

The Parshah in a Nutshell

# Chukat

*Numbers 19:1-22:1*

Moses is taught the laws of the **Red Heifer**, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After **40 years** of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin.

**Miriam** dies and the people thirst for **water**. G-d tells Moses to speak to a **rock** and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and **strikes** the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

**Aaron** dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the High Priesthood by his son **Elazar**. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people "speak against G-d and Moses"; G-d tells Moses to place a **brass serpent** upon a high pole, and all who will gaze heavenward will be healed. The people sing a **song** in honor of the miraculous well that provided the water in the desert.

Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite kings **Sichon and Og** (who seek to prevent Israel's passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie **east of the Jordan**.



## Chukat

**Numbers 19:1-22:1**

The Parshah of Chukat ("the decree of") opens with the law of the Red

Heifer, which purifies a person from the *tumah* (ritual impurity) engendered by contact with death.

*And G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: This is the **chok of the Torah** which G-d has commanded.*

*Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring to you a red **heifer** without defect, in which there is no blemish, and upon which never came a yoke.*

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### Commentary

**chok of the Torah:** *This is the decree (chok) of the Torah... (Numbers 19:2)*

This phrase can be understood in two ways. On one level it means that *this*--the law of the Red Heifer--is the ultimate "decree", the most supra-rational of all the Torah's precepts. A deeper meaning is that all of Torah is, in essence, divine decree. It is only that with many of the mitzvot, the supra-rational divine will come "clothed" in garments of reason.

(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

In everything that G-d taught Moses, He would tell him both the manner of contamination and the manner of purification. When G-d came to the laws concerning one who comes in contact with a dead body, Moses said to Him: "Master of the universe! If one is thus contaminated, how may he be purified?" G-d did not answer him. At that moment, the face of Moses turned pale.

When G-d came to the section of the Red Heifer, He said to Moses: "This is its manner of purification." Said Moses to G-d: "Master of the universe! This is a purification?" Said G-d: "Moses, it is a *chok*, a decree that I have decreed, and no creature can fully comprehend My decrees." (Midrash Rabbah)

In reference to what did King Solomon say (Ecclesiastes 7:23), "I thought to be wise to it, but it is distant from me"? He said: All of the Torah's commandments I have comprehended. But the chapter of the Red Heifer, though I have examined it, questioned it and searched it out--I thought to be wise to it, but it is distant from me. (Midrash Rabbah)

**heifer:** *A red heifer (19:2)*

A maids child once dirtied the royal palace. Said the king: "Let his mother come and clean up her child's filth." By the same token, G-d says: "Let the Heifer atone for the deed of the Calf."

(Midrash Tanchuma)

*And you shall give her to Elazar the priest, that he may bring her outside the camp, and she shall be slaughtered before him.*

*And Elazar the priest shall take of her blood with his finger, and sprinkle of her blood towards the front of the Tent of Meeting seven times.*

The entire heifer--"her skin, her flesh, her blood, even her dung"--is burnt, together with a piece of cedar wood, and bundle of hyssop, and a scarlet thread. The ashes are then collected.

*This is the law: when a man dies in a **tent**, all that come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days...*

*They shall take for the impure person of the ashes of the burnt purification offering, and **living water** shall be put upon it in a vessel.*

*And a ritually pure person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon .... the impure person on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall... wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be pure at evening...*

*This shall be to you an **everlasting decree**.*

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### Commentary

**tent:** *This is the law (torah): When a man who dies in a tent... (19:14)*

Resh Lakish said: From where do we learn that words of Torah endure only in he who kills himself for it? Because it says, "This is the Torah: when a man dies in the tent..." (Talmud, Berachot 63b)

**living water:** Water from an ever-flowing spring. Fallacious springs which run dry even once in seven years are disqualified.

(Sifri; Talmud, Parah 8:9)

In other words, a spring which runs dry once in seven years is "fallacious" even when there is water flowing in it.

This is lesson in the meaning of truth: something which exists under certain circumstances but ceases under other is not "true", even when it does exist. (The Chassidic Masters)

And **he that sprinkles** the water of sprinkling... and he that touches the water of sprinkling shall be unclean until the evening...

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## Commentary

**everlasting decree:** *Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring to you a red heifer (19:2)*

Nine Red Heifers were prepared from the time that the Jewish people were commanded this mitzvah until the Second Temple was destroyed. The first was prepared by Moses, the second by Ezra, and another seven were prepared from Ezra until the Temple's destruction. The tenth Heifer will be prepared by Moshiach, may he speedily be revealed, Amen, may it so be the will of G-d. (Mishneh Torah)

The *Mishneh Torah* is a purely legal work. As he explains in his introduction, Maimonides included only the final rulings of Torah law, leaving out the reasoning and deliberations behind them, in order to make it a readily accessible guide to daily life for all. Also in those rare cases in which Maimonides appears to "digress" and interject a philosophical insight or some background information, upon closer examination these always prove to be a statement of law and a practical instruction on daily living.

The same is true of the above quoted passage. At first glance, it appears to be a brief piece of history concerning the Red Heifer, followed by a prayerful appeal to the Almighty to send Moshiach. But Maimonides is demonstrating to us the true definition of "belief in Moshiach." To believe in Moshiach is not just to believe that he will someday come, but to expect his coming on a daily, hourly, and momentary basis. It means that no matter what you are discussing, the subject turns to Moshiach at the slightest provocation. It means that in the midst of arranging the laws of the Red Heifer, a spontaneous plea erupts from the depths of your heart: "May he speedily be revealed, Amen, may it so be the will of G-d!" (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

**He that sprinkles:** *The clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean person... and he shall be clean at evening... [But] he that sprinkles the water of sprinkling... shall be unclean (19:19-21)*

All who are involved in the preparation of the Heifer from beginning to the end, become impure, but the Heifer itself purifies the impure! But G-d says: I have made a *chok*, decreed a decree, and you may not transgress My decrees. (Midrash Tanchuma)

The fact that the ashes of the Heifer "purify the contaminated and contaminate the pure" carries an important lesson to us in our daily lives: If your fellow has been infected by impurity and corruption, do not hesitate to get involved and do everything within your power to rehabilitate him. If you are concerned that you may become tainted by your contact with him, remember that the Torah commands the Kohen to purify his fellow Jew, even

## Waters of Strife

After **40 years** of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin. **Miriam** dies and is buried there; "and there was no water for the congregation."

The people complain to Moses and Aaron: "... Why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this

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## Commentary

though his own level of purity will be diminished in the process. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

**40 years:** *And the entire congregation arrived in the wilderness of Zin in the first month (20:1)*

The perfect congregation. For the generation decreed to die in the desert had already died out, and these were the ones who were destined to live [and enter the Land]. (Rashi)

All the events and prophecies which the Torah relates [pertaining to the time that the people of Israel were in the desert], are either of the first or of the fortieth year. (Ibn Ezra)

**Miriam:** *And Miriam died there... And there was no water for the congregation (20:1-2)*

Three great providers arose for the people of Israel--Moses, Aaron and Miriam--through whom they received three great gifts: the well, the clouds [of glory], and the manna. The well was in the merit of Miriam, the clouds in the merit of Aaron, and the manna in the merit of Moses.

When Miriam died, the well was removed, as it says, "And Miriam died there..." and, immediately afterward, "And there was no water for the congregation." The well then resumed in the merit of the other two.

When Aaron died, the clouds of glory were removed, as it says, "And the Canaanite, the King of Arad, heard ...and waged war on Israel." He heard that Aaron died, and thought that he now had license to attack Israel [because the clouds of glory which protected them were gone. The well and the clouds] then resumed in the merit of Moses alone. (Talmud, Taanit 9a)

evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; nor is there any **water** to drink."

G-d instructs Moses to "gather the congregation together, you and Aaron your brother; and you shall speak to the rock before their **eyes**, and it shall give forth its water."

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## Commentary

**water:** *And Miriam died there... And there was no water for the congregation (20:1-2)*

A person may ingest the ingredients of life, but these will not vitalize him without the fluids that course through his body. The food swallowed by the stomach, the oxygen drawn in by the lungs, must now be transported through the body's canals and made to saturate its every cell.

Therein lies the spiritual significance of Miriam's role as Israel's provider of "water". Miriam first appears in the Torah (see Midrashim and commentaries on Exodus 1:15) as a child's nurse: one who distills adult food for the consumption of a child; one who trains and educates a growing human being, filtering the stimuli of an adult world for his maturing mind: who processes the raw materials of life to meet the specific needs of her charges age and phase of development.

Miriam's well is the vital fluid of Israel's spiritual life, the water that inculcates them with the knowledge and identity her brothers provide. The waters of Miriam transport and apply the nutrients of Torah and the abstractions of faith to each individual, on his or her particular level. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

**eyes:** *Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel (20:12)*

But had not Moses previously said something that was worse than this? For he said (Numbers 11:22): "If flocks and herds be slain for them, will they suffice them? Or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, will they suffice them?" Faith surely was wanting there too, and to a greater degree than in the present instance. Why then did G-d not make the decree against him on that occasion?

Let me illustrate. To what may this be compared? To the case of a king who had a friend. Now this friend displayed arrogance towards the king privately, using harsh words. The king, however, did not lose his temper with him. After a time he rose and displayed his arrogance in the presence of his legions, and the king passed sentence of death upon him. So also the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "The first offence that you committed was a private matter between you and Me. Now, however, that it is done in the presence of the public it is impossible to overlook it." Thus it says: "[Because you did not believe in Me...] in the eyes of the children of Israel."

When they are thus gathered, Moses admonishes the people: "Hear now, you rebels! Shall we get you water out of this rock?"

*And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice.*

*And the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.*

## G-d speaks to Moses:

**"Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation in to the land which I have given them."**

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## Commentary

(Midrash Rabbah)

### **G-d speaks to Moses:** *These are the Waters of Strife (20:13)*

It is written (Psalms 66:5): "Come and see the doings of G-d, His awesome plot on the children of man." For G-d had already decreed that none of that generation shall enter the land... But as soon as Moses said to them, "Hear now, you rebels..." G-d said to him: "...therefore you will not bring this congregation into the Land..." Thus, it was "an awesome plot." (Midrash Tanchuma)

G-d said to Moses: "With what face do you request to enter the Land?" This may be illustrated by a parable. It is like the case of a shepherd who went out to feed the king's flock, and the flock was abducted. When the shepherd sought to enter the royal palace, the king said to him: "If you come in now, what will people say? That it was you who have caused the flock to be carried off!"

So, too, did G-d say to Moses: "Your greatness is that you have taken the 600,000 out of bondage. But you have buried them in the desert and will bring into the land a different generation! This being so, people will think that the generation of the desert have no share in the World to Come! No, better be beside them, and you shall in the time to come enter with them."

Therefore it is written "You shall not bring *this* congregation..."--rather, you must bring the other, the one that you had taken out of Egypt! (Midrash Rabbah)

**"Because you did not believe:** *Because you did not believe in Me (20:12)*

The commentaries offer various explanations as to what Moses (and Aaron's) sin was. Rashi says that it was that he struck the

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## Commentary

stone instead of only speaking to it, as G-d had instructed. According to Maimonides, it was the fact that he got angry, and said, "Hear now, you rebels."

Nachmanides questions both explanations, pointing out that: a) G-d told Moses to take along his staff, implying that he was supposed to strike the stone (as in Exodus 17:6); b) It does not say here that Moses' words were spoken in anger; whereas on other occasions we find Moses getting angry (cf. Numbers 31:14), and we don't find that he was punished for it; c) the verse explicitly says that his sin involved a lack of *faith*--not disobedience or anger. Nachmanides therefore explains the sin as lying in Moses' declaration, "Shall we get you water out of this rock?" when he should have attributed the miracle solely to G-d.

Chassidic Master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Barditchev sees Maimonides' explanation (that he rebuked the people angrily) and Rashi's explanation (that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it) as two sides of the same coin. If a leader's influence on the community is achieved through harsh words of rebuke, than his relationship with the environment is likewise: he will have to forcefully impose his will on it to get it to serve his people's needs and their mission in life. If, however, he influences his community by lovingly uplifting them to a higher place so that they, on their own, will desire to improve themselves, the world will likewise willingly yield its resources to the furtherance of his goals.

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(Midrash Rabbah)

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[At the burning bush,] Moses said: "But, behold, they will not believe me" (Exodus 4:1). Said G-d to him: They are believers, the sons of believers; you, however, will ultimately fail to believe. They are believers, as it is written, "And the people believed" (ibid. v. 31); the sons of believers, as it is written "And [Abraham] believed" (Genesis 15:6); whereas you will ultimately fail to believe, as it is written: "Because you did not believe Me."

*These are the Waters of Strife; because the children of Israel strove with G-d, and He was sanctified by them.*

## The Death of Aaron

Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom, asking permission to pass through his land in order to reach the Land of Canaan. "We will not pass through the fields," he promises, "or through the vineyards, nor will we drink of the water of **the well**; we will go by the king's highway, we will

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## Commentary

(Talmud, Shabbat 97a)

**Waters of Strife:** *Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well; sing to it (21:17)*

Why is Moses not mentioned here? Because he owed his punishment to water, and no man praises his executioner. Why is not the name of G-d mentioned? This may be illustrated by the case of a governor who made a feast for the king. The king asked: "Will my friend be there?" "No," he was told. Said he: "Then I also am not going there." In the same way, G-d said: "Since Moses is not mentioned there, I also will not be mentioned there."

(Midrash Rabbah)

**the well:** *We will not drink of the water of the well (20:17)*

It should have said, "water of the wells," should it not? Why does it say "the well"? But this is what Moses said: "Although we have with us manna to eat and the Well of Miriam to provide us with water, we shall not drink from it. Instead, we will purchase food and water from you, to benefit you.

Here the Torah teaches you a rule of good conduct: If a man goes to a country that is not his, though he possesses all his requirements, he should not eat of what he has, but should leave over his own and buy from the shopkeeper, so as to benefit him. (Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

**Hor HaHor:** (20:22)

It was a mountain on top of a mountain, like a small apple perched on top of a big one. (Midrash Rabbah)

*Take Aaron and Elazar his son, and take up Hor HaHar (20:25)*

G-d said to Moses: "Do Me a favor and tell Aaron that he is to die, for I am ashamed to tell him."

not turn to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed your borders."

The Edomites refuse, and mass their armies to block Israel's passage. "And Israel turned away from them."

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## Commentary

What did Moses do? He rose early in the morning and went to Aaron, and called to him: "Aaron, my brother!" Aaron came out to him and asked: "Why did you see fit to come so early today?" Said Moses to him: "There was something in the Torah which occupied my mind during the night and which I had difficulty with, so I rose early and came to you." Asked Aaron: "What was this thing?" Said Moses to him: "I do not remember what it was, but I know that it was in the book of Genesis; bring it and let us read from it."

So they took a scroll of the Book of Genesis and read from it. With each chapter and each thing they read, Moses would say: "G-d did well; G-d created well." When they came to the creation of man, Moses said: "What can be said of man, who brought death into the world!" Said Aaron: "Moses, my brother, can you say that in this matter we do not accept the Divine decree?" ... Said Moses: "And I, who ruled over the ministering angels, and you, who stopped death [with the *ketoref*], shall we, too, come to this?"... Immediately Aaron felt his demise in his bones... Said Aaron to him: "My heart is trembles within me, and the terrors of death are befallen me" (Psalms 55:5)."

Said Moses to him: "Are you prepared to die?" Said he: "Yes." Said Moses: "Let us then ascend Hor HaHar." Thereupon the three of them--Moses, Aaron and Elazar--ascended before the eyes of all of Israel...

When they ascended [the mountain], a cave opened up for them...

Said Moses to Aaron: "Enter the cave." He entered, and he saw there a made-up bed and a burning candle. Said Moses to him: "Go up onto the bed." He went up. "Straighten your arms." He straightened them. "Close your mouth." He closed it...

Thereupon the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) came down and kissed him.

(At that moment, Moses desired a death such as that. Thus it was later said to him (Deuteronomy 32:50): "And you will die on the mountain... as Aaron your brother died on Hor HaHar"--the death which you coveted.)

G-d said to them: "Go out from here." As soon as they went out, the cave was sealed, and Moses and Elazar descended.

(Yalkut Shimoni; Rashi)

They journey from Kadesh to **Hor HaHar** ("mount upon a mount"), where G-d says to Moses and Aaron:

*Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against my word at the Waters of Strife.*

G-d instructs Moses to take Aaron, and Aaron's son Elazar, up to the top of the mountain. There he should dress Elazar in Aaron's priestly garments, and there Aaron will die.

*And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, they wept for Aaron, thirty days, all the **house of Israel**.*

## The Brass Serpent

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## Commentary

*house of Israel: They wept for Aaron... all the house of Israel (20:29)*

For Aaron, "all the house of Israel"--both men and women--wept; but regarding Moses it is said only that "the sons of Israel" wept for him (Deuteronomy 34:8). For Moses would rebuke them with harsh words. Aaron never said to a man, "You have sinned!" or to a woman, "You have sinned!"... [Instead,] when Aaron would walk along and meet with an iniquitous person, he would greet him, "Shalom!" The next day, when this person desired to commit a transgression, he would say to himself: Woe is to me! How will I show my face afterwards to Aaron, who greets me all the time?" As a result, this person would refrain from the transgression.

If two people quarreled, Aaron would go and sit with one of them and say to him: "My son, have you seen what your friend is doing? He beats his breast and rends his clothes, saying: 'Woe is to me! How can I lift my eyes to see my friend? I am ashamed to show myself to him, for I have done him offence!'" And so he would sit with him, until he removed the jealousy from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other and say to him: "My son, have you seen what your friend is doing? He beats his breast and rends his clothes, saying: 'Woe is to me! How can I lift my eyes to see my friend? I am ashamed to show myself to him, for I have done him offence!'" And so he would sit with him, until he removed the jealousy from his heart. When the two would meet, they would embrace and kiss each other...

There were thousands in Israel named after Aaron, because were it not for Aaron, they would not have come into the world. For Aaron would make peace between husband and wife, and they would come back together and call the child by his name.

(Avot d'Rabbi Natan, ch. 12)

Canaanites from Arad in the Negev attack the children of Israel. The Israelite pray for G-d's help and pledge the war spoils to the Sanctuary; and the attackers are defeated and their cities despoiled.

The children of Israel journey on, circumventing the Land of Edom; "and the soul of the people was discouraged along the way."

*And the people spoke against G-d, and **against Moses**: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, nor is there any water; and our soul loathes this insubstantial food."*

*And G-d sent venomous serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died.*

*And the people came to Moses and said: "We have sinned, for we have spoken against G-d, and against you; pray to G-d, that He take away the serpents from us." And Moses prayed for the people.*

*And G-d said to Moses: "Make you a venomous serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live."*

*And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, and **he looked upon the brass serpent**, he lived.*

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## Commentary

**against Moses:** *And the people spoke against G-d, and against Moses (21:5)*

It is written: "And they believed in G-d, and in Moses His servant" (Exodus 14:31). If they believed even in Moses, they certainly believed in G-d! But this comes to teach us that whoever believes in the shepherd of Israel, it is as though he believes in G-d.

In the same vein, it says, "And the people spoke against G-d, and against Moses." If they spoke even against G-d himself, than certainly they spoke against Moses! But this comes to teach us that whoever speaks against the shepherd of Israel, it is as though he spoke against G-d.

(Mechilta Beshalach; Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a)

**he looked upon the brass serpent:** *And it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, and he looked upon the brass serpent, he lived (21:9)*

## The Song of the Well

The people of Israel are now in the **final stages** of their journey to the Holy Land. They stop at Ovot, Iyei Avarim ("Desolate Passes"), the Zered Brook, the far bank of the Arnon River. Their next encampment is at Be'er ("The Well"), so named after "the well of which G-d spoke to Moses: Gather the people together, and I will give them water." A song was composed to commemorate the **Miracle of the Well:**

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## Commentary

Now did the serpent kill or did the serpent restore to life? No. But when Israel looked upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed; but if they did not, they pined away. (Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 29a)

**final stages:** A people have various needs, and different types of leaders arise to provide them. Spiritually, too, a nation requires "food", "air" and "water" -- wisdom, faith and guidance. Again, different leaders arise to provide these different needs, each according to his or her specialty.

But there may come a time when a leader cannot afford the luxury of "specialization." He may be capable of teaching Torah on the highest level, but there is no one to teach the children *alef-bet*. He may be suited to raise the most spiritual souls to sublime heights, but there is no one to sustain the simple faith of the common man or to provide guidance on the most commonplace dilemmas of life. In such times, the true leader assumes all these tasks, as Moses did in the closing days of Israel's sojourn in the desert, when the people stood at the threshold of the Promised Land. Miriam and Aaron were no more, and Moses served as shepherd, nurse and guardian of faith in one. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

**Miracle of the Well:** *And the valleys of Arnon and the outpouring of the streams... and from there to the well (21:14-16)*

This song was sung at the end of the forty years, and the well was given to them at the beginning of the forty years. What is the reason then why it was written here?

This subject must be expounded by reference to what precedes it, viz., "Wherefore it is said in the book of the Wars of G-d: Vaheb is Sufa, and the valleys of Arnon." This implies that G-d wrought for them signs and miracles in the valleys of Arnon like the miracles that He had wrought for them at the sea of Suf (the Red Sea).

What was the nature of the miracles in the valleys of Arnon? A man could stand on the top of one mountain and speak with his neighbor on the top of the other mountain, yet he would be seven miles away from him! For the road ran down into the valley and ascended. Israel, on their way, had to pass through the midst of

*Then Israel sang this song:*

*Spring up, O well; sing to it. The well that the princes dug out*

*That the nobles of the people delved  
With the scepter, with their staves.*

Leaving the desert, they camp at Mattanah ("The Gift"), Nachaliel ("Heritage of G-d") and Bamot ("The Heights") before arriving at "the plain that is in the country of Moab, atop the cliffs which looks out towards the desert."

The people of Israel now send messengers to Sichon, king of the Emorites, requesting permission to pass through his land. Sichon gathers his armies and attacks the Israelites. The Emorites are defeated and their land is occupied.

When Og, the King of Bashan, also masses his people against the Israelites, he too, is defeated, and his lands, too, are occupied.

*And the children of Israel journeyed; and they camped in the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho.*

## War and Conquest

### Commentary

the valley. All the nations assembled at that spot, armies without end, and some of them took up positions within the valley. The cliffs above them were riddled with caves. Opposite these caves, in the mountain facing this one, there were numerous rocky projections resembling breasts... The armies entered into the caves, thinking: When Israel come down into the valley, those who are in the valley will confront them, and those who are above will harass them from the caves, and so we shall slay them all.

When, however, Israel reached that spot G-d did not make it necessary for them to descend to the bottom of the valley, but signaled to the mountains, and the projections of the opposite mountain entered into the caves, and all the occupants were killed. Furthermore, the mountains brought their heads close to each other and formed a level road, and it was impossible to tell one mountain from the next.

That valley was the boundary between the Land of Israel and the land of Moab; as it says, "For Arnon is the boundary of Moab, between Moab and the Emorites." The mountain in the land of Moab in which the caves were did not move, while the mountain from the Land of Israel in which were the rocky projections resembling breasts moved and joined the mountain opposite. Why was it the one to move? Because it belonged to the Land of Israel. It may be compared to the case of a handmaid who, on seeing her master's son coming to her, advanced quickly to meet him and welcomed him.

The rocky projections entered into the caves and crushed all the warriors in them. The Well descended into the valley and there it swelled and destroyed all the armies in the same manner as the Red Sea had destroyed the armies [of the Egyptians]. For this reason "Vaheb in Sufa" and "the valleys of Arnon" are placed side by side for comparison.

Israel passed along the top of those mountains and did not know of all the miracles. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "I will let My children know how many armies I have destroyed on their account." The well descended into the caves and washed out skulls, arms, and legs innumerable. Israel returned in search of the well and saw it coming from the valley full, carrying limbs upon limbs. Israel saw and sang. (Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)



## The Calf's Mother

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Certainly the most esoteric chapter in the Torah are the laws of the "Red Heifer" (*Parah Adumah*), commanded by G-d to Moses in Numbers 19 as an antidote to the state of ritual impurity engendered by contact with death. The Midrash describes how King Solomon, "the wisest of men," was baffled by it; and how Moses, the very vehicle of G-d's communication of His Torah to man, turned pale upon encountering the prospect of contamination by death, and found utterly incomprehensible the process of its rectification, crying out to G-d: "Master of the universe! This is a purification?!"

It's not just that the law of the Red Heifer cannot be logically explained; indeed, there exists an entire category of mitzvot, called *chukim* ("decrees"), whose defining criteria is that they transcend human understanding. What's unique about the Red Heifer is that while the other *chukim* at least follow an internal logic of their own, the laws of the Red Heifer are fraught with paradox and inconsistency. To cite but several of numerous examples:

a) The ashes of the Red Heifer remove the most severe of all impurities; yet those involved in its preparation become ritually impure themselves.

b) The Red Heifer must be completely red (as few as two hairs of a different color disqualify it)--a color which has connotations of sin and deficiency in Torah and Torah law; yet it must also be "perfect, without blemish."

c) The Torah commands that it be slaughtered outside the holy city of Jerusalem (in contrast with other *korbanot*, which must be slaughtered in the courtyard of the Holy Temple). On the other hand, it must be slaughtered within the sight of the Holy Temple and its blood is sprinkled "toward the Holy of Holies"; according to one opinion, it must be slaughtered by the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) himself, wearing the "white garments" reserved for the Yom Kippur service in the Holy of Holies.

d) The two components of the purifying mixture--ashes and spring water--represent two contradictory forces: fire, which represents the power of ascent, and water, which embodies the quality of "settling down" and saturation.

Thus the laws of the Red Heifer are introduced by the Torah with the word "This is the *chok* of the Torah", as if to say: this is the Torah's ultimate *chok*, the mitzvah that most vividly demonstrates the supra-rationality of its divine commandments.

### The Mystery of Death

Indeed, explains the Lubavitcher Rebbe (in a talk delivered upon the conclusion of the *sheloshim* (30-day morning period) after his wife), the most incomprehensible of human experiences--the phenomenon of death--can be sublimated only with the most incomprehensible of divine mitzvot, the ashes and water of the Red Heifer.

Physically and biologically, death makes perfect sense (indeed, it is the phenomenon of life that defies explanation). Yet we all--even a man such as Moses--find death utterly incomprehensible, utterly devastating to our sense of reality. Despite all the "evidence" to the contrary, something deep inside us insists that life is the natural, axiomatic state of the human being, and that its cessation is a violation of the most basic law of existence.

For such, in truth, is the fundamental nature of man. True, the human body is physical flesh, and as such, shares the dissolutive nature of all things physical. But it is animated by a soul that is a "spark of the Divine" and fortified with the eternity and indestructibility of its Source. In essence, human life is eternal.

Indeed, the first man was created to live forever. But then he violated the Divine will, thereby distancing himself from his Source and introducing the phenomenon of death into the human experience.

Our Sages tell us that when the Children of Israel stood at Sinai to receive the Torah from G-d, they were restored to the original perfection in which man was first created. The Torah reinstated the original, unadulterated bond between G-d and man, so that man was once more granted "freedom from the Angel of Death."

But this time, too, the state of perfect connection to G-d was short-lived. Forty days after the people of Israel stood at Sinai, they transgressed the divine decree "You shall have no other gods before Me" by worshipping a calf of gold. The pestilence of death, introduced into the world by Adam's sin and banished at Sinai, was reintroduced by the sin of the Golden Calf.

This explains the connection between the Red Heifer and the Golden Calf expressed in the Midrashic parable:

*A maids child once dirtied the royal palace. Said the king: "Let his mother come and clean up her childs filth." By the same token, G-d says: "Let the Heifer atone for the deed of the Calf" (Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 8).*

In our post-Calf world, the imperfection in our relationship with G-d finds its most noxious expression in the phenomenon of death. Contact with death thus spawns the most severe form of spiritual impurity, which can be mitigated only by the mother of the Golden Calf, the most supra-rational of the divine decrees--the Red Heifer.

This was G-d's reply to Moses' cry, *Master of the universe! This is a purification?!* "Moses," G-d said, "it is a *chok*, a decree that I have decreed." Certain things are so overwhelming to My creations that they can only be overcome by submitting to an absolute command from an absolute authority. I have therefore commanded laws to instruct you what to do when your lives are touched by death. These are supra-rational, even irrational laws, for only such laws can facilitate your recovery. It is only by force of an utterly incomprehensible divine decree that you can recover from such utter devastation to a living being's self-definition.

Ultimately, however, there will come the day that the original bond between man and G-d will once more be restored. This time, our prophets promise, it will be immune to disruption by sin, since G-d will "slaughter the inclination for evil" in the heart of man and "remove the spirit of impurity from the earth," with the result that "death shall cease forever."

*Adapted by Yanki Tauber, Ytauber@chabadonline.com*