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Parshat Chukat 5778

Embracing Radical Uncertainty

“Google ‘Rabbi David Hartman’, look up his lectures, read his books. I think you’ll like it.” This was the suggestion a friend of mine made to me when I was in college and struggling with reconciling some theological issues. We had just taken a literature class together called Encountering the Other, and I was panicked with how to reconcile the values of egalitarianism and individual liberty with some of the more parochial parts of the Torah. I feared that there were only two options for my religious life to continue — heresy or obscurantism. Thankfully, my friend’s suggestion led me to a third option. That of Chok, radical uncertainty.

Parshat Chukat opens with a description of the Parah Adumah ceremony. If someone becomes Tameh (ritually impure) through touching or being in the same room as a dead body they are forbidden from entering the Temple. The only way to become pure enough to enter the Temple was by having water mixed with ashes from a burnt Red Heifer, Parah Adumah, sprinkled on you by a kohen.

In Jewish tradition, Parah Adumah is considered the quintessential Chok, which is understood to mean “a mitzvah without a reason”. In Kohelet, Shlomo says “I said I would become wise, but it eludes me” (אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני). Rabbi Akiva in Gemara Yoma says that King Shlomo was referring to Parah Adumah with this verse. Parah Adumah was the one thing that Shlomo, considered the wisest man of all time, could not understand. And what specifically about the Parah Adumah did he not understand?

The fact that the same ashes that made an impure person pure also made the Kohen performing the service impure. It seems totally nonsensical.

If I may make a suggestion, through both the Parah Adumah’s message — that the impure person becomes pure and pure Kohen becomes impure — and its medium — being dubbed the quintessential “Chukat HaTorah” — the Mitzvah of Parah Adumah is coming to teach us something about the nature of uncertainty. The inherent contradiction, the nonsense, of the Mitzvah is its point.

I would never want to live in a world of certainty. A world of certainty seems boring. A world of uncertainty — a world of Chok — is a world of possibility. Because there is no pre-ordained outcome, anything remains possible, both good and bad. My teacher Rabbi David Hartman once said that: “To live is to be exposed to the negative possibilities of life, a great adventure, what are you going to decide to do? That’s my conception of Jewish History, Halacha, Mitzvah—the duty to acknowledge the challenge of now, exhaust the potential of the now.” Rabbi Hartman’s theology focuses not on proving and debating what was, but on living in a world where anything is possible now. It is up to us to craft a society that brings out the best of

possibilities. A world of uncertainty and possibility places the responsibility upon us to shape our own destinies. A theology of certainty — that there is An Answer to every question — removes responsibility from us and places it on God. God has responsibilities, but so do we. We are responsible for our own society, our own torah. Certainty can be paralyzing, spending all of our time trying to “find the answer,” petrified of being “wrong.” A world of uncertainty allows us to say, as Rabbi Hartman would put it, *ich weiss nisht*, maybe we’ll be wrong, but we still must act.

For a Kohen to take part in the Parah Adumah ceremony took literally lifetime of preparation. The mishnah teaches that the pregnant wives of Kohanim would go to a sealed off courtyard, known to be free from Tumah. They would give birth there and the boys were raised in total isolation, ensuring that they would never come into contact with tumah, with death. The ceremony must be done by someone who has never been Tameh in his lifetime.

I believe that the Kohen becomes Tameh while preparing the ashes of the heifer because he is encountering a new human reality for the first time. Death. The narrative of his previous life has been shattered as he is now faced with a whole new human reality. He doesn’t know how to respond amidst the uncertainty, thus he needs to step outside the camp to reevaluate. His task is to rejoin society having encountered this new human reality.

Since the kohen that performs the Parah Adumah becomes impure, it is physically impossible for every single Jew to be pure at the same time. We will always be living in a society where different people are living in different realities with different narratives. There will always be Chukat HaTorah, uncertainty, and the responsibility that comes therein. This is the lesson the young Kohen needs to learn — life is not certain; totally pure; siphoned off in some bubble. Life is full of uncertainty and a leader must take responsibility for their own choices.

What deeply resonates with me in this theology is that it relieves me from the duty of reconciliation and frees me to embrace uncertainty.

This theology is incredibly empowering, and, I would argue, deeply religious. I no longer feel threatened by the world because new ideas only add to that which is possible. I embody religious passion because I recognize that I am responsible for my own actions and decisions. And most of all, I’m ok with knowing that I might be wrong. There might be a reality out there that I have yet to encounter.

On my final shabbat here as Rabbinic Intern, if there is one idea that everyone here remembers me by, it’s “let’s be ok to take risks. To recognize our responsibilities to act.”

Each and every risk must be carefully weighed in terms of tradition and Halacha, for sure. But ultimately the responsibilities and the choices are our own. Whether that be in the realm of our communal partnerships during politically & societally tumultuous times. Or how we reckon with the very serious challenges facing our own internal community.

Our hands are never “thrown up in the air”. “My hands are tied” is never an acceptable answer. That theology implies absolutism, closes off possibilities. We must make decisions based on our possibilities, and own it, whether right or wrong.

This is what it means to live in a society of radical Chukat HaTorah, the Torah’s Mitzvah ethic that embraces uncertainty and endless possibilities. Chukat HaTorah means not spending our time engaging in endless philosophizing on blogs and social media about how to deal with “X issue,” but making a decision, acting, and embracing the fact that while we are not 100% certain what is right, we are doing our best because the Torah calls on us to act. The Jewish communities I aspire to are ones that live up to the responsibility of uncertainty.

Anshe Sholom is a community that truly embraces the diversity of the Lakeview Jewish community and acts on its values. This shul sets an example for the rest of the Jewish community of what it means to take responsibilities of Mitzvah seriously, acting on its values sometimes despite an unknown.

I am forever grateful for the opportunity to add my voice here. It is a bit surreal for me that this is the very same pulpit many great teachers have taught from, including my life’s Rebbe and religious role model, Rabbi Asher Lopatin, and a new rebbe of mine, Rabbi David Wolkenfeld.

And I want to publicly thank Rabbi Wolkenfeld, for all that he has taught me, for his time, for the opportunities he has afforded me this year, and most of all, for his trust. This community is blessed to have Rabbi Wolkenfeld as its shepherd.

I want to thank all of the people, too many to name, who opened their homes to me as an overnight guest or for shabbat meals.

And finally, I want to thank each of you for learning Torah with me. I hope we can continue to learn together for many years to come!

Shabbat Shalom