



BEIT MIDRASH ZICHRON DOV TORONTO TORAH

PARASHAT CHUKAT

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DVAR TORAH CHUKAT RABBI NOAH SONENBERG, DEAN

Grappling with Mortality

The transition between the tumultuous events in the second year in the desert and the fortieth year is bridged by the chapter describing rituals surrounding purification following contact with a corpse. The key event of the missing thirty-eight years is the death of the generation that left Egypt. The way that we are instructed to ritually confront death is described by the term *chok*, a statute, generally understood as a law whose rationale is not readily understood (Bamidbar, 19:2). When death enters a home, all those who are in that home become impure (19:14). Encountering death is something that affects us, changes us and can't be ignored. Death and mortality are something that human beings have a hard time fully understanding and it's something that we grapple with both in terms of our own lives as well as the lives of those that we love.

The poet Dylan Thomas famously wrote:

*Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Death marks a clear end, and his approach seems to reflect a natural resistance to leave the world that we have become attached to. We see a very different approach to death later in our parasha when Aharon is told of his imminent death. He doesn't rage and plead; rather, he

silently and passively follows the instructions given by Hashem and gently dies at the time and place chosen by Him. Aharon was able to accept not only his own death but we also saw, earlier in the Torah, that when his children tragically died he was able to stoically accept their deaths as well (Vayikra, 10:3). What insight did Aharon have that allowed him to come to peace with his own mortality and the mortality of those that he loved that we can learn from to apply to our own lives?

He didn't rage and plead

When describing the death of his sons we see that Aharon is comforted by his brother Moshe, who says:

This is what Hashem spoke of, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified. (Vayikra, 10:3)

Whether we fully understand death or not, it is comforting to know that life has purpose and we can ask for no more than to fulfill our purpose with our lives. Sometimes, death itself can allow a person to fulfill their purpose and being given Divine insight to know that this was indeed what had happened brought Aharon

consolation. His children's lives had meaning and in their deaths they achieved an ultimate purpose.

When it comes to his own death, we are told that Aharon's son Elazar accompanies him.

And Moshe stripped Aharon of his garments, and put them upon Elazar his son; and Aharon died there on the top of the mountain... (Bamidbar, 20:28)

Aharon is being given the privilege of seeing his son picking up his mantle and assuming the role that Aharon himself inaugurated. He was able to see his death not as an end but rather as part of a chain where his legacy would be kept alive and transmitted to future generations. When we see ourselves as part of history and know that we fulfilled our role and that the values that we lived for continue in those that we have impacted, that can allow us to gently move on. As Rabbi Tarfon teaches us, "It is not your duty to finish the work" (Pirkei Avot, 2:16). If we feel that it is our responsibility to finish the work then it becomes difficult to let go, but when we know that we didn't neglect our duty and that we did put in the effort required of us, we can gently pass on the torch to the next generation to contribute their part in the tapestry of history.



Yirmiyahu 28

In Chapter 27 Hashem instructed Yirmiyahu to place a yoke upon his own neck. The yoke plays a prominent role in Chapter 28.

At the outset, the text says that this chapter took place “in the beginning” of King Tzidkiyahu’s reign, but it also says it was “in the fourth year” (28:1).

- Rashi says that in Tzidkiyahu’s fourth year on the throne Nevuchadnezzar gave him power over Amon, Moav, and other nations that had rebelled against Babylon. That was what “began” here.
- Radak suggests it was actually the fourth year of the shemita cycle. This is important because it shows that when the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed eleven years later, it was at the end of a shemita cycle, as punishment for not observing shemita.

A man named Chananiah ben Azor, claiming to be a prophet, stood in the Beit

HaMikdash and declared that Hashem was going to destroy the Babylonians in two years. He would restore the Beit HaMikdash vessels which Nevuchadnezzar had taken, and He would return King Yechoniah and the other exiled Jews to Israel. (28:2-4).

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 89a) explains that Chananiah heard Yirmiyahu predict, as recorded in Yirmiyahu 49:34, that Hashem was going to destroy Elam. He thought it logical that Hashem should destroy Babylon, which was far worse than Elam. But his message contradicted Yirmiyahu’s warnings that Hashem had empowered Nevuchadnezzar to conquer all of the local nations.

Yirmiyahu challenged Chananiah publicly. He declared, “Amen, I wish Hashem would do this!” And then he said that the people would know whose words were Divine when they came true. Chananiah then

seized the yoke from Yirmiyahu’s neck, and broke it. He declared this a symbol of the way Hashem would break Nevuchadnezzar’s yoke. Yirmiyahu left the Beit HaMikdash (28:5-11).

Hashem told Yirmiyahu to tell Chananiah that he had only broken a yoke of wood. Hashem then told Yirmiyahu to make a new, iron yoke, and to announce that Hashem was going to place an iron yoke upon the nations. All of them, and even the animals, would serve Nevuchadnezzar (28:12-14).

Yirmiyahu then told Chananiah that due to his lies, Hashem would remove him from the land; he would die that year. Indeed, Chananiah died that year, in the seventh month. [Commentators note that the seventh month is Tishrei, which is in the *next* year; they suggest that he died right before Rosh Hashanah, and was buried afterward.] (28:15-17)



Week 4: The Why and What

As we have seen, Rabbi Soloveitchik rejected the “genetic” approach that seeks to know why God commanded that which He did, that seeks causality, preferring cases where Rambam began with the commandments and then unpacked meaning from them. Then the question becomes one of “a descriptive nature: What is the religious act? What is its structure, context, and meaning?” (*Halakhic Mind*, 86). In the *Guide*, he says that “[i]nstead of describing, Maimonides explained; instead of reconstructing, he constructed” (92).

In the examples from *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam looks for hints implicit in the mitzvot, not causes, such as in the cases of shofar and mikva. A third example is taken from the *Guide*, namely Shabbat. Rambam writes that Shabbat means rest, but it symbolizes (or hints at) the act of creation (*Guide*, 3:43).

“What is the difference between a ‘cause’ and a ‘hint’? The distinction between them is the same as that between the methods of objectification and reconstruction. By establishing the cause, one objectifies the datum and subordinates it to a superior order.

However, by exploring the norms retrospectively through vectorial hints which point towards subjectivity, the religious act with its unique structure retains its full autonomy.” (93)

The language is complex, but the idea is as follows. Trying to determine why God commanded something implies that those reasons, rather than the commandments, are what are really important. However, by starting with the mitzvot and seeing what values can be extrapolated, the mitzvot maintain their independent value. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, this also allows for more meaning to emerge. Hence, in the case of Shabbat, he writes that had one focused on why Shabbat was commanded, it would have turned into something pragmatic, “the goal of Shabbat is hedonic ... the Sabbath idea is dispossessed of its breadth and warmth. The metaphysical sweep is checked and the religious ardor is cooled.” By taking the other model, we envisage “The Sabbath as the incarnation of the mystery of creation,” which “penetrates Infinity itself” (97). We begin with divine commands and can derive infinite meaning from them.



Swimming on Shabbat

Question: We are in the hot summer days, and we have a pool at the cottage. I am very tempted to swim on Shabbat - is swimming allowed on Shabbat?

Answer: The *Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata* [Chapter 14, Halacha 12], rules that swimming on Shabbat is forbidden, and he refers to *Shulchan Aruch* Orach Chaim 339:2. Surprisingly, those who look at *Shulchan Aruch* 339:2 will actually see a reason to permit swimming in a pool on Shabbat, because the *Shulchan Aruch* indeed says that it is forbidden to swim in an ocean or lake on Shabbat, but if one swims in a pool that has a rim around it, as all pools do nowadays, it would be allowed.

Despite this, the poskim wrote that swimming on Shabbat is forbidden for other reasons:

A. The *Igrot Moshe* [Even HaEzer 2:13] rules that swimming on Shabbat is forbidden because of the bathing suit, as it is ruled in *Shulchan Aruch* Orach Chaim 302:9 that

a garment should not be soaked with a lot of water because this is considered laundering on Shabbat, and there is also the concern that one might come to wring out the bathing suit. On the other hand, Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef in his book *Yalkut Yosef* [Shabbat, Siman 301] believes that there is no concern about wetting the bathing suit because the law brought in *Shulchan Aruch*, that one should not wet a garment, applies only to a garment that one does not want to get wet and therefore might come to wring it out on Shabbat, but with a bathing suit which is meant to get wet there is no concern that one would come to wring it out. However, in my humble opinion, there is room to argue with Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef's reasoning, as indeed, while in the pool there is no concern that one might come to wring out the suit because one is prepared for the suit to get wet, but once one leaves the pool, they do not want the suit to remain wet and therefore might come to wring it out.

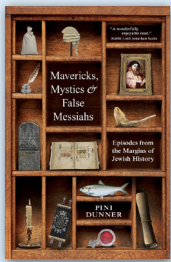
B. Another reason to forbid swimming on Shabbat is due to the words of the *Mishnah Berurah* 326:21, where he says that the custom among Ashkenazi Jews is to not enter the sea or a mikveh on Shabbat because one might come to wring out their hair. On the other hand, Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef says that this custom applies only to Ashkenazim but not to Sephardim, who follow the rulings of the *Shulchan Aruch*, which explicitly permits entering cold water on Shabbat (326:8).

Conclusion: According to Ashkenazi practice, there are several reasons to forbid swimming on Shabbat, while according to Sephardic practice, there is perhaps more room for leniency. Nevertheless, Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef rules practically, also citing his esteemed father, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, that one should not swim on Shabbat, as engaging in such an activity is not fitting for the holy day of Shabbat.

Have a halachic question? Share it with Rabbi Mann at ymanntorontorah.com.



Week 4: Lord George Gordon



Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs
By Rabbi Pini Dunner
Toby Press, 2018

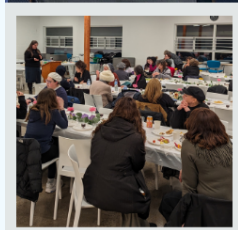
"Seven months later, in January 1788, the news broke that he had finally been located in Birmingham and arrested. Except that this wasn't the same Lord George Gordon of the House of Commons and the Gordon Riots. The person the police found in a shabby rented room in a grubby area of the city was a full-bearded Orthodox Jew, dressed in a Polish kaftan and black broad-brimmed hat, who proudly gave his name to the arresting officers as Yisrael bar Avraham. Lord George Gordon - aristocrat, socialite, and political activist - had converted to Judaism. At first he refused to accompany the arresting officers back to London, as it was a Saturday, which he insisted was his Sabbath, but a magistrate was hastily summoned to rule that he must be transported immediately. With no alternative, Gordon was hastily shipped off to London, but not before he had obtained a package of kosher food from

his Jewish landlady." (*Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs*, page 121)

In this chapter, Rabbi Dunner tells the history of Lord George Gordon, an 18th century Christian-born British politician. As Rabbi Dunner notes, Gordon is most remembered in history books for the "Gordon Riots" of 1780, during which rioters demanded a repeal of laws protecting Catholics in Britain (though he was the leader of the petition to repeal these laws, Gordon himself did not support the riots). For those interested in Jewish history, however, Gordon is most known for his surprising, and sincere, conversion to Judaism in 1787.

Rabbi Dunner gives us the backstory to Gordon's secret conversation and dedication to living a Torah observant life. Any student of British history or of Jewish history will find the story of Lord George Gordon educational and inspirational.

Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs can be purchased from Koren Publishers at tinyurl.com/KorenBMZD. Use the code TorontoTorah for a 10% discount on this or any other book on their website



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