

Dvar Torah Outline — Parashat Chukat:

“זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל,” Mityat Atzmo, and the Body’s Refinement

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores the famous דרשה of Reish Lakish that Torah only endures in someone who “kills himself” over it, derived from the pasuk “זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל.” He addresses the tension between the pasuk’s פשט—death and טומאה in a literal tent—and the דרוש—life-giving devotion in the tent of Torah. Rabbi Shulman then reconciles an apparent contradiction in חז”ל about whether the human body can be purified in this world, arguing that intense immersion in Torah creates a temporary “Har Sinai” state where physical drives fall silent and the זוהמה is functionally suspended.

I. The pasuk and Reish Lakish’s דרשה: Torah is acquired through “death”

A. The pasuk in Parashat Chukat

- במדבר י”ט:י”ד: “זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל” (This is the Torah: when a person dies in a tent)
 - Rabbi Shulman notes the פשט context: death in a tent generates טומאה for everything under that roof.

B. The Gemara’s דרשה (Berachot 63b)

- Rabbi Shulman cites: אמר ריש לקיש מנין שאין דברי תורה מתקיימים אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה... שנאמר זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל
 - Torah is sustained only by someone who is “ממית עצמו” for Torah—interpreting “tent” as the tents of learning.

C. The initial discomfort: why does a “negative” peshat produce a “beautiful” drash?

- Rabbi Shulman frames the problem:
 - פשט speaks about טומאה, מיתה, and spiritual negativity.
 - דרוש speaks about חיות, becoming a vessel for דבר ה’ through Torah.
- Core question: If פשט and דרוש are meant to connect, **how can these two worlds align?**

II. A second contradiction in חז"ל: Can the body be refined in this world? (2:00)

A. Maharal's claim: post–Adam HaRishon, the body can't be fully purified until death/resurrection

- Rabbi Shulman cites the Maharal (Derech Chaim, ch. 3):
 - After the חטא of אדם הראשון there is a decree: the נשמה can no longer fully מזכך and elevate the גוף through mitzvot in this world.
 - The “only way forward” is תחיית המתים and מיתה.

B. The Gemara in Shabbat seems to say the opposite (Shabbat 146b)

- Rabbi Shulman brings the teaching:
 - The נחש “הטיל זוהמה” into חוה, extending to humanity.
 - Yet ישראל שעמדו על הר סיני פסקה זוהמתם—their זוהמה ceased.
 - חז"ל imply: without the חטא העגל, they would not have been subject to the same mortality.

C. The challenge

- Rabbi Shulman asks: **How can both be true?**
 - If purification of the body is only after תחיית המתים, how could זוהמה stop at הר סיני?
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III. Reading “כי ימות באהל” with new eyes: death as a vehicle to a higher life (4:02)

A. Reframing death: not only tragedy, but a gateway

- Rabbi Shulman suggests a deeper perspective:
 - While death is painful, it is also the “vehicle” that enables תחיית המתים, when body-spirit integration will reach its perfected form.
 - Only then can the גוף be truly transformed by the נשמה.

B. Introducing a “second vehicle”: a temporary, in-life workaround

- Rabbi Shulman proposes another pathway (not the full, permanent תיקון of תחיית המתים):
 - A person can reach a higher state through “ממית את עצמו על התורה.”

- In learning, one **nullifies personal רצונות** to Torah, becoming “like post-מיתה” in a תיקון-like state.
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IV. Torah immersion as standing at Har Sinai: suspending the body’s participation (5:32)

A. “As long as you’re learning”: a Har Sinai state

- Rabbi Shulman explains:
 - The חטא אדם הראשון–post גוף may not permanently refine the נשמה.
 - But while one is wholly immersed in Torah, it is akin to **standing at הר סיני**—a unique spiritual condition.

B. “מיתת הגוף”: bodily drives go quiet during genuine עמילות בתורה

- Rabbi Shulman describes what “ממית את עצמו” means experientially:
 - The drives of the body—**כבוד, קנאה, תאוות**, and the forces that “מוציא אדם מן העולם”—fall silent.
 - For that period, the גוף is “out of the equation,” not steering the person.

C. “פסקה זוהמת” revisited: not a permanent transformation, but a functional suspension

- Rabbi Shulman resolves the earlier contradiction:
 - At תחיית המתים, the תיקון is permanent: יצר הרע is embedded in the גוף at all.
 - At הר סיני (and analogously during deep Torah learning), the זוהמה “ceases” because the **body is not participating**, not because it has been permanently transformed.

D. Why the effect ends when learning ends

- Rabbi Shulman notes:
 - Once the connection is interrupted, the bodily layer reasserts itself—“as soon as you stop, it comes back.”
 - This also explains how the חטא העגל could “undo” the Sinai-level state.
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V. Returning to the pasuk: peshat and drash unite through the theme of “quieting the body” (7:00)

A. Peshat: literal death silences desire

- Rabbi Shulman ties it together:
 - When a person dies, the תאוות are finally quiet—there is no more bodily turbulence.

B. Drash: Torah learning can approximate that silence

- The “עומק” Rabbi Shulman emphasizes:
 - By being ממית את עצמו באוהלה של תורה, one can *taste* that transcendence during life.
 - The “tent” becomes a מקום where bodily noise recedes and דבר ה' can rest within a person.
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VI. Closing application: rebuilding what was broken on י"ז בתמוז through Torah (8:00)

- Rabbi Shulman concludes with a tefillah and communal aspiration:
 - שבעה עשר בתמוז marks a day when a vital connection was broken.
 - That connection should be restored through עמילות בתורה and מסירות נפש for Torah.
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In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman spotlights the pasuk “זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל” as the source for Reish Lakish’s teaching that Torah endures only through self-sacrificing devotion.
- He reconciles the “dark” peshat (death/tumah) with the “bright” drash by reframing death as the silencing of bodily drives—something Torah learning can partially replicate.
- He resolves an apparent contradiction between the Maharal (true גוף-refinement only after תחיית המתים) and the Gemara (Sinai ended זוהמה) by distinguishing **permanent transformation** from **temporary suspension** when the body is not participating.
- He ends by urging renewed עמילות בתורה as a path to restore what was spiritually broken.