Sermon: Parshat Chukat
By Rabbi Rachel Simmons, 2022

Shabbat shalom!

I'm Rabbi Rachel Simmons, and this is my first official Shabbat morning sermon as your Associate Rabbi here at Har Shalom.

It is an incredible honor to be here. I've been looking forward to this moment for such a long time.

And, even though this is a beginning, and beginnings are wonderful, I also just wanted to let you know that this sermon will be about death.

Now, I want to promise you, this will not be a sermon ONLY about death. This will also be a sermon about hope, and tradition, and rest, and self-care. But I wanted to let you know that today we're going to dive right in at the deep end together.

That's because this week's *parsha*, Chukat, is all about loss, and death, and how we handle the aftermath of loss and death. It's a *parsha* about the laws, about the Chukim, that God wants us to follow after a death, and it starts right off the bat with what happens when a living person comes into contact with a dead person. Our Torah teaches (Numbers 11:19):

הַנֹּגֵעַ בְּמֵת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים׃

“Anyone touching the corpse of a human soul shall become טָמֵא for seven days.”

We often translate “טָמֵא” as “unclean”, or “impure”, words that have a negative connotation for us, but I don’t think that these words grasp the full meaning of the word, and perhaps the following details will explain why.

In *parashat* Chukat, our Torah describes an in-depth ritual called “the slaughter of a red heifer”, the special sacrifice of a cow with crimson hair that is then burned along with special additional ingredients including wool and hyssop. Even the handling of its ashes is outlined specifically. Our text teaches us:

“On the third and seventh days, the one who touched a dead body shall cleanse themselves with the ashes, so that they can become clean. But if they does not sprinkle themselves with the ashes on the third and seventh days, they shall not become clean. Whoever touches a dead body and does not cleanse himself, has defiled the *Mishkan* of the Lord.” (Numbers 11: 12-13)

That’s right: we are to cleanse ourselves by putting ashes on ourselves.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when I read about the ritual of the red heifer, it doesn’t feel particularly familiar or comfortable to me. It also doesn’t feel particularly “cleansing” to me. It feels ancient and holy, yes, but it doesn’t feel like it applies directly to ME, or to us-- in the sense that I’ve never seen anyone in this room, or heard of any of the rabbis I know

and love and respect, actually taking a red cow and slaughtering it and rubbing the ashes on themselves.

Yet I know that I, and those rabbis I love and respect, do indeed come into contact with the dead. Serving the dead and dying is some of the most important and holy work that we provide our community. Yet-- as far as I know, none of us have ever anointed ourselves with red heifer ashes.

And so, in order to both honor and connect with this ancient Jewish law, I think we have to go even deeper. We have to go beyond the specifics of the red heifer and the ashes, beyond the number of days the person is considered “unclean”, beyond the wool and the hyssop and the smoke. We have to go beyond all of that in order to be able to actually discern what is really being said in this law, and what the core values are that this law reflects.

You see, in the law of the red heifer, God does not tell us that it is **bad** to touch a dead person, or that touching the dead should be avoided. Not at all.

God does not tell us that coming in contact with death is horrible or a sin. No.

Instead, God tells us that engaging with a dead person, touching and cleaning and holding the hand of a dead person, is a sacred act, a holy act, one that requires intention and processing afterwards.

This story teaches us that when we handle a dead person, that contact should be done with care and purpose and dignity for ourselves and for the deceased, and that this care and purpose require us to take a step back from everyday life.

This law and this *parsha* name for us what so many of us in this room already know from painful and holy experience: that when we come into contact with death, it changes us. Forever.

In Judaism, we have the ritual of a *chevre kadisha*, a holy or separate group of people who have learned how to ritually clean the body of a Jewish person who has died. This process is both a physical one, a ritual of undressing, washing, drying, wrapping, and placing the person into a wood coffin. And, ultimately, the process is also a spiritual one, accompanied by prayers, song and chanting, silence, and--ultimately-- a request to the soul of the dead person to forgive us if we have inadvertently done them any disgrace as we prepared them for burial.

Speaking for myself, though, and my experience serving as part of a *chevre kadisha*, my role did not end with that request for forgiveness as the lid was placed on the coffin for the final time. My experience of the sacred ritual did not end when I walked out of the morgue or said goodbye to the others who served with me. No-- each time I have come into contact with a dead person, each time I have touched the skin no longer warm with potential and life-- it has changed me. And it SHOULD change me. Each

time I have come in contact with death, I have needed time to process, time to heal, time to internalize what I had witnessed.

There is not one single right way to grieve, one single right way to mourn, one single right way to honor the memories of those we have lost..

But our Torah, in its wisdom, teaches us that no matter how, it is absolutely necessary to give ourselves time to process and mourn when we come into contact with the death of a person, and to grieve them, to mourn them, and to honor them and the way their death has changed us.

In our tradition, time is sacred-- and when it comes to processing a death, time is definitely sacred. Taking time is holy. Taking time is important. Taking time is necessary, even if it may seem counterintuitive.

So far I've been talking about the death of a human being, and the way that such a loss changes us, remarkably.

What I've been sitting with this week, though, is the possible lessons that our story of the red heifer offers us on how to honor and move forward after OTHER types of losses, too, such as the loss of hope, the loss of a belief, the loss of a right, or the loss of an idea.

In some ways, the loss of a hope or idea is not the same thing as the loss of a person. There is something that happens when a loved one dies that is unlike any other experience, and I want to name that and honor that.

Yet. Just as, in *parashat* Chukat, when we are touched by the death of a person, it changes us-- so, too, the loss of a deeply held belief or, perhaps, a right we had taken for granted also changes us.

The loss of a hope we had held onto, that perhaps gave us strength.

The loss of an identity, or a central, guiding principle, that was part of who we were.

Just as the people who are central to our lives become the compass around which we turn, and the anchor that grounds us in a storm, so too our central values, beliefs, rights, and ideas live at the core of our being. And losing one of these values, losing one of these ideas, changes us.

And it should.

I would posit that the story of the red heifer teaches us that when we are touched by a death, whether of a person, or of a right, or of an opportunity, or of an idea, it is not only a good idea-- it is an opportunity for Jewish practice-- it is a holy opportunity-- to take some time away from the normal pace of life and to sit with our pain. To acknowledge that the loss is one that will affect us, going forward. To accept that we can't just move ahead with business as usual.

Now, I know that the people in this room, and listening online, don't agree about every single thing. And I'm thankful for that-- because life would be terribly dull if we were all carbon copies of one another. I didn't become a

rabbi because I wanted to convince all of you to agree with me, or vote like me, or attend every single protest that is dear to me. No.

One of the reasons I became a rabbi, though, is because I believe deeply in providing sacred accompaniment to every single person. I believe that each and every one of us deserves the space to mourn and to heal when we lose what is dear to us, no matter what that person or idea is. And I believe that when we are faced with any kind of death, be it of a loved one or of a deeply cherished idea, that it is a moment when sacred accompaniment is urgently needed.

I would be willing to bet that everyone listening to these words has felt the kind of loss that I am describing. Whether in the last few weeks, whether in the past few months, whether in the past few years-- I would be willing to bet that we have all felt what it is like to have the rug pulled out from under us, to lose something that we used to take for granted, to have our image of the future shaken from what it once was, to wake up in a community we saw with optimistic eyes and go to sleep in a community we struggled to identify with, in that moment. This is part of the nature of the beautiful thing that is being human and living in community with one another.

And unfortunately, it also just hurts.

I am your rabbi-- and that goes for all of you. I am here for you, if you are hurting. I encourage you to be there for each other, to reach out and simply offer presence, to share the space after a death. Before the problem-solving begins, before the fight continues, before life goes on-- I

would encourage you, when you feel the pain of a deep loss of any kind, to take stock of your heart. How are you? How are we? How did we get here? What did we take for granted? What will give us the strength to go on?

Perhaps, like with the red heifer, we will take seven days of holiness, seven days of separateness, to process. Perhaps, we will need much longer. Being patient with ourselves and with each other is one of the holiest gifts we can give, in moments like these.

Now. I promised you at the beginning of this sermon that this would not be a sermon only about death, and I intend to honor that promise.

Because sometimes, in moments of pain, we also get moments of clarity and beauty and wisdom. In one such moment, recently, where it felt like so many people I loved were in mourning for lost ideals, my teacher, Rabbi Adam Greenwald, wrote that “unlike with the death of an individual, the death of an idea is never permanent.”

And that gave me pause.

Because he was right! The death of an idea hurts us, and we do need to honor and mourn it, but at the back of our minds, as that still, small, voice, the idea lives on.

And over time, with nurturing, with work, with safety-- maybe that small voice will grow stronger. Maybe, eventually, it will rejoin the conversation. Maybe it will sing. Maybe it will yell. Maybe it will become a chorus!

The death of an idea is never permanent. What a concept-- survival as a thought! Survival as a yearning. Survival as a persistent voice, tapping into our deepest and most central values.

And where better do we see this survival than in our own tradition?

In our very *parsha* this week, we read of the death of Miriam, the death of Moses' sister, the singer, the outspoken woman, the arguer, the temporary outcast, the brave observer. Miriam!

And isn't it fantastic that even though Miriam the person died thousands of years ago, we still speak of her-- and sing of her--and invoke her-- to this day?

Isn't it fantastic that the words of *Mi Chamocha* bring to my mind a woman in twirling fabric, who even in a rush for her life in the dark of night from Egypt took with her her timbrel, believing that there would one day once again be a reason to celebrate??

Miriam died, but the idea of Miriam did not die. Her spirit, her music, what she represented-- as long as there are Jews, as long as there is Torah, Miriam lives on.

And so I say to you, with the strength and force of our tradition behind me, that no matter what idea or right seems lost to you in this moment-- no matter what hope seems gone-- there IS a way forward, and that idea WILL live on.

We need to learn the lesson of the red heifer. The ritual of the red heifer is gone, but its wisdom lives on. Miriam is gone, but the idea of Miriam lives on.

So. We need time to feel the loss,
Time to breathe,
Time to grieve.

And then, like Miriam, we need to pick up our timbrels, and raise our voices again, and return to the fight.

Shabbat shalom.