



## Parashat Chukat

The first section of Parashat Chukat presents the basic guidelines relevant to the halakhic status of *tum'at meit* – the spiritual "impurity" that results from contact with a corpse. Among the *halakhot* discussed is the law of *tum'at ohel*, which establishes that people and utensils under the same roof as a dead body contract the status of *tum'at meit*. The Torah (Bamidbar 19:14) introduces this law by stating, "*Zot ha-Torah adam ki yamut be-ohel*," which literally translates as, "This is the law [or 'procedure'] concerning a person who dies in a tent..." The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Shabbat (83b), cites Reish Lakish as offering a famous homiletic reading of this verse, whereby the word "Torah" refers to Torah study, rather than to a "law" or "procedure." Reish Lakish reads this verse as implying, "*Ein ha-Torah mitkayemet ela be-mi she-meimit atzmo aleha*" – "The Torah is sustained only within one who kills himself over it." The situation described of a person who "dies in a tent" may be taken as an allusion to the student who "kills himself" in the "tent" of the academy. The verse begins, "*Zot ha-Torah*" – "This is the Torah" – suggesting that this is only the possible means of acquiring Torah scholarship.

Maimonides cites this Talmudic passage in the third chapter of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, where he describes the required lifestyle of "One whose heart stirs him to fulfill this *mitzva* [of Torah study] to its fullest and be crowned with the crown of Torah" (3:6). He writes (3:12):

The words of Torah are not sustained within somebody who is slothful regarding them, nor in those who learn amidst delights and eating and drinking, but only within one who kills himself over them and constantly causes himself physical discomfort, and does not allow his eyes to sleep or his eyelids to slumber. The Sages said by way of allusion: "This is the Torah – a person who dies in a tent: Torah is sustained only within one who kills himself in the tents of the scholars."

According to Maimonides, when Reish Lakish speaks of somebody "killing himself" over Torah, he refers to denying oneself comfort and luxury. A person who wishes to truly "acquire the crown of Torah" must be prepared to subject himself to a degree of discomfort in the pursuit of mastery over the immense corpus of Torah knowledge.

The question has been raised as to how to reconcile these comments of Maimonides with the Mishna in the final chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (6:5). The Mishna there lists the forty-eight "things with which Torah is acquired," and includes in this list the condition of "*yishuv*." According to many commentators, *yishuv* refers to *yishuv ha-da'at*, or "a settled mind." Proper focus on one's studies requires peace of mind. A student who must constantly worry about his basic necessities cannot possibly exert the time and concentration needed to master such a large corpus of complex and intricate laws. How, then, can Maimonides demand that the serious student "kill himself" by "causing himself physical discomfort," to the point of depriving oneself of excess eating and drinking, and even sleep?

The answer, it would seem, is that to the contrary, Maimonides in this passage instructs the serious student how he can free his mind to properly concentrate on his studies. Quite simply, the student must lower his expectations of physical comfort; he

must afford secondary importance to luxury and enjoyment, and focus his ambition and energy exclusively on the acquisition of Torah knowledge. It is precisely through the sacrifice of comfort and luxury that a student can attain the desired level of *yishuv ha-da'at*, as he is able to feel content with limited comforts, and absolve himself of the pressure entailed in achieving higher standards of luxury.

It is clear from Maimonides' presentation in Hilkhhot Talmud Torah that this standard is not required of everybody. Earlier (1:8), he writes that every Jew is obliged merely to set aside some time during the day and night for the study of Torah. Still, the value of "killing oneself" over Torah learning is applicable even to those on this level. Commitment to Torah study on any level necessarily entails some degree of sacrifice. We are enjoined to take time away from all other pursuits – such as one's professional, recreational, and social pursuits – for the sake of Torah learning. Even though most of us do not "kill ourselves" in the sense described by Maimonides, we are all nevertheless included in this obligation to make sacrifices for Torah study, to deny ourselves a certain degree of luxury and enjoyment in order to make time for learning.