

Making Sense of Irrational Commandments, a.k.a., *Why Parashat Hukkat is Every Self-Respecting Texan's Favorite Parasha!*

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When we were living in Dallas, it was always around this time of year when we would take long drives across Texas—we would drive south through Waco and my favorite town, Temple, TX, to Austin where my kids still go to camp. We would drive to San Antonio to see the Alamo or the River Walk; there is also a fabulous kosher restaurant there. In fact this summer, after we pick up our kids from camp, we'll head down to the pristine beach at South Padre Island at the very tip of Texas. Now Texas is larger than most countries in the world, and those drives across the plains can get pretty monotonous. So you begin to become acquainted with the scenery over the years, and some of the unique features of that flat, scorched landscape...*Like the cattle*. Believe it or not, this kid from Cleveland was able to identify all kinds of cattle breeds you encounter munching on the vegetation along the Texas highways and interstates. I could tell you which were dairy cows and which were being bred for beef. I could identify the iconic Texas Longhorn, or the black, muscular Angus cattle. I could point out the big mammoth Beefmaster cows, or the unusual looking Brahman cattle brought over from India. And if you ask any self-respecting Texan, they'll tell you their favorite parasha in the whole Torah is Parashat Hukkat! This parasha that opens with the words: *Zot hukkat ha'Torah*...a phrase that occurs in only one other place, meaning this is THE law of the Torah, this is the classic example of a "hok." [More on that in a moment.] So what is this law? It is the law of the *parah adumah*, known as the red heifer...a perfectly red cow that is to be sacrificed on the altar and whose ashes are then mixed with water and sprinkled on a person who came into contact with a corpse. If you had contact with a dead body, you could not come into the sanctuary or participate in the sacrificial system until you went through this ritual cleansing. And no one could be ritually cleansed without the ashes of the red heifer. Now as an aside, soon after I moved to Texas there was all kinds of news about how a red heifer had been successfully bred by an evangelical Christian rancher in Texas. But just as the cow, who was named "*Ge'ulah*" (which means redemption) was set to be shipped off to Israel, two little white nose hairs were detected, rendering poor *Ge'ulah* unfit to be the authentic red heifer. Many people breathed a sigh of relief, as they worried that a real red heifer

could set off a movement to retake the Temple Mount [because now people would have the required purifying prerequisite], and potentially ignite a third world war!

The Torah calls this procedure of mixing the ashes of the red heifer and using them to effect ritual purity a *hok*...imprecisely translated as a statute. There are at least two categories of law in the Torah. A *hok*, or the plural: *hukkim* imply the kinds of laws that have no rational explanation. They are inexplicable, they have no moral component, they don't help society to become better, or have anything to do with social justice. They exist solely as an expression of our allegiance to God. We do these mitzvot without understanding their purpose, their rationale, or their meaning. This is in contrast to *mishpatim*: logical, commonsense, reasonable rules, which people might have figured out all on their own, even without the Torah. Let's face it, it doesn't take a religious genius to legislate against murder or stealing! The midrash¹ relates a story of an idolater, a heathen who challenged the great Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the leading sage of his time period, to explain the red heifer. The idolater accused Jews of practicing witchcraft, with all this ashen water sprinkling. Rabbi Yohanan calmly offered this idolater a rather logical explanation of the *parah adumah* ritual, and the idolater seemed satisfied and went off on his way. Then Rabbi Yohanan's students, having observed this back and forth, said to their teacher, 'Since when is there such a rational explanation for this *hok*?' To which he replied to them: 'There is no rational explanation! I was just trying to get that annoying idolater off my back! In fact there is no explanation at all! God commanded it, and we must observe it. Period. End of story.'

Now most of us aren't really satisfied by an explanation like Rabbi Yohanan's. We modern, 21st Century Jews like to have explanations for everything! While our ancestors at Sinai said *na'aseh ve'nishma*, we will obey everything now, and understanding what we're doing can come later; our generation demands explanations, elucidations, justifications, vindications, and clarifications before we'll accept anything. People who observe mitzvot that they don't fully understand are derided as simple minded, or blind followers, or worse, fundamentalists. Now I must tell you, this is not the first generation to wrestle with the meanings of the mitzvot...in fact there is a whole literature referred to as *ta'amei ha'mitzvot*, the endeavor to understand the meaning, the underpinning, the purpose of the mitzvot—especially the *hukkim*...especially the ones that seem

¹ Bamidbar Rabbah 19:8

the most inscrutable. Some, like Rashi, are interested in this as a way to defend the Jewish people against critics. In his commentary on the first verses of the parasha, Rashi worries that laws like the Red Heifer will only bring ridicule upon the Jewish people from the other nations of the world. ‘What kind of meshugenah people engages in crazy rituals like this?’ Others, like the Rambam, Maimonides, had a different take altogether. The Rambam, in distinction to Rabbi Yohanan and others who believed that *hukkim* really have no explanation at all, argued that EVERY mitzvah has a reason. The Rambam famously wrote in his Guide for the Perplexed, that *people* don’t make laws that have no purpose. When human beings create laws and statutes, they have reasons for them. They might not always be good reasons, but people don’t create laws just for the sake of creating laws...so why, argues the Rambam, would God do such a thing?! The Rambam claims that if you study with enough depth, if you immerse yourself sufficiently in Jewish life, the reasons even for the most enigmatic laws can become clear to you. The Rambam was a philosopher, a rationalist, perhaps even an Aristotelian. To suggest that some laws in the Torah exist only to test the allegiance of the Jewish people but for no other rational purpose was totally against his grain. In fact, in another Midrash² God does tell Moses the reason for the Red Heifer, but refuses to tell anyone else...suggesting again, that every mitzvah exists for some purpose, and has some eternal significance...even if it isn’t readily apparent to us.³

Now I want to share with you my own personal belief...in this debate between Rabbi Yohanan and the Rambam, I tend to side more with the Rambam. I do believe that mitzvot have an intrinsic purpose, and that sometimes the only way to understand that purpose is to do the mitzvah itself. By devoting yourself to that mitzvah you gradually come to understand what it means and why it exists. One of the most paradigmatic *hukkim* is kashrut, keeping kosher. I was recently asked whether cicadas are kosher—this was in anticipation of the plague that seems, God-willing, to have been averted. Cicadas alas are not kosher, but grasshoppers are. A goose is kosher but a pelican is not. Ocean pout is not kosher but ocean trout is. At first blush, kashrut seems to make no sense. Add to that the minutiae of pots, pans, and dishes, and it can seem completely incomprehensible. That’s the way I thought of it growing up...but once I started to keep kosher myself, the meaning and the symbolism and the significance of it began to make a great deal of sense to me. So too with Shabbat, which at one time in my life I viewed as a

² Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6

³ Rudavsky, T.M. Maimonides. Blackwell Great Minds, 2010. Pages 174-177

colossal world of hair splitting restrictions, and today I tell you with complete sincerity that I could not live without a 25-hour Shabbat and all of the ways it forces me to disconnect from the world. This debate about the red heifer ought to inspire us to consider the possibility that maybe, just maybe we could begin to understand the meaning of the mitzvot by just doing them. Maybe, just maybe God indeed has a reason for what seem to be incomprehensible guidelines for life. Maybe, just maybe if we commit ourselves to doing one additional mitzvah we might begin to sense its power and transformative effects in our lives. I would never suggest that we not pursue the study and inquiry of *ta'amei ha'mitzvot*, of trying to analyze and discover the underpinnings of the commandments. That is a meaningful, inspiring pursuit. But I also happen to know from personal experience, that some mitzvot can only be understood through practice and observance. That's what is so exciting about traditional Jewish life! Try out a mitzvah and experience its remarkable magic in your life.