah. Later, they complained קצרה נפשנו - it was too much for them “and our soul is disgusted”.

The *mon* may have tasted of the choicest delicacies – and the varieties were endless, but something inside them was unsatisfied. They were left with no natural cravings for worldly pleasures. Even this, however, was not reason

they later complained about – rather, as the *Shma’atsa* tells us, they complained of having no choice but to love Torah. They wanted to choose.

But leading this lifestyle was an investment, one which would lock them and the rest of the Jewish nation permanently into a life time of commitment and dedication. And the returns were to be an unbreakable connection with *HaKodosh Boruch Hu*.

It may have been a lesson which is relevant to the whole Torah, but it most certainly belongs in a *parsha* whose theme is *taharoh*. Unquestioning *shmiras hamitzvos* forms the basis of an unbreakable connection between the Jew and his Creator – this is the very source of our purity.

*Sfas Emes*, elucidating the words of the Midrash explains that it is in cleaving to the instruction and its Instructor in which we find our *taharoh*. It is the humility of loving obedience subsequent to the brash thoughtlessness of sin, which opens the doors to purity.

As we educate coming generations, we offer them unwavering commitment and loyalty to the *mitzvos* we have received and all their *dikdukei halocho* – minute halachic details. We serve as anchors for our children, tying them in with unshakable faith to a path which will guarantee them satisfaction in this world and eternity in the world to come. They won’t need to choose.

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