

Whose Rules Are Engraved in You

The Brown M and M Story and the Meaning of Chok on Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur Ladies Musaf Class

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Central question. We often resist a Torah requirement by saying, "Why should Hashem expect me to do something I do not understand?" Yet every society asks people to live by assumptions and customs they have never proved and often cannot explain. Yom Kippur places two sets of chukim before us and asks which set will become engraved within us.

Three Kinds of Mitzvos

Before asking which mitzvos challenge us, we need to define our terms. Torah mitzvos are commonly described in three broad categories: **mishpatim, eidos and chukim**. These categories describe how a mitzvah appears to the human mind; they do not measure how binding or important it is.

Mishpatim are laws whose moral logic we can substantially recognize: prohibitions against murder and theft, obligations of honesty, and the orderly administration of justice. Human reason might have reached many of them even without revelation. **Eidos** are testimonies or commemorative mitzvos. We might not have invented them ourselves, but once their meaning is revealed, we can understand what they testify to: matzah recalls Yetziyas Mitzrayim; Shabbos testifies to Creation; tefillin keep foundational truths before mind and heart. Eidos are important, but they are not our main subject today.

Chukim are Divine statutes whose full reason remains beyond us. We may find meanings and benefits within them, but no explanation exhausts them or makes their authority depend upon our agreement. The dietary laws and taharas hamishpachah are familiar examples. The Torah is not telling us to stop thinking. It is telling us that **our understanding is not the source of the mitzvah and is not the limit of the mitzvah**.

Chassidus adds a crucial qualification: at their root, even the mishpatim are Hashem's will. We do not refrain from stealing only because our society currently agrees that theft is wrong. If human fashion changes, the command does not. Reason can help us enter a mitzvah, but covenant is what holds us there. This will make the Torah's description of Yom Kippur especially striking: **why is the holiest day of the year repeatedly called a chok?**

Opening Question

Let me begin with a question. If you had to name three mitzvos that seriously affect the life of a Jewish woman and are difficult to understand, which three would you choose? I do not mean the parah adumah. It is the classic chok, but

none of us will go home tonight and struggle over how to prepare its ashes. I mean mitzvos that enter the kitchen, the marriage and the way a woman presents herself to the world.

I would suggest three: **covering one's hair after marriage, taharas hamishpachah, and the separation of meat and milk.** These mitzvos do not remain in a sefer. They ask something of a woman repeatedly. They affect her body, her home, her schedule, her appearance and sometimes her relationship with the people closest to her.

Strictly speaking, Chazal do not place every one of these in the same formal category. Hair covering, for example, is derived by the Gemara from the Torah's description of the sotah and is developed through the categories of das Moshe and das Yehudis. It is not normally listed beside parah adumah as the textbook example of a chok. But it can function as a **personal chok**: a binding Torah demand whose reason or precise boundaries a woman may not understand.

Three Chukim That Enter Daily Life

Hair Covering

A married woman may ask honest questions. Why does marriage change the status of her hair? Why should hair, of all things, carry this significance? Why should a practice associated with dignity and privacy require concealment? Explanations have been offered: the creation of a private marital space, the dignity of marriage, and the special power of a married woman's beauty. These ideas can be valuable. But they do not eliminate every question, and they are not substitutes for the halachic source.

For some women, hair covering becomes difficult precisely when the explanation no longer feels persuasive. At that moment the mitzvah asks a deeper question: **Was my commitment dependent upon my always understanding, or was it rooted in the fact that this is Hashem's Torah?** We should seek understanding, and we should never belittle a sincere question. Yet the mitzvah does not disappear while we search for an answer.

Taharas Hamishpachah

Taharas hamishpachah reaches even further into life. A natural physical cycle creates halachic distance between husband and wife. There are days of separation, careful procedures and immersion in a mikvah. Why should a biological process affect permitted touch between two people who love one another and are married to one another? Many profound explanations describe renewal, respect and the preservation of longing. But a couple does not keep these laws only because one particular explanation happens to resonate with them.

This mitzvah appears inside the very chapter read at Mincha on Yom Kippur. The Torah is telling us that holiness enters the most private rooms of life. **The body is not outside our relationship with Hashem.** Even where no other human being sees, a Jew lives before the One Who created body and soul.

Meat and Milk

The separation of meat and milk reshapes a Jewish kitchen. It requires separate dishes and utensils, attention to ingredients, waiting after meat, and constant awareness. Meat is permitted. Milk is permitted. Why should their mixture be forbidden? Beautiful explanations have been suggested, including the separation of life-giving milk from the death represented by meat. Nevertheless, the prohibition remains a classic example of a supra-rational Divine decree.

These three examples matter because each creates a moment when a person can say, "This seems excessive. Does this detail really matter?" That question brings us to an unlikely teacher: one of the loudest rock bands of the twentieth century.

The Brown M and M Clause

Van Halen was one of the defining American hard-rock bands of the late twentieth century. The original lineup featured the extraordinary guitarist Eddie Van Halen, his brother Alex Van Halen on drums, Michael Anthony on bass and the flamboyant lead singer David Lee Roth, known as "**Diamond Dave**." They were famous not only for their music but for the excess and wild behaviour associated with the rock-star world.

Their contracts with concert promoters were enormous. Buried in the many pages was one demand that became legendary: when the band entered its dressing room, there had to be a bowl of M&M candies with **absolutely no brown M&Ms**. The rider reportedly allowed the band to cancel at the promoter's expense if that requirement was ignored.

Imagine the reaction. Grown men are being paid handsomely to perform, yet somebody backstage must sort through a bowl of candy for them. Was this vanity? A childish power trip? A test of how completely they could humiliate local workers? It seemed to confirm every criticism of spoiled rock stars who believed ordinary rules did not apply to them.

Then came the story that appeared to prove the critics right. In 1980 Van Halen performed at the University of Southern Colorado in Pueblo, now Colorado State University Pueblo. Brown candies were found backstage. Reports spread that David Lee Roth had flown into a tantrum and caused approximately eighty-five thousand dollars in damage. The story was irresistible: **a millionaire rock star wrecked a building because one forbidden colour of candy appeared in his bowl.**

At first glance, the clause seems ridiculous, arrogant, wasteful and immature. But the part of the story that almost everyone left out changes its meaning entirely.

Van Halen's show was not four musicians arriving with a few instruments. It was an immense travelling production with complicated staging, hundreds of lights, enormous electrical demands, rigging, pyrotechnic effects and extraordinarily

heavy equipment. Many of the smaller venues receiving the band had never handled a production of that scale. Their technical rider specified stage dimensions and strength, voltage, security, loading access and the weight a floor had to support. A missed detail could cause an electrical fire, a structural collapse or serious injury.

And Pueblo? Roth later said that most of the famous damage figure was not the cost of a candy-fuelled tantrum. The venue had failed to account properly for the production's tremendous weight, and the staging damaged its relatively new basketball floor. He did acknowledge a much smaller amount of backstage destruction; the exact figures remain disputed. The band was hardly transformed into a model of perfect behaviour. But most of the damage did not begin in the dressing room. **It began beneath the stage.**

Only now do we reach the reason for the candy clause. The band needed a fast way to know whether the local promoter had actually read the entire rider. Roth therefore inserted one absurd, memorable instruction deep inside it. When he entered the dressing room, he looked at the candy bowl. If he saw a brown M&M, the crew immediately checked every technical requirement. The candy itself was harmless. **It was an alarm telling them that the contract might not have been read carefully.**

Alex Van Halen later made the same point. It was not an aversion to the colour brown. The brown M&Ms meant that the promoter had failed to follow even one conspicuous, easily checked detail. If that clause had been skipped, what had happened to the clauses about voltage, structural support and weight limits? **That is the reveal: what looked like the most ridiculous demand in the contract was the detail that told the band whether all the life-and-death demands had been taken seriously.**

The lesson is not that every unexplained rule is wise. Human beings can issue foolish instructions. The lesson is narrower and stronger: **an instruction can look arbitrary to the person who sees one clause while making perfect sense to the author who sees the entire system.**

The local promoter saw a piece of candy. The band saw the entire stage.

When we see separate dishes, covered hair or the calendar of taharas hamishpachah, we see one clause. Hashem sees the architecture of the Jewish soul, the Jewish home and the Jewish people.

What Chok Really Means

The Rambam teaches that a person should contemplate the laws of the Torah and understand as much as possible. Judaism does not celebrate ignorance. But the Rambam adds that when a person cannot find a reason, the mitzvah must not become light in her eyes. The honest response is not, "There is no reason." It is, "I do not yet see the reason."

The Maharal goes further. The mitzvos do not merely collect merit points or provide useful advice. They form the human being according to a Divine order. Human reason can perceive part of what a mitzvah accomplishes, but it cannot measure everything the mitzvah does to the body, soul and relationship with Hashem. **The Creator understands the person more fully than the person understands herself.**

Chassidus finds another meaning inside the word chok. Chok is related to **chakikah**, engraving. Ink is added to parchment and remains a second substance. Engraved letters are formed from the stone itself. The words and the stone become one.

A mitzvah I perform only because I agree with it may remain like ink placed upon me. It can disappear when my reasoning or feelings change. A chok reaches the deepest part of the soul. I do it because my bond with Hashem is part of who I am. **A chok is meant to become engraved within me.**

A Chok Is an Act of Trust

This brings us to the emotional centre of a chok. A chok is not the absence of a relationship. It is what becomes possible **because there is a relationship of trust**. There is a great difference between obeying a stranger who refuses to explain himself and listening to someone whose wisdom, concern and faithfulness one has come to know.

Imagine that a wife says to her husband, "Please do not make plans for Sunday afternoon. I cannot explain why yet. Please trust me." He presses her for a reason. She evades the question because their children are arranging a surprise birthday celebration for him. If she tells him the reason, the very purpose of the request will be destroyed. The husband can respond in two ways. He can say, "Unless the instruction makes sense to me, I will ignore it." Or he can say, "I do not understand the request, but I know my wife. If she is asking me this way, she must know something I do not know."

His trust is not irrational. It is not based on understanding Sunday afternoon; it is based on understanding his wife. **He does not know the reason for the request, but he knows the person making the request.** In the same way, the deepest answer to a chok is not, "I understand the command." It is, "I know the Commander."

We therefore do not begin our relationship with Hashem with chukim in a vacuum. We begin with creation, with Yetziyas Mitzrayim, with Torah, with generations of covenant and with the life He continually gives us. We search for the taam of a mitzvah and learn every explanation available to us. But when our understanding reaches its limit, the relationship does not reach its limit. **A chok asks whether I trust Hashem only when I can see what He sees, or precisely because He sees what I cannot.**

Yom Kippur Is Called a Chok

The connection to Yom Kippur is explicit. The morning Torah reading repeats three times that Yom Kippur is a **chukas olam**, an eternal statute.

וְהָיְתָה לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם

It shall be an eternal statute for you Vayikra 16 29

שַׁבַּת שְׁבֻתוֹן הִיא לָכֶם וְעֲנִיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם

It is a complete Sabbath for you and you shall afflict yourselves an eternal statute Vayikra 16 31

וְהָיְתָה זֹאת לָכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵם אֶחָת בַּשָּׁנָה

This shall be an eternal statute for you to atone for the Children of Israel from all their sins once each year Vayikra 16 34

At the centre of that reading stands the se'ir hamishtale'ach. Two apparently identical goats are placed before the Kohen Gadol. A lottery determines that one will be offered to Hashem and the other sent to Azazel. Yoma 67b identifies the se'ir hamishtale'ach as one of the mitzvos challenged by the Satan and the nations because its reason is hidden.

Now we can ask the larger question. Why should the holiest day of the year be called a chok? Judgment seems like a mishpat: actions have consequences, accounts must be faced and wrongs must be repaired. Yom Kippur also functions like an eid, testifying to Hashem's covenant and to the forgiveness that followed the sin of the Golden Calf. Yet when the Torah gives the day its repeated defining phrase, it calls it **chukas olam**.

Perhaps the answer is that judgment can be understood, but **kapparah cannot be demanded by human logic**. Logic can calculate a debt and insist that it be paid. It cannot explain how confession, teshuvah and the sanctity of one day can cleanse a person and restore a damaged relationship. The past is fixed; what was done cannot literally be undone. Yet Hashem created a path by which the past need not imprison the future.

The avodah itself presses us beyond reason: five forms of self-denial open the day of greatest spiritual life; two outwardly identical goats receive radically different destinies through a lottery; and a people carrying a year of failure emerges with the possibility of purity. These are not tricks that bypass responsibility. Teshuvah requires honesty, remorse, confession and change. But after a person has done what teshuvah demands, the cleansing itself remains a Divine gift.

Yom Kippur is therefore not holy **despite** being a chok. Its deepest holiness is revealed through chok. The day reaches the covenantal bond between Hashem and the Jewish soul that is deeper than calculation and deeper than failure. Because the bond is deeper than the damage, repair is possible even where reason says that some stains can never be removed.

Yom Kippur is Hashem's incomprehensible gift to us: we are not sentenced to remain forever who we were yesterday.

The Greatest Chok of All

Perhaps the greatest chok in the world is **teshuvah itself**. Think about what we are claiming. A person ate treif. She cannot uneat it. A person spoke words that destroyed another human being. She cannot pull the words back out of the air. In the most terrible case, a person took a life. No teshuvah can make the victim alive again. The deed entered history. How can regret, confession and a decision for the future change what the person has become?

We must be precise. Teshuvah does not pretend that the act never happened, cancel consequences or remove obligations toward another person. The Rambam teaches that sins against another human being are not forgiven until the wrong has been repaired and the injured person has been appeased. Where full repair is impossible, the tragedy remains. **The chok of teshuvah is not that Hashem calls evil good. It is that Hashem does not require the sinner to remain forever identical with the evil she committed.**

The Gemara in Yoma 86b makes an astonishing statement: teshuvah done from love can transform deliberate sins into merits. That cannot mean that the original act becomes virtuous. It means that Hashem can take the very fall that should have carried a person farther away and allow it to become the force that drives a deeper return. Human logic says that the past produces the future. Teshuvah says that, with Hashem, **the future can give the past a new spiritual direction.** We cannot fully explain how. That is the chok.

Why did Hashem create such a chok? Because He loves us and does not want guilt and failure to become our permanent address. He wants responsibility, repair and change, but He also wants His child back. Chassidus explains that a sin can damage the revealed relationship between a Jew and Hashem, but it cannot destroy the essential bond beneath it. Teshuvah reaches that deeper bond. **The damage is real, but the relationship is more real.**

The same idea appears in the eternity of the Jewish people. By every ordinary law of history, a small nation scattered among powerful empires should long ago have disappeared. Yet Hashem promises that even in the land of our enemies He will not reject us, destroy us or break His covenant with us:

וְאֵף גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיּוּתָם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא גָעַלְתִּים לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתָּם

Yet even while they are in the land of their enemies I will not reject them or destroy them and break My covenant with them Vayikra 26 44

The survival of Klal Yisrael is another chok: covenant is stronger than every historical calculation. And the two chukim are connected. The Jewish people can never be destroyed because Hashem's covenant with us is essential; a Jew can always return because that same covenant is deeper than the sin. **The eternity of the Jewish people on the national level becomes the possibility of teshuvah on the personal level.**

Now we can add the principle we discussed elsewhere: Hashem deals with us according to the measure we create. This does not mean that our obedience gives Hashem power, chas v'shalom. It means that middah keneged middah, our response creates the vessel through which His response can be revealed. If I insist

that I will serve Hashem only where everything makes sense to me, I am asking to live in a relationship governed only by calculation. But when I accept one of Hashem's chukim and say, "I do not understand, but I trust You," I make room for Hashem to answer me beyond calculation: "Your failure says one thing, but My covenant goes deeper. You can return."

That gives us the heart of the Yom Kippur acceptance: **we live with Hashem's chukim so that the chok of teshuvah can live within us.** We accept His will beyond our present understanding, and we ask Him to grant us His cleansing beyond what strict human understanding could ever demand. We do not earn the miracle of teshuvah by keeping one mitzvah. We open ourselves to the kind of relationship in which that miracle becomes possible.

The Rope in the Attic

A traditional mashal makes this visible. A wealthy merchant owned a magnificent crystal chandelier. It was so large and heavy that the dining-room ceiling could not support it by itself. A hole was made in the ceiling, and a strong rope was passed through the hole and secured to a beam in the attic. Downstairs everyone saw the chandelier's beauty. Upstairs one saw only an ordinary rope wound around a beam.

One day a poor boy came seeking old clothing. He was sent to the attic and gathered a bundle. Looking for a piece of string with which to tie it, he noticed the rope. It seemed far longer than necessary, so he took out a knife and cut off a small piece.

Crash. From the dining room came a terrible sound. The precious chandelier had fallen and shattered. The boy was bewildered. "Why is everyone so upset? I only cut a little piece of rope." The owner answered, "You saw only the rope in front of you. You did not see what it was holding up."

The boy was not malicious. He judged the rope by the small part he could see. That is the danger of dismissing a mitzvah because its purpose is hidden from us. **What looks like an unnecessary cord in one corner of life may be holding up the holiness of an entire home.** Hashem sees where every cord is fastened and what it supports.

The Chukim of the Surrounding World

A second question follows. We named three Torah requirements that women may struggle to understand. What are three chukim of the surrounding culture, ideas or customs that people accept because society has declared them normal?

We can begin lightly. Why do we invest January 1 with a special power of reinvention? Why is kissing under mistletoe considered romantic? Why do we place candles on a birthday cake, extinguish them and make a wish? These examples are not being presented as foolish or as halachically forbidden chukos hagoyim. They simply show that sophisticated modern people comfortably

participate in inherited conventions whose origins and meanings they have never investigated.

The deeper cultural chukim are far more serious because they define human identity and morality. I am not using the word chok here in precisely the same halachic sense. Hashem's chukim are Divine laws whose wisdom transcends us. Cultural chukim are human assumptions that become engraved through repetition. The comparison is not in their authority or truth; it is in the way people can accept them without continually reexamining their foundations. Here are three that deserve examination.

Before discussing the first example, we must be absolutely clear: a person experiencing gender dysphoria or identifying as transgender is a human being created in the image of God and must never be mocked, humiliated or mistreated. We are examining an idea about the meaning of the human body; we are not denying the dignity or pain of any human being.

First, inner identity is said to overrule the meaning of the body. One current example is the claim that a person's declared gender identity should supersede biological sex in language, institutions, sports and sex-specific spaces. This claim is often presented as self-evident compassion rather than as a philosophical proposition that can be questioned. Compassion for a person does not require accepting every theory about the human person. The Torah begins with a different premise: "Male and female He created them." The body is not an accidental container that the inner self may simply overrule. It is part of the Creator's statement about us. **We can protect a person's dignity without surrendering the Torah's categories.**

Second, consent is treated as the complete definition of sexual morality. This claim concerns who determines the boundaries of a relationship. Consent is indispensable; coercion is evil. But contemporary culture often treats mutual consent as the only meaningful boundary. The Mincha reading of Yom Kippur says that desire and consent do not by themselves create holiness. The chapter establishes relationships that remain forbidden even when adults desire them. Torah asks not only whether two people consent, but whether the relationship accords with the purpose and sanctity Hashem placed within sexuality.

Third, authentic desire is assumed to deserve expression. This claim concerns whether the intensity of a desire establishes its moral authority. We are repeatedly told that suppressing a deeply felt desire is unhealthy and that expressing the inner self is the path to freedom. Torah does not despise desire, but it refuses to worship it. Every serious moral life requires restraint. The question is which desires should direct us and which must be educated, elevated or refused.

These claims are cultural chukim because they often operate as starting assumptions. Anyone who questions them is asked to defend herself, while the assumptions themselves are rarely required to prove their authority. **Modern society has not abolished chukim. It has appointed new authors.**

No One Lives by Understanding Alone

Now we can answer the objection with which we began: "Hashem expects me to follow something I do not understand? That goes against human nature." But it does not. **Human beings constantly act on knowledge they do not personally possess.**

Suppose a doctor tells a patient that she needs a serious operation. The doctor explains the diagnosis, the purpose of the surgery, the risks and the alternatives. The patient should ask questions and, when appropriate, seek another opinion. Yet she cannot become a surgeon, an anesthesiologist and a medical researcher before deciding. At some point she says, "I understand enough to know that you understand more than I do, and I trust you." That is not the abandonment of reason. It is reason recognizing its own limits and choosing a trustworthy authority beyond them. The doctor is not infallible, and the analogy is not exact. The point is that responsible trust can rest on reasons even when we cannot personally master every reason behind the decision. Our trust in Hashem rests on creation, revelation, covenant and the history of His relationship with us.

Much of life rests on that kind of trust. We make consequential decisions without personally mastering every fact on which they depend. The troubling cultural examples make the same point in a darker way: people can absorb definitions of identity, freedom and morality that they have never seriously examined, simply because respected voices and institutions repeat them. They have not escaped chuk. They have placed their trust in human authors.

Therefore, the Torah is not asking us to develop an alien capacity. We already know how to act beyond the edge of our own understanding. **The choice is not between living by reason and living by chok, because no human being lives only by what she personally understands. The choice is whose judgment we will trust when our understanding ends: Hashem's, or the surrounding culture's.**

The Mincha Reading Answers the Question

The Torah reading at Mincha opens with a direct contrast.

וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תֵלֶכְךָ
You shall not follow their statutes Vayikra 18 3

אֵת מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשׂוּ וְאֵת חֻקֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ לְלַכֵּת בָּהֶם
You shall perform My judgments and observe My statutes to walk in them Vayikra 18 4

Rashi explains that the nations' chukim include social practices that have become **chakuk**, established and engraved for them. The chapter then lists the forbidden relationships, and its final verse warns:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת מִשְׁמְרָתִי לְבִלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת מַחֲקוֹת הַתּוֹעֵבֹת אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנֶיךָ
Keep My charge and do not perform any of the abhorrent practices that were carried on before you Vayikra 18 30

We should be precise. In the final verse, chukos hat'eivos refers to the forbidden practices listed in the chapter; it does not necessarily mean that their practitioners could offer no explanation for them. But the Torah's language teaches that a society can engrave destructive practices into its members until those practices feel normal and their alternatives feel incomprehensible.

The morning reading asks whether we will accept Hashem's chok. The afternoon reading warns that if Hashem's will is not engraved within us, another culture will do the engraving. **No one lives without chukim. The question is whose chukim will shape us.**

The Yom Kippur Acceptance

Each woman can identify one genuine Torah requirement she has treated like the brown M&M: a detail minimized because she does not understand it, it seems excessive, or the surrounding world considers it outdated.

The acceptance should be concrete and manageable, and it should be made **bli neder**. It may involve hair covering, an area of taharas hamishpachah that requires renewed care, a kashrus practice, a Shabbos boundary, a standard of tznius, or another halachah she already knows she should observe. This is not an invitation to invent a new stringency. It is an invitation to stop dismissing one authentic obligation while continuing to learn its meaning.

A useful personal formulation is:

The Torah detail I have treated as insignificant is

Even though I do not yet fully understand it I will begin

I accept this step bli neder

Closing

Let me conclude with a remarkable account published by Rabbi Chaim Mentz, the Chabad shaliach in Bel Air, California. In the summer of 2004, a couple named Andrew and Sharon asked him to officiate at their wedding, planned for December 5. During the preparations Sharon revealed that she had once been married to a Jewish man for only six hours. A civil court had annulled that marriage, and she understandably regarded the episode as finished.

Rabbi Mentz had to tell her that halachah did not regard it as finished. Before he could officiate, she needed to obtain a Jewish get. Sharon resisted reopening a painful chapter of her life, but she and Andrew ultimately agreed to follow the halachah. With the rabbi's help she obtained the get.

Then came another instruction they did not want to hear. In her circumstances, halachah required a waiting period of approximately three months before she could remarry. Their wedding, reservations and three-week honeymoon had already been arranged. They asked for explanations, and Rabbi Mentz tried to

give them. But the explanations did not make the disappointment disappear. They finally said, in effect, **"We want to begin our marriage in the right way before Hashem, even though we do not understand why He is delaying us."** They moved the wedding to January 23, 2005.

On December 26, the Indian Ocean tsunami struck. According to Rabbi Mentz's published account, Andrew and Sharon would have been spending those days at a hotel on Lankanfushi Island in the Maldives. The room they had reserved was among those swept away by the water. On January 1, instead of being in that room, they celebrated their deliverance with a special kiddush in the rabbi's shul.

We must tell this story with humility. We do not know why they were spared while so many others were not. We cannot promise that every mitzvah will be followed by a visible miracle, and we do not keep chukim as an insurance policy. Most of the time, no wave arrives to reveal what a mitzvah protected, and we may live our entire lives without receiving an explanation. Their faithfulness was complete before they knew the ending; the ending does not create the lesson, it merely allows us to see it. The power of the story lies in what happened **before** the wave arrived. They accepted the halachah when it still appeared to be nothing but an obstacle. Only later did they glimpse one thing that the delay had been holding up: their lives.

Now the three images come together. Van Halen saw an entire production where the promoter saw one brown candy. The owner saw a chandelier where the boy saw one expendable rope. Hashem sees the architecture of a life where we may see only an inconvenient detail. **The chok is not asking me to believe that there is no reason. It is asking whether I can trust the One Who knows the reason when I do not.**

On Yom Kippur morning, Hashem gives us a chukas olam: the incomprehensible gift of cleansing and beginning again. On Yom Kippur afternoon, He warns us not to exchange His chukim for the chukim of the surrounding world. Perhaps we can say: "Hashem, I may not understand what this mitzvah is protecting, forming or holding up. But I know Who gave it. This year, let one of Your mitzvos become engraved within me."

You give me the incomprehensible gift of another beginning. Let me answer with one act of trust, bli neder, that reaches beyond my present understanding.