



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**Bringing life to life**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אבנא זאב בן פנחס זייל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Chukas

## *Bringing life to life*

Generally, regular celebrities have what is commonly known as “fifteen minutes of fame”—a few moments of publicity. If the celebrity is lucky, he or she will have a few years in the spotlight during which time everyone talks about him or her. But, sooner or later, he or she loses that magic and is cleared off the public stage for the next celebrity in line.

The story is told of a Jew who pulled into a little Jewish village in Poland one late Friday afternoon, very close to Shabbos candle-lighting time. However, he immediately began looking for a place to tie his horse over Shabbos. (This was obviously 200 years ago, before they had cars.) He asked a fellow Jew if he could help him find a place to tie up his horse. The Jew sighed and apologized, saying that he could not help him. So the man turned to another Jew and again got the same response.

Finally, one Jewish villager told the man: “Go to the rabbi—he’ll definitely be able to help you.” The man asked, “Why the rabbi?” The villager answered, “Because no matter what, the rabbi always manages to tie everything to the Torah portion of the week.”

It may be a funny joke, but it’s a depressing joke: The reason the rabbi has to tie everything to the Torah portion is because every year we read the same Torah portion.

In the world around us, the way it generally works is that a person will read a book once—and when he’s done, he’ll go on to another book. If he really liked the first book, then maybe he’ll read it a second time—but eventually, he’ll always move on to something new.

And in learning new things, the same rule applies. Let’s say you learn something new in school or college: You study it until you know it well, and then you progress and start a new subject, or a new class, or a new book. Maybe you even get one college degree and then start on a new degree. Regardless, the point is that you do not read the same book or study the same subject again and again—because it’s boring.

In other words, if your Second Grade teacher taught you the same things you learned in First Grade, the teacher would be retired.

In life, we are constantly trying to learn new things—as the saying goes, “You learn something new every day.”

Now, all that is true—except when it comes to reading the weekly Torah portion.

Every year, we read the same stories—and this week, we once again read the story that the majority of you here in shul have heard: G-d tells Moshe to speak to the rock so that the rock will produce water. However, instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe hits the rock, and therefore was punished by not being allowed to enter the Holy Land.

Every Hebrew School or cheder kid knows this story—and every year, when the Torah portion of Chukas comes along, we read this story again.

The story is told of a woman who came to shul one Shabbos and heard the story of the selling of Yosef being read from the Torah. Her heart broke out of great pity for poor Yosef, and she simply started sobbing. However, the next year, when they read the same story in shul, she showed no emotion.

So somebody turned to her and said, “Rebbetzin, do you have no pity on Yosef this year?” So she answered, “Listen: Last year, he went to visit his brothers and he got burned. Who asked him to go again?”

Now, we’re all familiar with the Shema, the most famous Jewish prayer.

In the first paragraph of Shema, we say: “And these words, which I command you *today*, shall be on your hearts.”

Now, what exactly is meant by “today?” Did G-d give us a command today? If He did, I didn’t hear it! I may be a rabbi, but I didn’t get any fax or e-mail from G-d today. Wasn’t this command given over 3,300 years ago? So what does “today” mean?

To answer this, Rashi says (Devarim 6:6): “It should not be to you like an old book that no one reviews but rather, like a new one that everyone runs to.”

In other words, Rashi is saying that a person needs to constantly feel that the Torah like the freshest headlines, which everyone is pulled to with great excitement. That’s how a person needs to feel—as if the Torah were given today.

This concept repeats itself in the second paragraph of the Shema.

On the verse, “And if it will be that you listen to My commandments which I command you *today*...”, Rashi repeats his previous comments in similar words: “They should be new to you, as if you heard them this very day”—meaning, a person needs to feel like today is the first time he’s hearing about the mitzvos.

But practically speaking, what does this mean?

The fact is, one may be an average American Jew, 50 years of age or so, and has read the Shema at least 50 times, if not 150 times, in his life—so what does it mean when it says you should feel like you’re hearing it for the first time?

In other words, imagine if a rabbi came along and said, “Today I’m going to repeat the same speech I gave last year—but I’d like you to feel it’s the first time you’re hearing it.” They’d stone the poor guy!

Clearly, that can’t be what the Torah means—especially since the Torah is the truth, and the Torah would not encourage people to play games.

So the answer to this question, my friends, is that each weekly Torah portion contains a special lesson that isn't found anywhere else. No matter how much you study the Torah, you learn something new every week—Jews who study the Torah each week clearly demonstrate learning new things that they never thought about until then.

Each week he uncovers new depths, whether in the general understanding of the story or in a specific verse, which he never knew of before—regardless of the fact that he studied the Torah portion each week until now.

This is how the Torah is “new” every day.

This is also why all of Judaism really revolves around the Torah portion of the week: the Midrash was written as a commentary on the portion of the week, the Zohar was written as a sort of commentary on the portion of the week, and all of Jewish continuity is built on the fact that all the great Jewish leaders throughout history studied the Torah portion of the week, week after week—and constantly found new pearls of wisdom that they had not discovered before.

We find the same concept with the Receiver of the Torah, meaning Moshe Rabbeinu.

At the end of the Torah portion of V'Zos HaBrachah, when the Torah describes Moshe Rabbeinu as being 120 years old and still healthy, it means that throughout his life, Moshe Rabbeinu stayed alive, robust, interesting and relevant. He was in his people's lives. He never lost his zest or energy. He always had that twinkle in his eye, the look of a man full of life. As a matter of fact, to this day, when you want to describe in modern Hebrew someone who has not lost that inner vitality, you use the very same phrase used by the Torah thousands of years ago: “*Lo nas leicho*”—“moisture did not leave his body.”

And we saw the same thing with the Rebbe.

The Rebbe never let Judaism become something old and boring. The Rebbe constantly came out with new campaigns. The Rebbe always had new ideas, whether putting tefillin on Jewish men on the streets, Lag B'Omer parades or other innovations. And before anybody even got tired of the first idea, the Rebbe would come out with a new idea.

Regardless of what it was, the mission was always the same: To never let Judaism become old.

And this, my friends, is the mission of every parent in his or her home: To come home every day with a new idea, a new game, or even a new craze—to ensure that, when it comes to your Jewish identity and your Jewish life, your house is constantly crackling with energy and life.

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