

In *Parashat Chukat*, Miriam dies, Aaron dies, the Israelites complain, Moses loses his temper, strikes the rock for water and thereby loses his right to enter the Holy Land. There are battles with various tribes from east of the Jordan and people die. There's a plague of deadly serpents and thousands more die until they apologize for their incessant complaining. God give Moses a staff with a brass serpent on top, and the suffering snake-bitten people look upon this object and are miraculously healed. All of these incidents are rich material for Torah study, but for now we will consider the opening of the *parasha* which discusses the most inexplicable of Mitzvot, that which even King Solomon couldn't comprehend, the *Parah Adumah* or Red Heifer.

Broadly speaking, a Mitzvah is either a *Chok* or a *Mishpat*. The *Mishpatim* seem to make sense; they are rational. Don't steal, don't kill. *Chukim*, on the other hand, do not seem to make sense. They are irrational like the laws of *Kashrut* or the laws of the Red Heifer. In Torah, there are many way a Jew can become impure. A significant and common way, as shown by the events in this *parasha*, is by coming into contact with the dead. That this causes one to go from a state of purity to impurity requiring some cleansing action is not really appreciated by most in our current way of life. We often think 'becoming impure' has something to do with dirt or germs or *kooties*, but it's not really about physical cleanliness. In many ancient cultures and even in many cultures that exist today, the need to maintain spiritual purity is essential for participation in communal life. In Judaism, it was especially important for the priests in the *Mishkan* and later in the Temple, and for the tribespeople who needed to bring the various sacrifices in their worship of God. If you were impure you couldn't engage in ritual life. You couldn't commune with the Divine.

So what to do? The Torah tells us: an unblemished red heifer which had never been put to work was to be slaughtered outside the camp. It was then burnt entirely from top to bottom. The priest would take cedarwood, hyssop, and crimson thread, and throw those into the mix. The priest who performed this rite would thereby become ritually impure until evening. Then another man, who was ritually pure, would gather the ashes and store them in a pure place for use when needed. He, too, would become impure until evening. This change in state from pure to impure when handling the agent of purification (red heifer ashes) seemed especially strange to our sages. The actual act of purification, also performed by the priest, involved mixing the ashes with well water and sprinkling them on the person needing to be cleansed.

A Midrash tells us that the great Rav Yochanan Ben Zakai, who lived during the time of the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, was approached once by a non-Jew who said something like: Rabbi, you Jews do things that appear to be sorcery. You burn a red heifer, take the ashes, mix them with water and when one of you comes into contact with a dead body, you sprinkle the mix on that guy and so that purifies him? Rav Yochanan asks the man – tell me have you ever seen someone in your community possessed by the spirit of madness? The man says sure, happens all the time... Rav Yochanan then asks, so what do your people do about it? And the man says, we burn special roots and smoke them under the possessed person, then we splash water on him until the spirit flees the body. Rav Yochanan replies – do your ears hear what your mouth is saying? A man defiled is like a man possessed. There is a spirit of impurity in him. We sprinkle the ash and the spirit flees.

Whether this guy is satisfied or not, we don't know, but what we do know is that Rav Yochanan's disciples who overheard the conversation were not satisfied. They said, Master, you brushed that guy's question off like it was a piece of straw. What answer can you give us regarding this strange commandment of the Red Heifer? Rav Yochanan replies: The truth is that the corpse does not defile, nor do the sprinkled ashes cleanse. The rite of the Red Heifer is a *chok* of God Almighty. The Holy one said I have set down a law, I have issued a decree and you are not permitted to transgress my decree.

So what does this mean? Rav Yochanan is telling his disciples to stop making sense. The truth is it's all about faith in God –we do it because it is God's will. The last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, points out that the words are *Zot Chukat HaTorah*, this is *The* decree of the Torah indicating that it is the foundation for the entire Torah. How so? He says, that even *mishpatim* can be *chok*-like in that they transcend logic, because they are expressions of God's will. The thing about *chukim* is that they are completely beyond our comprehension. However, the reason we follow any law of Torah should have nothing to do with whether it is rational or not. That is why this *chok* is the foundation of all Torah.

Another thing to consider: God gives us the will to choose between right and wrong. Following a law that is a *chok* is a true test of our free will. You tell me do not kill. Of course I won't kill – it makes no sense for me to kill. You say it's my choice? Maybe, but not really. It's an easy choice to make. I won't kill because there are too many good reasons for me not to kill, and I don't need God to tell me it's wrong. You're not really testing my freedom of choice here. But you tell me not to eat pig, not to eat shrimp. That's hard. Why not? It tastes good, it's healthy, at least as good and healthy as herring or chicken. It makes no sense that I shouldn't eat these foods. But if you tell me not to do it because God has commanded it, then this truly is a test of my so-called free will.

Of course there is another side to this idea that we should stop making sense when confronted with a *chok*. Even for the faithful. After all, how does a sage like the Rambam, who believed there was a rational basis behind everything in Torah respond to *chokim* such as the *Parah Adumah*? Rambam says there is a reason, it is simply beyond our reach for now. That doesn't mean we should stop looking for the rationale behind it. The reason is out there as alluded to in the Midrash attributed to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Rabbi Yosi B'Hanina: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'To you will I disclose the reason for the heifer, but to anybody else it is a statute (*hukkah*).'"

These different attitudes when confronting what cannot be explained are discussed here in the context of Torah and Religion, but I heard something similar at the World Science Festival recently held in New York City. There was a panel discussion on the “enduring conundrum of consciousness”. So what is a conundrum? One definition is “a confusing and difficult problem or question”. (Red Heifer, no?) On the panel was an entertaining but somewhat melancholy philosopher and three very happy and confident neuroscientists. The moderator asked the philosopher to open the discussion by defining consciousness and within 30 seconds he is discussing the mind-body problem. Are they two distinct things? Is mind a byproduct of brain? Are you a dualist or a materialist? He gives us various views from Descartes until the modern day and then he tells us what he thinks. He suggests that we may never know the answer to this difficult question because it is beyond our comprehension. That our primitive hominid brains have not evolved to the point where we can understand the relationship between mind and brain and perhaps they never will. Though we can ask the question, the answer is beyond our species' capability.

As soon as he was done, one of the neuroscientists nearly jumped out of his seat objecting that the philosopher has a defeatist attitude. He complains that these philosophers always ask questions but never seem to get the right answer. That 200 years ago they said we'd never know what the stars were made of but lo and behold today with the help of spectrometers we know what stardust is. To this scientist, anything we can ask has an answer that will one day be solved if we put our minds (brains?) to it. One thing you can be sure of he said, “no brain, never mind.”

My impulse was to jump to the defense of the philosopher, but then *I* started feeling melancholy. The man seemed neither humbled nor angered by the thought that his human brain may never be capable of knowing the answer. And once I realized that, I thought, where does that leave him? Living with profound questions and the derision of scientific know-it-alls? Rainer Maria Rilke said “learn to love the questions” but that was to a young poet not a worldly philosopher. Seems to me the dynamic is different

for the student of Torah who in her quest for answers always has her faith to fall back on. That perhaps one day the reason will be revealed, but even that is beside the point. More importantly there is the satisfaction in doing God's will. A choice he makes, a framework for living, irrational though it may seem. Ask yourself, can you make a choice like that or must you always have a reason? Does anything in today's world leave you feeling spiritually impure? What do you do about it? How do we reconstruct this ancient idea? Is there value in doing something that makes no sense?