

PARASHAH: Hukat (Regulations)
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 19:1-22:1
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AUTHOR: Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman

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(Note: all quotations are taken from the **Complete Jewish Bible**, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

Our parashah this week is **Hukat** (say “choo-kaht”; sounds like “who caught”). Actually, this Hebrew word shares the same root word as a previous Torah portion. The last portion of Vayikra (Leviticus), known as **Parashat B'chukkotai** (say “b-choo-koh-tie”; the “ch” is as the “ch” in Bach) also comes from our root word. The root word from which our Torah portion's title is taken is “choke” חָק, and it means “statute, limit, ordinance, something prescribed.”¹ This should not be confused with its synonym “Torah” which is also sometimes translated along these same lines. The main difference is the nuance that each word is attempting to convey: choke=ordinance; Torah=teaching.

Because the portion deals with a central Torah injunction (the ashes of the Red Heifer), I want to briefly repeat some of the important concepts concerning Torah as Law. Some of my material will actually come from the above-mentioned Torah portion of **B'chukkotai**.

Let's Recall...

In Judaism, safeguarding and keeping the Torah is central to performing the will of HaShem.² Indeed, as properly understood from HaShem's point of view, the whole of Torah was given to bring its followers to the "goal" of acquiring the kind of faith in HaShem that leads to placing one's trusting faithfulness in the One and

¹ Brown, Driver, Briggs (BDB), חָק.

² Deuteronomy 5:1.

only Son of HaShem, Yeshua HaMashiach.³ To this end, the Torah has prophesied about him since as early as the book of Genesis (3:15), and continues to speak of him until its conclusion in Revelation (22:20). In this capacity, the Torah תורה acts like its etymological counterpart ירה "yarah"⁴ (an archery term) in that it "teaches" its adherents how to properly identify with HaShem by helping them to "reach the mark." To be sure, one of the most common Hebrew verbs used to identify "sin" חטא "chatah" literally means, "to miss the mark."⁵

Parah Adumah - A Unique Commandment

The mitzvah of the Red Heifer (referred to in Judaism as Parah Adumah, literally "Red Cow") is a peculiar command indeed. A couple of details make this mitzvah unique. To begin with, the participants are commanded to slaughter and burn completely this female cow without blemish. If you will recall from reading Vayikra, touching a dead animal's carcass renders one tamei (ritually unclean). As we discover from our current portion at 19:7-22, the preparation of the ashes also rendered the individuals involved tamei.

Yet the end result of their efforts produced a substance that possessed the supernatural ability to cleanse, as HaShem endowed it. True, the real healing always comes from HaShem, but in this case, the focal point of the healing (the ash mixture) began by defiling those who made the mixture.

Peculiar indeed.

Herein lies the secret of faith. To follow HaShem's instructions to the letter was to act and live in an arena of trusting faithfulness. To do what the Torah asked sometimes required its participants to perform various rituals and functions that defy logic and common sense. Life from death? Only the Will of HaShem could produce such an effect. Particularly, we see this demonstrated graphically in Yeshua!

The events surrounding his death defiled everyone involved. Remember that the handling of the sacrificial victim defiles the handler. Thus, everyone, from the prosecutors, to those who mocked him, to the executioner who drove the nails—everyone was made unclean.

This includes you and me.

³ Luke 24:27, 44-47; Romans 10:4.

⁴ BDB, ירה.

⁵ Ibid, חטא.

We placed him there as much as any Roman or Jew involved directly in that century. Our transgressions caused him to become the sacrifice for sin. Therefore, we are also defiled.

But the end result is what makes the significant difference!

In the case of the Red Heifer, the resulting ash played the central part in the cleansing of those who were tamei. In the case of Yeshua, his shed blood plays a central part in our cleansing. Were it not for the blood, which was freely spilled, we would forever be in a state of spiritual tamei! Thanks be unto God, the blood was poured out!

This brings out the importance of understanding the Torah and matters related to faith. If we reduce the Torah to legalistic misunderstandings, we cut short the miraculous workings of our Heavenly Abba, especially where matters of tamei and tahor (unclean and clean respectively) are concerned. While it is true that Yeshua brought about a transformation in the Levitical priesthood, and ritual uncleanness is no longer an everyday issue, the matter of spiritual cleansing is still a stark reality. We must avail ourselves of the spiritual cleansing made possible by Yeshua in order that we can be included in the community of the “called-out ones.” Only the ashes of an unblemished female cow would suffice for this special ceremony; only the blood of a sinless human—the blood of Yeshua, could effectively cleanse fallen humanity from spiritual defilement!

He is our Red Heifer!

From Kadesh to Moab – Disobedience, Death, and Desert Dilemmas

The parashah goes on to narrate the tragic story of Moshe’s disobedience. Chapter 20 records for us the sobering reason as to why this otherwise stalwart leader succumbs to human weakness. It is true that he was incredibly faithful to perform all that HaShem asked him to do. Yet, even Moshe was not perfect. The pressure mounted and in a moment of anger and indecision, he struck—twice, when he was commanded to speak. Thus, he dishonored HaShem in the sight of all Isra'el. For this, HaShem would not allow him to enter into the Land that he was leading the people to. He would only be allowed to gaze at it from afar. What lessons can be learned from this?

HaShem is a merciful God! In spite of Moshe’s disobedience, water did indeed flow from the rock to meet the community’s physical need. Yet, along with God’s mercy, we see a reminder of his requirements of responsibility especially where chosen leaders are involved. Moshe was in what is known as a “high visibility” position. The greater the calling the greater the responsibility. Moshe was not in a position to be blatantly disobeying HaShem. His call was a higher one, and therefore, God expected more from him. Remember that this was the man of whom the Torah says he spoke to God “face to face” and “mouth to mouth.”

In our Torah portion we read of the deaths of two of the community's great leaders, two from the same family no less. Miryam the sister and Aharon the Cohen HaGadol both die in chapter 20. In the case of Miryam, we saw the people's concern for her demonstrated a few parash'ot ago, when, as she contracted tzara'at (leprosy) they all waited while she remained outside the camp before moving on with their travels. Here in the later part of chapter 20, Isra'el mourns Aharon for thirty days, as his son El'azar takes on the awesome responsibility of his father's place in the community.

These glimpses into the personal lives of those who lived during the period of the TaNaKH drive home the fact that these were ordinary folks just like you and me! They laughed, played, hoped, feared, loved, and cried just like we do. As such, we should be less critical when examining the lives of these ordinary desert-dwelling folks. I sometimes wonder if we would have done any better, were we in their situation.

Nevertheless, their journeys take them into close proximity to some territorial enemies of theirs. In an act of cordiality and humility, Moshe offers to pass through the land of the Edomites without disturbing what belongs to Edom. He even uses the identification marker of "brother" highlighting the well-known fact that Edom was a descendant of Esav, the brother of Ya'akov—whom the Israelites were descendants of. But despite his gentle pleadings in 20:14-21, Edom refused to allow passage, and instead turned a closed door to the wandering descendants of Ya'akov. Edom even issued a threat of the sword upon any that would cross into his land. This incident will be remembered for ages to come in the journals of the TaNaKH. HaShem was not pleased with Edom and his prophets will record HaShem's heart on the matter later for the people to read and understand.

For now, Isra'el had no choice but to comply with Edom, and go around the long way. In chapter 21, we read of their involvement with the king of the Emori. Again, the same invitation is offered to them as with the Edomites, but this time Sichon, king of the Emori takes to the offence and attacks Isra'el. God intervenes and Isra'el defeats the Emori all the way up to the borders of the people of 'Amon. Following this successful campaign, HaShem instructs Moshe to muster a small army and go against Og the king of Bashan as well. Moshe does and ADONAI causes a great victory there as well, with the complete destruction of those in opposition to 'Am Yisra'el. Amazingly, this is the precise setting for our haftarah portion of Shof'tim (Judges) 11:1-33.

This is a glimpse into the beginnings of the intense land disputes that the people would find themselves involved in for quite a while to come. Indeed, such disputes dominate the entire book of Shof'tim. The promises of HaShem did not come without a struggle. The Promised Land was not just "handed over" to the people. Rather, to secure what was theirs by covenant right, the people would

have to scratch and struggle for it. What can be gained from this graphic example? Does HaShem want us to fail in reaching the goal that he himself sets before us?

“Are we there yet?”

In the upcoming portion in D'varim (Deuteronomy) known as **Vayelekh**, we find Moshe challenging the people to obedience in chapter 31. He promises and charges young Y'hoshua in verse 23 to be strong and full of courage, for indeed he will lead the people into the Land of Promise. But on the heel of that promise, and in keeping with the theme of obedience, he warns of the future apostasy of that often-rebellious bunch.

Having warned the people about their coming days of lawlessness (verses 16-18 of D'varim chapter 31), HaShem then commands Moshe to teach them a song of remembrance (verse 19-22), which will serve as a witness for their God, against the people of Isra'el. The actual song itself is recorded for us in Chapter 32. So why does HaShem keep reminding them of their upcoming failure to obey him? From a cursory glance, it appears rather pessimistic and disheartening. In fact, it may strike the average reader as being too harsh and challenging, similar to the seemingly insurmountable challenge that awaits the people as they endeavor to enter the Land of Promise. But we need to understand the heart of the Father here. His (loving) chastening does appear, at first, to be too much for us to bear, but as we begin to see the “big picture” we will understand it more.

In order to understand why HaShem uses Moshe to point out the downfalls of the people in D'varim (which I'm purporting as a picture of the struggles to enter the Land), we must read what it says in D'varim 31, verses 24-29 again carefully. I won't quote it all here; I want you to read it for yourself.

The Torah is HaShem's measuring rod for disobedience. To be sure, this is what he said in D'varim 31:26. Even the New Covenant Scriptures echo this same teaching consistently throughout the above-mentioned book of Romans. This happens, the Torah teaches us in both the TaNaKH and the B'rit Chadashah, “in order that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world be shown to deserve God's adverse judgment. **For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous...**(Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:19).” Now this specifically applied to those within the framework of the Torah, of which the Jewish Nation surely was! The budding young nation that we read about in our current parashah had already begun to live within that framework, which was initiated at the “Mount Sinai experience.” HaShem was training them to become dependent upon his grace **alone** to get them out of “hot water.” The enemies that they would encounter on their way “Home” would indeed be “hot!”

This, by way of introspect, is why he established the elaborate system of sacrifice (such as the Red Heifer); they must be taught to operate according to trust.

Things were to be done according to the plan of the Holy One of Yisra'el! It would take his loving provision to restore the fellowship that was lost as a result of the grievous sin of wanting to go back to Egypt time and time again. A Jewish person living in the time period of the TaNaKH could only approach the Holy God according to the instructions of the Torah! For only God could repair the breach! This same God was the one who would fight their battles as they approached the borders of the Land, and even when they crossed over into it! The enemies were simply too strong for Isra'el by themselves and HaShem wanted them to internalize this truth!

Even though our portion here (or in D'varim) does not explicitly state these terms of the covenant, we know them to be true from previous teachings in the Torah. The Word of HaShem is eternal and unchanging. Likewise, his nature is eternal and unchanging. Does it, therefore, surprise us to find HaShem challenging his children to learn how to do things his way? **Performance-based righteousness was never the plan of the Holy One!** The Torah will always serve to remind us that we all fall short of the goal, when we try to accomplish things our own way, whether it be the grumbling of a desert weary people waiting to find a home, or the everyday life of a believer in Yeshua.

By reminding us of our shortcomings, the purpose of HaShem is accomplished—we fall desperately into his means of provision for our sin! When we **then** accept HaShem on his terms and his terms **only**, we have no choice but to accept his sacrificial offering, whether it be the Red Heifer then or the Messiah now! This is not legalism, too harsh thinking, or even “narrow-mindedness.” This is pure LOVE! Had it not been for Yeshua (of whom the Red Heifer was a type and shadow) providing the only way back to the Father, we would all be without hope! Think about it: a man only accepts the hand of his rescuer, once he realizes he is drowning, and cannot save himself! **Yeshua is the one who is reaching out his hand to rescue the drowning man!** Unless the man realizes he is in need of Yeshua, he won't reach out to accept him. The Torah helps man to see his need for a Savior!

A Talmudic Midrash

The Torah was given in the wilderness so that we might see the awesome provision of an Almighty and All-loving Father! Citing a couple of p'sukim (verses) from **Parashat Hukat**, I will close by explaining what Chazal (the ancient rabbis) have to say about the giving of the Torah in the wilderness:

The **Talmud** says that HaShem purposely gave the Torah to 'Am Yisra'el in the desert, to bring about a desired result. Using a midrash (homiletic explanation) to a verse that we find here in B'midbar (as part of my introduction to B'midbar), I explained:

"Then Isra'el sang this song, "Spring up, oh well! Sing to the well sunk by the princes, dug by the people's leaders with the scepter with their staffs!" From the desert they went to Mattanah, from Mattanah to Nachali'el, from Nachali'el to Bamot."

The verses and their midrashic explanation are discussed in the following Talmudic passage:

"The princes dug the well, the nobles of the people hollowed it, by the law-giver, with their staffs. From the desert [they went] to Mattanah; from Mattanah to Nachliel; from Nachliel to Bamos. (B'midbar 21:18-19) ... Why does it say, "From the desert they went to Mattanah"? If a man makes himself like a desert, abandoning himself to all (Rashi: he teaches Torah to everyone free-of-charge), then Torah will be given to him as a gift (mattanah), as it says, "From the desert to Mattanah." Since it is given to him as a gift, he will inherit it from G-d (nachalo E"l), as it says, "from Mattanah to Nachliel." Since he inherited it from G-d, he will become elevated to greatness, as it says, "from Nachliel to Bamos (elevated places)." **(Nedarim 55a)**

A breakdown of the literal Hebrew words works like this:

B'midbar=desert (where Torah was given)

Mattanah=gift

Nachali'el=inheritance from HaShem

Bamot=elevated places

Thus, the above midrashic conclusion given in the Talmud.

Our Torah portion closes with the people poised on the borders of the Yarden River, opposite Yericho. Poised and ready to go in? Or poised to face another challenge from HaShem? Were the people indeed, after defeating Og and Sichon, ready to enter the Land of Promise?

We shall have to wait until next week's parashah to find out...

The closing blessing is as follows:

***"Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v'chay-yeh o'lam nata-b'tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn."***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.

Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman yeshua613@hotmail.com