

Parshat Chukat/Balak
July 4th, 2020 / 13 Tammuz 5780
Temple Sinai

Case Study of the enigmatic *chok*: A study of the Red Heifer

Parashat Chukat opens with the ritual of the Red Heifer, a complicated purification process to purify a person who has come into contact with the dead.

Numbers 19:2

זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה יְהוָה לְאֹמֶר דְּבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחֻּ וְאֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה
תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל:

This is the ritual law that the LORD has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.

Sefer HaChinukh 397:1 The commandment of the Red Heifer - That Israel is commanded to burn the red heifer, so that its ashes are prepared for those that need it, and to purify those defiled by contact with a dead body... Even though my heart was filled to write the connotations of the reasons for the commandment that are foremost through the simple meaning, with this being successful in the work of educating my children and his youth friends to keep this mitzvah, my hands became weak, and I became afraid to open my mouth about it at all, even about the simple meaning, for I saw that our rabbis, their memory be a blessing, spoke at length in the depths of its secrets and the vastness of its points, to the point that they said that King Solomon understood, with all his vast wisdom, all the reasons for the mitzvot, except for this one, as he said about it, (Ecclesiastes 7:23) "I said, I will understand, and it was distant from me."

Rashi on Numbers 19:2:1 זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה THIS IS THE ORDINANCE OF THE LAW — Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, “What is this command and what reason is there for it”, on this account it (Scripture) uses the term *chukah*, חֻקָּה about it, implying: It is an enactment from before Me; you have no right to criticize it.

Midrash: Numbers Rabbah 19:8

שָׁאֵל עוֹבֵד כּוֹכָבִים אֶחָד אֶת רַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי, אֵלֶיךָ עוֹבְדֵי דָאֲתוֹן עֹבְדֵי נְרָאִין כְּמִין כְּשָׁפִים, אַתֶּם מְבִיאִים פָּרָה וְשׁוֹרְפִין אוֹתָהּ וְכוֹתְשִׁין אוֹתָהּ וְנוֹטְלִין אֶת אַפְרָה וְאֶחָד מִכֶּם מְטַמֵּא לְמֵת, מִזֵּין עָלָיו שְׁתֵּים וְשִׁלֵּשׁ טַפִּין וְאַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים לוֹ טְהוֹרֵת. אָמַר לוֹ לֹא נִכְנָסָה בְּךָ רוּחַ תְּזַזִּית מִיָּמֶיךָ, אָמַר לוֹ לֹא. רָאִיתָ אָדָם שֶׁנִּכְנָסָה בּוֹ רוּחַ תְּזַזִּית, אָמַר לוֹ הֵן, אָמַר לוֹ וְמָה אַתֶּם עוֹשִׂין לוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ מְבִיאִין עֶקְרִין וּמַעֲשִׂנִין תַּחְתָּיו וּמְרַבֵּצִים עָלֶיהָ מַיִם, וְהִיא בּוֹרַחַת. אָמַר לוֹ יִשְׁמְעוּ אֲזַנֶּיךָ מֶה שֶׁאַתָּה מוֹצִיא מִפִּיךָ, כִּךְ הָרוּחַ הַזֶּה, רוּחַ טַמְאָה, דְּכַתִּיב (זְכַרְיָה יג, ב): וְגַם אֶת הַנְּבִיאִים וְאֶת רוּחַ הַטַּמְאָה אֶעֱבִיר מִן הָאָרֶץ, מִזֵּין עָלָיו מִי נִדָּה וְהוּא בּוֹרַח. לְאַחַר שֶׁיֵּצֵא אֶמְרוּ לוֹ תִּלְמִידָיו, רַבֵּנוּ, לָזֶה דְּחִית בְּקִנְיָה, לָנוּ מָה אַתָּה אוֹמֵר, אָמַר לָהֶם חֲיִיכֶם, לֹא הַמֵּת מְטַמֵּא וְלֹא הַמַּיִם מְטַהְרִין, אֲלֹא אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא חֻקָּה חֻקְתִּי גִזְרָה גִזְרַתִּי אִי אַתָּה רִשְׁאֵי לַעֲבֹר עַל גִּזְרַתִּי, דְּכַתִּיב: זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה

A gentile asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, "These rituals you do, they seem like witchcraft! You bring a heifer, burn it, crush it up, and take its ashes. [If] one of you is impure by the dead [the highest type impurity], 2 or 3 drops are sprinkled on him, and you declare him pure?!" He said to him, "Has a restless spirit ever entered you?" He said to him, "No!" "Have you ever seen a man where a restless spirit entered him?" He said to him, "Yes!" [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai] said to him, "And what did you do for him?" He said to him, "We brought roots and made them smoke beneath him, and pour water and it flees."

He said to him, "Your ears should hear what leaves from your mouth! The same thing is true for this spirit, the spirit of impurity, as it is written, (Zachariah 13:2) "Even the prophets and the spirit of impurity will I remove from the land." They sprinkle upon him purifying waters, and it [the spirit of impurity] flees." After he left, our rabbi's students said, "You pushed him off with a reed. What will you say to us?" He said to them, "By your lives, a dead person doesn't make things impure, and the water doesn't make things pure. Rather, God said, 'I have engraved a rule, I have decreed a decree (*chukah chakakti, gezeira gazarti*), and you have no permission to transgress what I decreed, as it says "This is a *chok* (rule) of the Torah."

Questions for discussion

- What does this mean for other laws in the Torah that we find troubling or confusing?
- What are some other examples of these type of blind-faith commandments (*chukim*)?
- As Reform Jews, is there a value in accepting commandments without explanation? Does everything have to have purpose and meaning?

- Does death defile? Does death generate some impure spirit? Why do we need purification after we have touched the dead or resided in the same room as a corpse?
- What are some modern-day *minhagim* (customs) that come from this teaching and death defiling?

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 432 If we were henceforth to designate all “commandments pertaining to the relations between man and God” as *minhagim* or “folkways,” we would accomplish a twofold purpose. First, we would convey the thought that they should not be dealt with in a legalistic spirit, a spirit that often gives rise to quibbling and pettifogging. They should be dealt with as the very stuff of Jewish life, which should be experienced with spontaneity and joy, and which can be modified as circumstances require. Second, we would convey the implication that not only should as many “commandments” or folkways as possible be retained and developed, but that Jewish life should be stimulated to evolve new and additional folkways. Folkways are the social practices by which a people externalizes the reality of its collective being.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel In carrying out a sacred deed, we unseal the wells of faith...A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought [or faith]. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does. In carrying out the word of the Torah he is ushered into the presence of spiritual meaning. Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the hereness of God. Right living is a way to right thinking.

Rabbi Soloveitchik in his work, *Halakhic Man*, gives a fascinating perspective on this topic:

Judaism has a negative attitude toward death: a corpse defiles; a grave defiles; a person who has been defiled by a corpse is defiled for seven days and is forbidden to eat any sacred offerings or enter the Temple... Many religions view the phenomenon of death as a positive spectacle ... sanctify death and the grave because it is here that we find ourselves at the threshold of transcendence, at the portal of the world to come.

Death is seen as a window filled with light, open to an exalted, supernal realm.

Judaism, however, proclaims that coming into contact with the dead precipitates defilement. Judaism abhors death, organic decay, and dissolution. It bids one to choose life and sanctify it. Authentic Judaism as reflected in halakhic thought sees in death a terrifying contradiction to the whole of religious life. Death negates the entire magnificent experience of halakhic man... — when a person dies, he is freed from the commandments ...

The Halakhah is not at all concerned with a transcendent world. The world to come is a tranquil, quiet world that is wholly good, wholly everlasting, and wholly eternal, wherein a man will receive the reward for the commandments which he performed in this world. ... Halakhic man prefers the real world to a transcendent existence because here, in this world, man is given the opportunity to create, act, accomplish, while there, in the world to come, he is powerless to change anything at all. The task of the religious individual is bound up with the performance of commandments, and this performance is confined to this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exuberance and strength. ...

Holiness means the holiness of earthly, here-and-now life. Halakhic man ... longs to bring transcendence down into this valley of the shadow of death — i.e. into our world — and transform it into a land of the living... He wishes to purify this world, not to escape from it. ...His goal is not flight to another world that is wholly good, but rather bringing down that eternal world into the midst of our world.

See what many religions have done to this world on account of their yearning to break through the bounds of concrete reality and escape to the sphere of eternity. They have been so intoxicated by their dreams of an exalted supernal existence that they have failed to hear the cries of "them that dwell in houses of clay" (Job 4:19), the sighs of orphans, the groans of the destitute. Had they not desired to unite with infinity and to merge with transcendence, then they might have been able to do something to aid the widow and orphan, to save the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor. There is nothing so physically and spiritually destructive as diverting one's attention from this world. (Selections from Halakhic Man, pp 32-41)

To discuss:

- Is this the Judaism that you know?
- Do you think that the defiling nature of the dead drives home Judaism's "worldly" orientation?

- Recall that the Jewish people became a people in Egypt. The Egyptians were obsessed with death and the afterlife, but the Torah is silent about an afterlife, and it asserts that death defiles. Maybe Rav Soloveitchik is showing us how Judaism had to reorient itself to a more world-focused perspective.

Case Study of 2 Prophets: the Deaths of Miriam and Aaron

Miriam's Death (Numbers 20:1)

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הַעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֶן בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם:

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

Aaron's Death (Numbers 20:22-29)

וַיִּסְעוּ מִקִּדְשׁ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הַעֵדָה הַר הַהָרִי:

Setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַל־אַהֲרֹן בְּהַר הַהָרִי עַל־גְּבוּל אֶרֶץ־אֱדוֹם לֵאמֹר:

At Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

וַיֹּאסֶף אֶהְרֹן אֶל־עַמּוּיוֹ כִּי לֹא יָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר־מְרִיתֶם אֶת־פִּי לְמִי מֵרִיבָה:

“Let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have assigned to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah.

קַח אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנֹו וְהַעַל אֹתָם הַר הַהָרִי:

Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up on Mount Hor.

והִפֹּשֵׁט אֶת־אֶהָרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְהִלְבִּישָׁתֶם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וְאֶהָרֹן יֵאָסֵף וּמֵת שָׁם:

Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead.”

וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶל־הַר הָהָר לְעֵינֵי כָל־הָעֵדָה:

Moses did as the LORD had commanded. They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community.

וַיִּפְשֹׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אֶהָרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיַּלְבִּשׂ אֹתָם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וַיָּמָת אֶהָרֹן שָׁם בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיָּרֶד מֹשֶׁה וְאֶלְעָזָר מִן־הָהָר:

Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain,

(וַיֵּרְאוּ כָל־הָעֵדָה כִּי גָּעַ אֶהָרֹן וַיִּבְכּוּ אֶת־אֶהָרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל: o)

the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.

Questions to Ponder

- What are some differences in the two accounts besides the astonishing brevity of Miriam's death?
- The fateful striking of the rock immediately follows Miriam's death. What do you make of this juxtaposition?
- Look at v. 20:10 during the striking of the rock. The word for rebels מרים is used here uniquely, the only time used in this form in the whole *Tanach*. What other word shares this identical spelling? What can this tell us?

The Israelites and Edom: Why the Overreaction??!

- Read Numbers 20:14-21 (This story is repeated in the next chapter with Sihon, king of the Amorites)
 - Verse 14: Why does it say “your brother, Israel?”
 - Verse 15: Does one go up or down to Egypt?
 - Verse 16: Messenger or an Angel?
 - Verse 17: In a work as terse as the *Tanach*, this verse stands out for an exceptional amount of details. Why?
 - Verse 17: What do the field and vineyard stand for?
 - Verse 20: The text uses “*b’yad chazaka*” for “great and mighty force.” Where else have we seen this expression?
- The Israelites are adamant that they will stick to the path and not use any of the Edomite resources. Moses, the long-suffering, exhausted shepherd is requesting a simple neighborly courtesy? Why, then, the strong reaction in v. 20?
- Perhaps this is the reason why *Chukat* and *Balak* form a double portion. *Balak*, the only *parshah* told almost entirely from a non-Israelite perspective, illuminates what these nations saw or did not see that led them to respond with violence.
 - Read 22:5
 - Balak twice states that Israel “covered the eyes of the land.” Four times, Bilaam refers to himself as one with “open eyes.” Who was blind and who could see?