



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

חקת - בלק
תש"ף

Chukat - Balak
5780

**Kohelet,
Tolstoy and
the Red
Heifer**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Deep faith, and friendship, can cure our deepest fears



PARSHAT CHUKAT-BALAK IN A NUTSHELL

Chukat begins with the law of the Red Heifer (a young female cow who can be used to purify us). The Sages thought the Red Heifer was the hardest of all the *mitzvot* in the Torah to understand, and it became the classic example of a *chok* - a mitzvah with no obvious explanation.

In Balak, the non-Jewish prophet Bilam is told by King Balak to go to a hilltop overlooking the Israelites' camp and curse them. But he finds he is only able to speak words of blessing.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do a mitzvah if you can't understand its purpose?



THE CORE IDEA

The law of the *parah adumah*, the Red Heifer, does not seem to have a logical explanation. The opening words, *zot chukat ha-Torah*, indicate that this is the classic example of a *chok*, a law whose logic is hidden, perhaps unknowable.

It was used in a ceremony for the purification of those who had been in contact with a dead body. Death is the primary source of impurity, and no person made impure was allowed to enter the Mishkan or Temple until they had been ritually cleansed, in a process that lasted seven days.

A key element of the purification process involved a Priest sprinkling the person affected, on the third and seventh day, with a specially prepared liquid known as "the water of cleansing." First a Red Heifer who had never been used to perform work, and who was without blemish, had to be found, ritually killed and burned outside the camp. Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool were added to the fire, and the ashes were placed in a vessel containing "living" i.e. fresh water. It was this water that was sprinkled on those who had become impure by contact with death.

The meaning behind this ritual addresses the basic human fear of death. The animal itself is a symbol of pure life, natural and untamed. Red is the colour of blood, the essence of life. The cedar, tallest of trees, represents vegetative life. The hyssop symbolises purity. All these were reduced to ash in the fire, a powerful reminder that all things die. The ash was then dissolved in water, symbolising continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. The body dies but the spirit flows on. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, always carrying us onward.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is death a "basic human fear"?
2. How does the water here help conquer this fear?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Dedicated to the memory of Marc Weinberg z"l, on his 10th Yahrzeit

It was a devastating tragedy. A young man, brilliant, gifted, with a devoted wife and two beautiful young children, was diagnosed with leukaemia. For two and a half years, helped by advanced medical technology and lifted by the prayers of friends, he fought with all his strength against the war taking place within his body. In the end it was all too much, and he died.

This was no ordinary young man. He was a person of the most profound religious belief and practice, who spent every spare moment of his crowded, short life helping others and bringing out the best in them, who by the sheer force of his example became a leader who transformed lives, as a youth leader, a student, a teacher and as a builder of communities. He taught people the power of possibility and helped them become better than they thought they were.

There are moments that can shake your faith to its foundations. Yet, as I stood at his funeral, this was not the feeling that swept over me. Instead I felt a strange, quite unexpected access of faith.

For around me, gathered at seemingly impossible short notice — in Judaism we try never to delay a funeral — were more than a thousand mourners, many of them his age or younger. Through

their tears I saw the difference he had made to their lives. He wasn't rich or famous. He had lived all too briefly. Yet each of them had a story to tell of how he had helped them, inspired them, befriended them when they were lonely, lifted them when they were suffering some personal crisis; and each of those blessings had given rise to others in turn, in a series of ever-widening ripples of good.

We had come to honour the memory of one who, without ever saying so, taught people to pay it forward, and he had left behind him a vast legacy of blessings. And yes, he had died young and left a tidal wave of grief. But he had also taught us how never to let grief, or suffering, or sadness have the last word. Before he died, he taught us how to live.

This piece was written by Rabbi Sacks and originally published in *The Times* (17th July 2010)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does this story teach us to live in the face of tragic death?
2. How is this message the same as the message of the Red Heifer?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Though this ritual has not been practised since the days of the Temple, it nonetheless remains significant, in itself and for an understanding of what a *chok*, usually translated as “statute,” actually is. Other examples include the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen (*shatnez*) and sowing a field with two kinds of grain (*kilayim*). There have been several very different explanations of *chukim*.

The most famous is that a *chok* is a law whose logic we cannot understand. It makes sense to God, but it makes no sense to us. We cannot aspire to the kind of cosmic wisdom that would allow us to see its point and purpose. Or perhaps, as Rav Saadia Gaon put it, it is a command issued for no other reason than to reward us for obeying it.

The Sages recognised that whereas Gentiles might understand Jewish laws based on social justice (*mishpatim*) or historical memory (*edot*), commands such as the prohibition of eating meat and milk together seem irrational and superstitious to others. The *chukim* were laws of which “Satan and the nations of the world made fun.”

Rambam had a quite different view. He believed that no Divine command was irrational. To suppose otherwise was to think God inferior to human beings. The *chukim* only appear to be

inexplicable because we have forgotten the original context in which they were ordained. Each of them was a rejection of, and education against, some idolatrous practice. For the most part, however, such practices have died out, which is why we now find the commands hard to understand.

A third view, adopted by Ramban in the thirteenth century and further articulated by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth, is that the *chukim* were laws designed to teach us the integrity of nature. Nature has its own laws, domains and boundaries, to cross which is to dishonour the Divinely created order, and to threaten nature itself. So we do not combine animal (wool) and vegetable (linen) textiles, or mix animal life (milk) and animal death (meat). As for the Red Heifer, Hirsch says that the ritual is to cleanse humans from depression brought about by reminders of human mortality.

My own view is that *chukim* are *commands deliberately intended to bypass the rational brain, the pre-frontal cortex*. The root from which the word *chok* comes is *h-k-k*, meaning, “to engrave.” Writing is on the surface; engraving cuts much deeper than the surface. Rituals go deep below the surface of the mind, and for an important reason. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make momentous mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain. We also have an extremely

powerful set of reactions to potential danger, located in the amygdala, that lead us to flee, freeze or fight. *A moral system, to be adequate to the human condition, must recognise the nature of the human condition.* It must speak to our fears.

The most profound fear most of us have is of death. As La Rochefoucauld said, “Neither the sun nor death can be looked on with a steady eye.” Few have explored death and the tragic shadow it casts over life more profoundly than the author of the book of Kohelet:

“The fate of man is the fate of cattle; the same fate awaits them both, the death of one is like the death of the other, their spirits are the same, and the pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for it is all shallow breath. All end in the same place; all emerge from dust and all go back to dust” (Kohelet 3:19-20).

The knowledge that he will die gives Kohelet the feeling that there is no point to his life. We have no idea what will happen, after our death, to what we have achieved in life. Death makes mockery of virtue: the hero may die young while the coward lives to old age. And bereavement is tragic in a different way. To lose those we love is to have the fabric of our life torn, perhaps irreparably. Death defiles in the simplest, starkest sense: mortality opens an abyss between us and God’s eternity.

The person in more recent times who most deeply experienced and expressed what Kohelet felt was the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, who told the story in his essay, *A Confession*. By the time he wrote it, in his early fifties, he had already published two of the greatest novels ever written, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. His literary legacy was secure. His greatness was universally recognised. He was married, with children. He had a large estate. His health was good. Yet he was overcome with a sense of the meaninglessness of life in the face of the knowledge that we will all die. He quoted Kohelet at length. He contemplated suicide. The question that haunted him was: “Is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?”

He searched for an answer in science, but all it told him was that “in the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small

particles mutate with infinite complexity.” Science deals in causes and effects, not purpose and meaning. In the end, he concluded that only religious faith rescues life from meaninglessness. “Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life.” What he felt was needed was something other than rational knowledge. “Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.”

That is why, to defeat the defilement of contact with death, there must be a ritual that bypasses rational knowledge. Hence the rite of the Red Heifer, in which death is dissolved in the waters of life, and those on whom it is sprinkled are made pure again so that they can enter the precincts of the Shechinah and re-establish contact with eternity.

These days, we no longer perform the seven-day purification ritual that involves the Red Heifer but we do have the *shiva*, the seven days of mourning during which we are comforted by others and thus reconnected with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the “living water.” We emerge, still bereaved, but to some extent cleansed, purified, able again to face life.

I believe that we can emerge from the shadow of death if we allow ourselves to be healed by the God of life. To do so, though, we need the help of others. “A prisoner cannot release himself from prison,” says the Talmud. It took a Kohen to sprinkle the waters of cleansing. It takes comforters to lift our grief. **But faith – faith from the world of *chok*, deeper than the rational mind – can help cure our deepest fears.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How can this message help us deal with the current crises we are living through?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The Holocaust survivors I have come to know are astonishing in their tenacious hold on life. Perhaps it's how they survived. Some believed in God, others didn't, but they all believed in life – not life as most of us understand it, something taken for granted, part of the background, a fact that rarely holds our attention, but life as something to fight for, as a consciously articulated value, as something of whose fragility you are constantly aware. They had, in Paul Tillich's phrase, the “courage to be”.

Future Tense, pp. 253



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think proximity to death causes impurity?
2. What is the benefit of having a mitzvah designed to “bypass the rational brain”?
3. How is the purpose of *shiva* similar to the idea of the Red Heifer?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. There are many approaches to this question. Some that a young person may relate to, include that we don't always understand what we are told to do, but if we trust the person instructing us (for example our parents, or in this case God) knows more than us and what is best for us, then we do it anyway. Our motivation could also be to show them that we love them, carrying out their wishes even if we do not understand them.

THE CORE IDEA

1. All humans live in the knowledge that we are mortal and will one day die. The fear of the unknown surrounding death is a natural emotion, and throughout our lives we have to find ways to live life despite this fear.
2. Water represents life. Vegetation and animals are dependent on water for their very existence. It symbolises continuity, the flow of life, and the potential of rebirth. This reminds us that while the body may die (as represented by the slaughtering of the Red Heifer), the spirit flows on. "A generation dies but another is born. Lives may end but life does not. Those who live after us continue what we began, and we live on in them. Life is a never-ending stream, and a trace of us is carried onward to the future."

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

3. Marc lived his life to the full, even during his illness. He showed us how to do the same, how to maximise life always, until the end. Learning about and remembering the inspiring way that he lived helps us to focus on embracing life even while feeling the sadness of his death.
4. The Red Heifer ceremony is an elaborate ritual with symbolic reminders of life. (We take a pure animal, with hair the colour of blood) and end its life, as all lives inevitably will end. Yet we then dissolve its ashes into water which represents life and continuity. The ceremony reminds us to focus on life rather than death, and that despite death, if we create a legacy before we die, we can live beyond our years.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Sadly, this year the fear and the reality of death is all around us. So many people are prematurely losing their lives due to this relentless virus (and there have been many other difficulties surrounding COVID-19, such as loneliness and separation, illness, both physical and mental, and economic hardships). It is understandable that many are finding it hard at times to focus on life, and embrace life, in circumstances like this. The message of the Red Heifer can give us some perspective on the blessings we have, to help us to continue to live our life to the fullest, within the confines of what is safe and possible.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Ritual impurity in Judaism is caused by proximity to death, or to unfulfilled potential for life. The laws of ritual impurity are there to sensitise us to the value of life by making us aware of death, or absence of life, in all its forms.
2. We are not fully rational animals, and we can make mistakes if we think we are. We have a limbic system, an emotional brain as well as a rational brain. Fear of death is an emotional experience, and to live with it we need a moral system that can bypass the rational thought system and speak to the more emotional parts of our brains.
3. The seven-day mourning period known as *shiva* during which we are comforted by others while experiencing grief during the recent loss of a loved one, reconnects the mourner with life. Our grief is gradually dissolved by the contact with friends and family, just as the ashes of the Heifer were dissolved in the "living water." We emerge, still bereaved, but to some extent cleansed, purified, able again to face life. Shiva pulls the mourner back into the land of the living, preventing them from fixating on their grief and matters of death.