

“Why Should I?” - BeHar/BeChukotai 2021 by Rabbi Rena H. Kieval

Have you ever been told: “Because, I said so!” We probably all heard those words as children, and we may have used them ourselves as parents or teachers. Why should you do something? Because I said so. Whether or not you understand the reason for it.

Parshat BeChukotai, the second of this week’s double *parsha*, speaks of observing God’s *chukim* – statutes. *Chukim*, according to longstanding Jewish tradition, are the rules for which there is no explanation, rules we do not understand. These are rules we are to follow “because God says so” – the reasoning behind them is not known. A prominent example of *chukim* are many of the rules of *kashrut*.

As modern people, we might bristle at the whole notion of *chukim*. We believe in science and logic, as citizens of a democratic society, we cherish our freedom. We expect to follow practices and obey orders that we *do* understand, that make sense to us. We might struggle with, or against, *chukim*, rules that we are to follow “because I said so.”

When the Torah asks us to do something we do not understand, it can affect our perception of God, and our relationship with God. We might experience God as commander, as authoritarian, distant. If we are to mindlessly follow the rules, we might perceive God as asking us to suspend our critical thinking, and our right to rational thought.

But our *parsha* offers a different approach, through a subtle but crucial use of language. When the Torah speaks of the rules which have no reasons, the Torah does not say “obey these *chukim*” or “follow them.” Rather, the Torah says: *walk* with them. *B’chukotai telechu* – walk with My ideas, with these guidelines. In other words, consider this way of life and move with it. Walk – live – within a particular framework. The idea of walking makes the *chukim* less about the minutiae of particular rules, and more about the overall path we travel. This dynamic image for a life of *mitzvot* begins in the Torah with Abraham, who is first called to walk, to go, with God – *lech lecha*. And Jewish law in Hebrew is appropriately called not law, but *halacha* – the way to walk.

The Torah commentator Kli Yakar deepens this walking idea still further, with a delightful play on the Hebrew word for leg – *regel*. The first step in this walking, he says, is to train our legs, literally, to take us to the performance of *mitzvot*. These steps then become *ragil* – regular in Hebrew – as *mitzvot* become second nature to us, part of our regular behavior. Just as physical exercise helps us cultivate muscle memory, our spiritual life grows through the habit of doing the right thing, and we develop *mitzvah* memory.

The Torah asks us to cultivate a habit to walk in God’s ways, to make a commitment to follow that path. We may not understand each signpost along the journey, but we may not need to. When we walk a path of commitment to *mitzvot*, God says in our parsha – then, I will be walking among you. *V’hithalachtu b’tochechem*. That will be a road worth traveling, and a walk worth taking. Shabbat Shalom