

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

that the Lord has commanded. A *hok*/ordinance is a Torah law whose goodness is not self-evident, and whose authority is entirely dependent on law-giver. Thus Rashi explains that both Satan and the nations of the world would mock Israel because of the seeming heathen magic or ridiculousness of the *Parah Adumah*, asking: "What is this command and what reason is there for it?" But because it is a "*hok*" neither we nor they have a right to question it, criticize it, or even ponder it too deeply.

But something does not have to be explainable to convey a message. Instead of asking "What does it mean in and of itself?" we can ask "What does it say to us?" And *Parah Adumah*, and this parashah in general speaks volumes about the paradoxical nature of our existence. It says to us that defilement and purity, illness and cure, are intertwined - a message echoed elsewhere in our parashah (Bemidbar 21:5-9) when the Israelites complain again about their hunger and God sends venomous serpents to bite them. When Moshe prays for God to heal them, he is instructed to make a serpent and put it on a pole. Whoever then looked at the *Nahash Hanehoshet* - the Copper Serpent - was healed. Things that heal us can hurt us, and things that hurt us can heal us. This is just as true in medicine as it is in social policy.

It says to us that leadership, or simply doing good in the world, can be bad for you. Miriam, Aharon, and soon Moshe die in the wilderness, having led the people to a place they themselves cannot enter. When God is angry with the people, they get God to forgive them, but when they lose their temper, as they did with the Waters of Meribah, they are not forgiven. We need power to do good, but that power can easily corrupt us, and battle against its influence damages us in other ways.

But to me, it says most clearly that life itself is the greatest paradox. We have souls that long for purity and eternal divine connection, but our souls animate imperfect and easily defiled earth-bound bodies that are driven by hunger and a desire for sensory pleasure. If all souls are destined to return to heaven, why are they subjected to such a challenging existence on earth? Why struggle, when our struggles are ultimately doomed to failure?

The potential for despair is ever-present, and yet we persist. There may not be a rational reason to do good, to lead, and ultimately to live, but we do anyway. Our lives are the real *hok* - inscrutable mysteries handed down from above. And here too the best question is not "What does my life mean, in and of itself?" but "What will my life say to me, to others, and to those who will come after us?"

May our lives speak volumes.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Hukat

July 13, 2019 | 10 Tammuz 5779

Annual (Numbers 19:1-22:1): Etz Hayim p. 880; Hertz p. 652
 Triennial (Numbers 21:11-22:1): Etz Hayim p. 890; Hertz p. 660
 Haftarah (Judges 11:1-33): Etz Hayim p. 909; Hertz p. 664

D'var Torah: A Great *Parah* Dox

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, Conservative Yeshiva Director of Engagement

Death is everywhere in Parashat Hukat. There are great military victories (Arad, Sihon, King of the Amorites, and Og, King of Bashan), the passing of great and beloved leaders (Miriam and Aharon), and a great plague. So it should be no surprise that the parashah opens with the laws of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) - the sole remedy for those who have "*tumat met*" - ritual impurity from contact with a dead body.

The *Parah Adumah* is one of the Torah's great oddities. It must be entirely red (no other sacrifices specify color), female (sin offerings are male animals), and cannot have done any work (a unique requirement). It is sacrificed outside the camp and not on the altar. Its entire being - hide, flesh, blood, and dung - is turned to ash as part of the sacrifice. Its ashes are then mixed with various red-colored substances (cedar wood and hyssop) that are usually burnt as part of the *ketoret ha-samim*. And this ash mixture, when combined with water, is sprinkled on any vessels, structures, or people who have this ritual impurity to purify it.

And *Parah Adumah's* oddness becomes more pronounced the more one thinks about it. Tending to a dead body to maintain its purity makes one ritually impure, but this impurity can only be removed by contact with the dead body of an animal! And most perplexing, the priests involved in the entire process of producing, transporting, and storing the purifying ashes are themselves rendered impure!

But much like Job, our questions are met with a stern silence. *Parah Adumah* is introduced by the words "*Zot Hukat HaTorah*" - THIS is the ordinance of the Law

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: Yiftach's Blind Spot

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yiftach the Gileadite was a tragic figure. The son of a prostitute, he was cast off by his family and by “normative” Gileadite society and forced to live apart from both. This adversity shaped him, turning him into an exceptional leader to whom “normative” society repeatedly turned in troubled times. His story is the stuff of great literature, not only because of his achievements but also because of his complexity and the tragedy that ultimately befell him.

Yiftach's rise to power was swift and smooth and owed a great deal to his powers of speech and persuasion. When the leader of Gilead sought him out to fight on their behalf, he secured from them the promise to not only accept him back into their society but to make him their military and political leader as well.

Yiftach's rhetorical skills were on display again in his communications to the King of Ammon. Like a diplomat, he made the case for why it was unjust for Ammon to go to war against Israel - that Israel was, in fact, the original and current injured party. But his communications were laced with a threat - reminding the King of Ammon what had happened to those like the Amorites or Moabites whose kings, Sihon and Balak, had initiated conflict with Israel.

And when the King of Ammon disregards the words of this God-touched leader, Yiftach prays to God that the Ammonites be delivered into his hands, and he is rewarded with victory after victory.

No, the great surprise is the tragedy that occurs when Yiftach returns from battle. This master of the deal, whose words and deeds had allowed him to ascend to heroic heights, was ultimately undone by his own words. For while praying to God for support in the battle with Ammon, he had made the following deal: “If You indeed give the Ammonites into my hand, it will be that whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return safe and sound from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I shall offer it up as a burnt offering.” (11:30-31) And tragically, following Yiftach's triumphant return, it is not an animal that first exits his house, but Yiftach's only daughter, whom he is bound by his vow to sacrifice.

What do we do with this story? What of this man who has turned his life around, done God's will, and saved God's people, and must sacrifice his daughter because of a careless statement? What of the innocent daughter? The rabbinic sages, who otherwise took vows quite seriously, were also astounded by the outcome. But it does caution us about becoming carelessly over-reliant on strategies that have worked for us in the past. Success managing and manipulating situations can give us the illusion of complete control, and our greatest strengths can turn into blind spots.

Parashat Hukat Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We have reached the 40th year in the desert. In this parashah some of the leaders that led us out of Egypt die, and land in trans-Jordan is conquered. We are, geographically, on the threshold of Eretz Yisrael.

- 1) The Red Heifer ceremony, required to purify a person who has come in contact with a corpse (chapter 19), has puzzled most who have tried to provide a reason for various mitzvot. Is there value in the experience of doing something simply because we are instructed to do so?
- 2) After Miriam (Moshe and Aharon's sister) dies, there is no water to drink. The rabbis deduced that the water that was provided for 40 years in the desert was thanks to Miriam. Try to remember other water related episodes in which she was involved. (Some people have the custom of placing a cup of water, 'Miriam's cup', at the Seder table. Why?)
- 3) The people congregated ON Moshe and Aharon (a threatening gesture – just like last week) demanding water (20:1-13). After Moshe and Aharon flee, God instructs them to *go to the people and congregate them*, speak to the rock and water will come out. Why does God force them to congregate the people?
- 4) The route to the land of Israel would take the Israelites through the land of Edom. Moshe sends a message asking the king for permission to pass through. What arguments do you think that he'd use? (check yourself in 20:14-21.) Why?
- 5) The refusal of Edom forces the people to take the long way around. While the Torah states that they had enough of the road, what comes out of their mouths are complaints about the hardship of the desert where there is no food nor water (21:4-5). Why don't they seem to be complaining about what really bothers them?

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