

## D'var Torah: Chukat

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This week's parsha, Chukat, tells of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, two of our greatest ancestors. It tells of the Israelites' victory over three different kings who tried to destroy them. And it tells of a plague of fiery serpents that God sent to punish the Israelites for their impatience in the desert. Those are all important occurrences, to be sure. But it's the two iconic episodes that come before most of those things that are the most significant – and the most confusing.

First God tells the Israelites to slaughter and burn a cow. But not just any cow, specifically a heifer -- one that is young, female, has not yet given birth. It must also be free from blemish, and must never have been yoked. And the cow must be red. Along with the cow, the people must burn cedar, hyssop, and scarlet. The cow's blood is to be sprinkled by the priest, and its ashes gathered and mixed with water.

The parsha goes on to explain that anyone or anything that comes into contact with a dead body will become unclean, and must be sprinkled with the specially prepared water before it can become clean again. Paradoxically, those who sprinkle the water become temporarily unclean themselves.

While we're left to ponder the mystery of the red heifer, the parsha continues with another story. After Miriam died, the Torah tells us that there was no water for the Israelites and they became desperate. They demanded to know why Moses had led them out of Egypt, only to taken them to a place with nothing to eat or drink. Moses and Aaron fell before God, and God spoke to Moses, telling him to take his staff, stand with Aaron before the congregation, and speak to the rock to bring forth water.

Moses assembled the congregation, but instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it twice with his staff. The rock gushed water to satiate the people and their cattle, but Moses and Aaron learned that they would not enter the Promised Land with their people.

It seems bizarre that an extraordinary cow would have something to do with ritual cleanliness, or that an extraordinary punishment would result from such a seemingly petty offense. Indeed, these two stories are simply baffling.

I once asked the rabbi of my congregation in Roanoke, where I grew up, to explain the commandment to eat matzah on Pesach. Sure, the Israelites didn't have time for their bread to rise as they fled Egypt. But they also didn't have time to wash their clothes, and we don't refrain from that. It's true, my rabbi said, that we don't eat leavened bread because our ancestors left Egypt in great haste. "But the real

reason,” he explained in that rabbinical cadence they must teach at seminary, “The real reason we eat matzah is because... God commanded us to.”

The same is true of the red heifer. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was asked by his disciples to explain how water with a red heifer’s ashes could possibly purify the ritual uncleanness of death. He responded, “the dead does not defile, nor does the water cleanse. The truth is that the rite of the red heifer is the decree of God.” In other words, those who became unclean were not made clean again by the ashes – they were made clean again by God if the ashes were applied as God commanded.

On the surface, that’s what this parsha is about – obeying God’s commandments simply because they have been commanded. God said to prepare the ashes of the red heifer, so that’s what should be done. God told Moses to speak to the rock, not to hit it, so that’s what Moses should have done. And this isn’t a brilliant deduction on my part, given that the name of the parsha, Chukat, means “decree.” In biblical references, the word “chok” is used specifically to mean a commandment that we don’t understand or can’t explain. Perhaps the most common chukim followed today are the laws of kashrut. Although many people have noted the potential agricultural and health benefits of some of the dietary laws, that neither fully explains the laws nor is actually offered in the Torah as an explanation. The bottom line is that there is a list of foods we cannot eat, and we don’t really know why.

In a short story by author John Walter Putre, a priest says, “Our faith is what it claims to be – a thing to be believed. As long as we remember that, for those who choose to accept it, it remains an impregnable bulwark. But when we feel the need to prove our faith by imposing on it human logic, we employ a manmade tool that carries with it the pathway to a thousand human errors. Worse, when we then try to use that flawed concoction to account for the endless subtleties of the natural world, we multiply the chances of error by another thousand-fold.”

If religion were a product, it would often be a difficult sell. I’ll admit that as someone who generally tries to approach life through logic and reason, it’s hard for me to accept the notion of faith without explanation. My relationship with God, as perhaps all of ours, is still evolving. In the end, I think we generally come to faith through choice rather than convincing.

One thing I’ve always appreciated about Judaism is that our religion has a vital element of faith, but also a strong element of culture and tradition. Many Jews, and especially children, are drawn to the wonderful sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of holidays, family activities, social gatherings, and even prayers, before they fully understand their relationship with God. The non-faith elements of Judaism provide a comfortable and compelling foundation on which to stay involved in the Jewish community while exploring aspects of faith.

For many Jews, and indeed for many people in general, faith is a red heifer. It is something commanded by God or pressured by peers, with no real explanation and at times unclear benefits. Described on paper, it can seem downright crazy. Trying to figure out how or why it works can lead to further frustration.

Then why bother? Looking more closely at the text of today’s parsha, there’s a lot more going on here than a lesson about blindly following orders.

Let's return to the story of Moses. After God instructs him to speak to the rock, he and Aaron gather the impatient Israelites and Moses says, "Hear now, you rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?" After striking it twice, the rock gushes forth water. God then tells Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

It seems obvious that Moses' offense was not against the rock. We are taught to care for nature in many different ways, but igneous indignation is not generally considered to be a sin. A common response to the story is that Moses was punished because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded. While that chronology is accurate, the explanation implies that Moses was punished simply for disobeying God.

Remember, Moses said "are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?" Even if he didn't intend to take credit for the miracle, he should have known that his words might be interpreted by his audience that way. After all, Moses had a unique relationship both with the Israelites and with God. Moses wasn't just elected by the Israelite Tentowner's Association for brief stint as president. He had led his people for virtually his entire life, directly and indirectly. In the time leading up to the Exodus, and for every minute since, he was the Israelites' representative to God, to pharaohs and kings, and even to themselves. He carried with him an enormous burden of responsibility, both to ensure the welfare of the people and to keep them right with God.

We are told in the last verses of the Torah, "And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." God had given Moses great power, and as action-hero philosopher Stan Lee famously reminded us, with great power comes great responsibility.

Moses' sin was not that he struck a rock, or even that he disobeyed God. It was that he allowed the power he had been given to go to his head, and in so doing he misrepresented himself as the very source of that power.

When we consider faith, either in the specific case of the red heifer or as a general concept, we are reminded that although we have the power to decide what to believe, we are not the source of that power. Faith is humbling, and human beings have been chronically short on humility. Accepting the notion that we are not in complete control of our lives is not a concession – it is a recognition that we are only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

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There's another lesson in the stories of the red heifer and the rock – one about leadership. Moses is the epitomical leader, but we all take turns as leaders in the course of our personal and professional lives. Whether in the setting of our jobs, our families, our extra-curricular activities, or here at shul, we find ourselves in positions that may range from fleeting moments of responsibility to years of institutionalized power. As a supervisor, or a parent, or a board member, or even just a witness to a stranger in need, we have to decide what kind of leader to be.

One approach, of course, is to go around striking rocks. This is sometimes an effective way to demonstrate power, coerce compliance, or simply get attention. But it just as often results in a truism that represents one of the greatest lessons I have learned from interacting with people: You can be right, and still not get what you want.

Think about how this applies to everyday life. When you cross the street, your goal is to make it safely to the other side. The law gives us a detailed set of instructions about how cars and people should interact in this situation, and a pedestrian who follows these instructions should be able to expect that cars will comply. But knowing that you had the legal right of way is a hollow moral victory when contemplated from a hospital bed.

If someone owes you something and you know you're right, demanding their cooperation may just make them resentful and defensive. Even though you shouldn't have to, a gentler explanation of your position will often yield better results than striking a rock. What you really want is not to be right, it's to get what you are owed.

When we are in leadership positions, this lesson is especially important. Our goal should be the welfare of the people and institutions we serve. If that's the case, it is sometimes necessary to speak to rocks instead of striking them.

Moses was right – right in the sense that the Israelites had become insufferable and needed to get a grip. It wasn't fair that after leading them out of generations of bondage, he had to deal with their daily insurrection and complaints. It wasn't fair even that he found himself in a position with such high expectations on him from God above and the Israelites below. And yet, like it or not, that was the situation. What Moses wanted more than anything else was to make it to the Promised Land and lay down his burdens. Moses' choice at that moment was to be right, or to try to get what he wanted. His choice was to exercise his power, or to keep his eye on the prize. It's hard to blame him for losing his temper, but as a leader he should have known that taking the high road comes with the job.

Moses was no stranger to accepting responsibility. From his first encounter at the burning bush, Moses said "Here I am." In Moses' defense, he probably didn't know exactly what he was getting himself into at that point, but although he challenged God to explain his selection, he did not ultimately shy away from it.

If you are a leader, you have the responsibility to take the high road even when you believe you shouldn't have to. When you are the representative of a people, you must act as the best version of them. If you are angry, and even if you know you have every right to be, you must remember that a hasty exercise of power may bring you one step forward today and two steps backwards tomorrow.

As a leader, there are times when you will have to ask people to do something they don't understand. Sometimes this is because there is insufficient opportunity to explain it, and sometimes it's because legal or ethical constraints may prevent a complete explanation. At these times, when you have essentially given your constituents a red heifer, it will all come down your relationship with them. If you've gone around striking rocks – if you've gotten your way through intimidation, heavy-handedness, or coercion, you may find that people will not be willing to give you their blind faith.

If you want to be successful as a leader, you have to focus on the practical side of getting what you want instead of simply being right. This doesn't mean that you have to put aside what's important to you. You can compromise without capitulating. You can accommodate without abandoning your values. Very often, people simply want to be heard, and to feel that they've been heard. They want to understand why decisions have been made, and why actions have been taken. Spending a little extra time on these points, though they may seem like indulging impatience, usually pays off in the long run through buy-in from your stakeholders.

I probably haven't painted a very rosy picture of leadership. Indeed, it is often frustrating. But leadership is one of the greatest callings to which we can commit ourselves, because it's through leadership that each of us has the ability to help people do things they didn't believe were possible on their own. For Moses, that meant transforming the lives of an entire civilization. For those of you who are parents, it means shaping the lives of your children. For those involved in organizations, it means helping achieve missions and visions.

Here at Agudas Achim, we need more leaders. There are many good people doing their best to serve this congregation, but we need more help. Today is the last day of my term as Member Services Vice President, and I want to wish the best to the new board that begins service tomorrow. More than that, I ask all of you to help them. Over the last couple of years, our membership has steadily increased. In particular, we've welcomed many young families, and welcomed babies born to existing members. But as our congregation has grown, so have our needs. We need more of our members to step up and chip in, not just in terms of money – although that's important – but also in terms of time and talent.

There are all sorts of things you can do to help lead this congregation -- which has flourished for nearly 100 years – into its next great century. To our new board, I ask you to model the type of leadership that will make people want to join you as leaders. To all of you, I ask you to consider how you might be able to contribute in new ways.

None of us is Moses. None of us can navigate the wilderness alone. I don't know that any of us has received a direct call from God, either. But if you get a call from a committee chair asking you to help out with an event, please say "Here I am." If you see a problem with the way some part of our organization operates, please say "Here I am" with a proposal for a solution. If you can help make a minyan, please show up and say "Here I am." And if you see a burning bush on synagogue property, please call 911.

If it's your inclination to dismiss a person or thing that you perceive to be a red heifer, try a little faith instead. If it's your inclination to strike rocks, consider speaking instead. If we focus less on being right and more on each other, we'll all be more likely to achieve the things we want.

Shabbat shalom.