

Parshat Chukkat- June 30, 2012- Tammuz 10, 5772

A Cow, a Well and a Rock written by Stuart Snow

Parshat Chukkat opens by describing one particular mitzvah- the Parah Adumah, or Red Heifer, which details the procedure for the slaughter of a cow without blemish and the ritual purification process involved for one who has come in contact with the dead.

It should be noted that there are three types of mitzvot presented in our Torah: din or judgments, mishpatim, or laws and chukkat, or statutes. The Parah Adumah is the archetypical standard for chukkat; those particular kind of mitzvot for which the rationale is beyond our comprehension.

Indeed, the Midrash pictures King Solomon, the wisest man in Torah, saying, “I have labored to understand the word of G-d and have understood it all, except for the ritual of the brown cow”.

This type of mitzvot serves as a paradigm of the nature of the entire Torah. For while HaShem gave us the power of intellect and reason as a means and method to know him and his ways, Hashem neither wants us to search for reasons nor to serve Him in response to specific rationale to which we can personally relate. Human failure to understand a truth does not make it any less true.

We serve Him because he has instructed us to do so; it is His decree. After all, faith is beyond understanding and comprehension; for faith represents the ability to grasp that which the intellect cannot. Our ancestors understood this when they proclaimed at the foot of Mt. Sinai, “Naaseh v’nishmah; we will do, then we will understand”.

In the commentary of Etz Chaim, we are told, “Israel of Ruzhin points out that this cow purifies the impure but renders the pure impure; G-d similarly purifies those who approach the sanctuary in a spirit of humility with knowledge of their own inadequacies, but condemns those who come in a spirit of arrogance and a claim to perfection. Perfect creatures belong in heaven; this world is given to the inevitably flawed and compromised”.

The Torah is filled with conundrums and contradictions such as these. Moses achieves his greatness by virtue of his humility. Our sages instruct us to say each day that while I am but dust and ashes, the world was created for me. It takes a red cow without blemish or defect to purify the impure, while those who administer the rights become impure themselves.

This Parsha also speaks about transition, as the seeds are being sown for the next generation to assume the mantle of leadership. First Miriam dies, then Aaron, and while Moses does not pass yet away, he is indeed given his death sentence by HaShem's vow that he will not enter the Promised Land because of the infraction of striking the rock instead of following G-d's command to speak to the rock after Mairam's Well ceases to exist when she does. What is the underlying message we are to take away from these events?

I believe that the message is one of faith and teshuva represented by a Cow, a Well and a Rock and how they are intertwined.

Whenever we come into contact with the "dead" or impurities of life that cause us to transgress, Judaism offers a pathway of return to righteousness. Sin in the Torah is an infraction of definable ethical-spiritual standards.

First must come the acknowledgement that indeed we have transgressed because of our action or behavior. Next comes the act of apology to the individual/s impacted by this action or behavior with true feelings of remorse, and lastly the promise to never engage in this type of behavior again. And yes, if another individual along the way acts as a vehicle for this process of recognition, remorse and redemption and becomes temporarily injured or impure in the process, then ultimately both will be elevated and transformed for the experience. None of this can be achieved however without faith in G-d, which brings us back to the underlying message of this week's Parsha.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When Miriam, a prophetess in her own right passes away, the well which miraculously followed the Israelites through the wilderness also ceased to exist. While open miracles such as this no longer happen in our day, it was part of the daily existence of the Exodus generation. Remember that in addition to the well, clothes did not wear out, food was

supplied every day, and G-d's presence was manifested by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Aaron was also a prophet as well as our first Kohen Gadol, or High Priest. G-d's presence was also manifested in the mishkan, or tabernacle, by fire coming down from heaven to "accept" the sacrifices offered by the Kohen Gadol.

As for Moshe, what do I need to say here? The entire Exodus event including the 10 plagues and the miracle at Yam Suf, the Red Sea, and all of the other miracles performed on our behalf during our 40 years of wandering, happened during his watch.

The people almost immediately start to complain about the lack of water when the well disappeared after Miriam's death. "Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord! And why have ye brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle"?

So what is Moshe's and Aaron's reaction to this? They fall on their face, or to speak in modern terms, they pray about it. "And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying, 'Take the rod and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink'.

"And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: "Hear now, ye rebels; are **WE** "(not G-d) but we, "to bring forth water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle."

Now, two underlying currents are going on here. The first is the peoples' fear and uncertainty caused by the beginning of the aforementioned transition evidenced by Miriam's death and the subsequent loss of the well. After all, one of G-d's open miracles ceased to exist along with their beloved prophetess who was also Moshe's sister.

Certainly we can all relate to this, for all human beings love their comfort factor and we get unbalanced when this equilibrium changes. We are nothing if not creatures of habit.

The second current is that Moses lets his anger overcome him by his flock's persistent and almost constant kvetching and denies HaShem the ability to perform the open miracle that would replace the one that existed previously, and thereby restore the peoples "comfort factor". Our sages compare anger to idolatry, for anger expresses a lack of faith in Hashem and his will. You may say, "Stuart I get it, but does the punishment fit the crime here? Did our greatest and most humble prophet deserve to be denied access to the Promised Land, certainly a fitting conclusion for a man so intertwined with this destiny?"

Our sages also tell us that the greater the level of the Tzaddik the more that G-d expects of them, and as such, the smallest blemish causes an unacceptable level of imperfection. To put this in terms we can all understand, as parents don't we have different expectation levels of our children and of others around us? If one child is an academic achiever and always gets A's and B's on their report card, while the other child is average and usually gets Cs on theirs, how do our own reactions differ when the first child comes home with a C and/or the second child comes home with a B? Similarly, if a co-worker is always punctual while another is always tardy, how would you respond when the punctual one is 15 minutes late versus the tardy one? Viewed in this light, we and certainly Moses understood why he received the sentence that he did.

When life throws us a curve, when we fall below the expectation level of others and/or ourselves, do we have the inner strength, fortitude and will that comes from our faith to meet these challenges and hopefully rise above them, elevating ourselves and those around us?

So in conclusion, you see, these three disparate stories of a Cow, a Well and a Rock representing faith and teshuva bring us full circle to understanding the lessons of this Parsha. Faith in G-d, and by extension faith in our fellow Jew, coupled with the understanding that when we fall short, there is a vehicle and pathway of return. Now, how's that for stabilizing and comforting one's equilibrium?

Shabbat Shalom