



## Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Acharei Mot-Kedoshim. Cultural Differentiation – Chukat HaGoy

Our Parsha, or parshiot introduce a concept of cultural differentiation – Chukat HaGoy - between Israel and the nations that surround us.

This principle has been at the center of the many debates of Jewish law in over time, from whether Jews can adopt a doctor's uniform, to the practice of men wearing a Kippa, the celebration of a Bat-Mitzvah (which was seen as imitating Christian "Confirmation" ceremonies), Jews celebrating the New Year, or even the practice of placing of flowers on a grave. Even today, some Ultra-orthodox Jews insist on speaking Yiddish and wearing distinctive clothing partly as an expression of this law.



We shall examine the origin and nature of this law, and what are its parameters?

In our parsha, God warns Israel not to follow the practices of the nations amongst whom the nation of Israel reside:

"You shall not act in the practices (Heb. maaseh) of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, nor the practices (Heb. maaseh) of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you walk in their ordinances (Heb. chukot). My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws: I the Lord am your God." (Lev 18:3-4 and see also 20:23)

Rashi notes:

**nor shall you walk in their ordinances** — What has Scripture left unsaid when it spoke of the deeds of the Egyptians and Canaanites that it felt compelled to add **לא תלכו** but these words refer to their cultural practices, for instance, theatres and circuses. Rabbi Meir, however, said: These (**חוקתיהם**) refer to the "ways of the Amorites"; the idolatrous practices which our Rabbis have enumerated.

Rashi offers two interpretations:

1. “chukot” are the culture of the nations, like their lifestyle and leisure. Obviously, their religious practices are forbidden, but here the Torah commands Israel to exercise caution in copying even the conventions of other civilizations, cultural norms.
2. “chukot” refers to idolatrous practices; not to cultural norms.

This debate is represented in the Halakha as well. We turn first to the formulation of Maimonides, the Rambam (Mishne Torah. Laws of Idolatry 11:1):

“It is forbidden to follow the customs of the idolaters, or to imitate them neither in dress nor in hair-trimming and similar customs, for it is said: "And ye shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I cast out before you" (Lev. 20.23), and it states: "And in their customs shall ye not walk" (Ibid. 18.3), furthermore, it states: "Then take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them" (Deut. 12.30) ... an Israelite shall be separated from them, and be recognized by his clothes and in his conduct as he is different than they are in education and tendencies, as it says: "And have set you apart from the peoples, that ye should be Mine" (Lev. 20.26). ...He shall not build public places of the same design and architecture as are the palaces built for idolatry in order to attract a crowd as they do.”

So clothing, architecture, hairstyle, and all conduct should be distinctively Jewish. There is a sense of a desire to segregate to prevent cultural influence and exchange. The Shulchan Aruch, the code of Jewish Law, rules like Maimonides and quotes the lines quoted above. However, the Ashkenazic authority, the Rama, takes a more limited view:

All these restrictions apply only to things that gentiles do for the sake of sexual looseness. For example, ... clothing that is immodest... or the “ways of the Amorites,” that is, practices stained by the blemish of idolatry ...But norms that have a useful purpose—such as their custom for expert doctors to wear particular clothing so that the doctors will be recognized as specialists—one is permitted to wear [such clothing]. (Shulchan Arukh Yoreh Deah 178:1)

In other words, we have the same two views as we saw in Rashi.

Is the goal of this law to create an absolute cultural distinction between Jews and their gentile neighbours, thereby generating a clear social divide?

Or do these lines merely restrict cultural norms that border on idolatry, forbidden sexuality, in other words, areas which might have a Jew unknowingly infringe on areas that Jewish Law would forbid?

**Please Discuss:**

- Do you think it is important for Jews to be noticeably distinct from their non-Jewish surroundings?
- When the Torah introduces this concept, the Israelites are about to enter Canaan. They are confronting idolatrous and pagan cultural surroundings. For Western countries in 2020 is this law relevant?

- With which halakhic approach quoted above do you identify? - restricting specific problematic (idolatrous or sexual) behaviours, or alternatively, a broader desire to create a distinct cultural marker for the Jew?
- Today, with intermarriage rates over 60% in North America, do you think that Jews need barriers to separate them from wider society? Is Jewish law strong enough to resist assimilation?
- Is this law about intermarriage or is it about an erosion of Jewish norms and values?

Shabbat Shalom!