

Parashat Bechuchotai 5779, 2019:

*The Divine Light of Torah Study*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first three words of our *parasha* present a significant interpretative challenge. The phrase, “*Im bechuchotai taleichu,*” could readily be translated as: “If you will walk after (or follow) My *chukim.*” According to this approach, “*chukim*” refers to those commandments whose reasons remain unknown. This class of *mitzvot* is most often contrasted with *mishpatim*, commandments whose rationale can be logically deduced. The difference between these two categories is clearly presented in the following well-known Talmudic passage:

Our Rabbis taught: “You should perform my *mishpatim*” (*Sefer Vayikra* 18:4). These are matters that were they not actually written [by G-d] it is logical that they would have been. These are some examples: the prohibitions of idol worship, illicit sexual behavior, murder, stealing, and cursing Hashem. “... and you should guard my *chukim*” [Ibid.] These are matters wherein the Satan [Rashi, *yetzer harah*, the “evil inclination”] attempts to disprove their validity and veracity. These are some examples: the prohibitions of eating pig flesh, wearing garments comprised of a mixture of linen and wool threads, the act of relieving a brother-in-law of his obligation to marry his widowed sister-in-law (*chalitzah*), the ritual purification of the individual afflicted with *tzarat*, and the scapegoat rite [of Yom Kippur]. [Since you cannot understand them] perhaps you will say that they are completely worthless and devoid of meaning! Therefore the Torah states [ibid.]: “I am the L-rd your G-d.” I am He who has decreed it [i.e. the *chukim*] and you do not have permission to question them. (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma 67b*, translation, my own)

Rashi (1040-1105) takes a different approach, however, and does not translate *bechuchotai* as referring to *chukim* and the fulfillment of the Torah’s precepts even when their rationale is elusive.

Instead, he explains our term as a synonym for intense involvement in Torah study:

**If you follow My statutes** I might think that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However, when Scripture says, “and observe My commandments,” the fulfillment of the commandments is [already] stated. Therefore, what is the meaning of “If you follow My statutes [*chukim*]?” It means that you must toil in the study of Torah (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Vayikra* 26:3, this and all Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations)

Rashi’s deviation from our above-cited Talmudic passage is based upon *Midrash Torat Kohanim*

26:3:

“If you follow My statutes (*chukim*)” — I would have thought that this refers to the *mitzvot*. This, however, is the case when the Torah writes: “...and My *mitzvot* you will keep and perform them” — this is, indeed, referring to the *mitzvot*. [If so,] how do I fulfill “If you follow My statutes (*chukim*)?” — this refers to intense involvement in Torah study (*amolim ba’Torah*). (Translation and emphasis my own)

At first glance, it appears strange that the Midrash would interpret the word *chukim* in this manner.

The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, 1809-1879) notes, however, that our Sages explained the term in this manner on a number of occasions. By way of illustration:

Our Sages, however, explained the term “*chukim*” many times as referring to Torah study. This is noted in the *Midrashim*. [This explanation of our term] is based upon the numerous Torah laws and interpretations that result from the standard rules of exegesis and grammar, and upon the explanatory principles [such as Rabbi Yishmael’s 13 hermeneutic principles] that are as authoritative [literally “fixed”] as the statutes pertaining to the heavens and the earth [i.e., the Laws of Nature] that Hashem established in His world. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Vayikra* 26:3, subsection 2, translation my own)

In the Malbim’s estimation, this connotation of the term “*chukim*” is “based upon the standard rules of exegesis and grammar, and upon the explanatory principles.” Rashi’s interpretation of *chukim* as referring to intense involvement in Torah study is, therefore, congruent with the midrashic analysis of this term.

Based upon our passages from *Midrash Torat Kohanim*, Rashi and the Malbim, we are in a much better position to understand one of the key elements for rebuilding and strengthening our relationship with Hashem. May our dedication to depth-level Torah study send a glimmer of light

to penetrate the spiritual darkness that so often surrounds our souls, and envelopes our time. With the Almighty's help and our heartfelt desire, may each of us renew our commitment to the study of His holy Torah and thereby encounter Him anew, and relieve our finest moment at Mount Sinai.

*V'chane yihi ratzon. Shabbat Shalom*

**Dear Chevra,**

**A number of people have asked to dedicate one or more *drashot* in honor of a life-cycle *simcha*, *refuah shlaimah*, or in memory of a loved-one. In the future, these dedications will appear immediately following the *drasha*.**

**Dedication opportunities:**

**One Year Dedication (52 weeks): \$360**

**One Month Dedication (Four weeks): \$72**

**One Week Dedication: \$36**

**How To Dedicate:**

1. Send an email to [dedicatethisdrasha@gmail.com](mailto:dedicatethisdrasha@gmail.com) stating the following:

**The Hebrew, transliterated, or English name of the honoree, *choleh*, or person being memorialized**

**The desired timeframe for dedication (1 week, 1 month, or 1 year)**

2. Modes of Payment:

**PayPal Please use PayPal Name: [david.etengoff@yahoo.com](mailto:david.etengoff@yahoo.com)**

**Zelle (through the App or your bank's website) to (718) 490-0192**

**\*Please Note: Dedication information and payment must be received by Wednesday of the week prior to the Sunday of the *drasha*'s publication, in order to ensure inclusion.**

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.