

Parashas Chukas

Parsha Summary

The laws of *tumas mes* (impurity of a dead body): a red cow is to be burnt and its ashes sprinkled over water; this water is used to purify someone who comes in contact with a dead body but the water itself causes anyone who touches it to become impure. A dead body will “impurify” anything in its tent that was not in a sealed container.

Miriam dies, and the people complain that they have no water. Moshe and Aharon are commanded to procure water from a rock, and they hit the rock to produce water. God tells Moshe and Aharon that they will die in the desert because they did not sanctify Him before the people. Moshe sent a message to the King of Edom asking to go through his land, but they refuse to allow them entry, instead greeting Israel with the sword. Israel then traveled from Kadesh to Hor HaHar, where Aharon is told to ascend the mountain with Moshe and his son to die there, and the people mourn his passing for 30 days. The Canaani King Arad and his people attack Israel, and take a captive, but Israel calls out to God and prevails. Traveling around Edom, the nation complains about the desert-travel and their food, and God sends snakes to bite them. The nation repents, and God tells Moshe to fashion a bronze serpent on a pole, saying whoever looks towards it shall be healed. The nation traveled more, and sang a song of thanks for the well of water they had. They asked Sichon, king of Emori to let them pass, but he instead did battle with them and lost, letting Israel take over the land. Israel also conquered Ya'azer of the Emori, and the land of Og, King of the Bashan, after Hashem assured Moshe not to fear him.

Classic Questions

Why is a deceased human body the source of ritual impurity?

- **Ramban (and others):** impurity reflects the fact that man's mortality is a result of sinning
- **Bekhor Shor, Chizkuni:** the *tumah* discourages excessive mourning or dealing with the dead (which should be minimal because of our assurance that the soul still lives on)
- **Chinuch:** the dead body represents the greatest spiritual loss, because it is the form of the person without that which makes him human
 - **Kuzari** (2:60): *tumah* is found wherever the potential for life-spirit is lost

Why are Moshe and Aaron told they would not enter the Land after Moshe hit the rock-well?

- **Rashi:** they should have spoken to the rock instead of Moshe hitting it with his staff
 - **Maharal:** speaking implies willing obedience, but hitting implies forced coercion
- **Rambam** (Intro to Avot): Moshe lost his temper, and the nation thought God was angry
- **Many:** they gave the nation the impression that the water from the rock wasn't a miracle
 - **Chizkuni, R. Chananel** (in Ramban): because they didn't mention God's name
 - **Bechor Shor:** because their words implied that they themselves had doubts
- **R. Albo** (Sefer Halkkarim 4:22): Moshe and Ahron should have performed this miracle on their own, without having to consult with God first
- **Abarbanel, Ralbag & Others:** the punishment is not really because of this episode, but because of an earlier sin, but God didn't state it explicitly until now

Why did the nation complain about their food here, and why were they punished with snakes?

- **Bechor Shor:** this story actually occurred much earlier, when the *man* first fell
 - **Seforno, Ohr Hachayim:** the instrument of punishment was a snake, a symbol of slander (in *Gan Eden*, appropriate because the people “slandered” the *man*)
- **Sifrei, Rashi:** the nation was specifically afraid that the food would cause them to explode, because they would eat it but not have to expel anything
 - **Netziv** (Emek ha-Netziv, Beha’aloscha 30): they knew that they could survive by a miracle, but thought that once they’d enter the Land, the miracle would cease and their bodies would explode with the food that they had been eating before
- **Akeidas Yitzchak, R. Hirsch:** the people were tired of the miraculous sustenance and wanted to start supporting themselves, but God reminded them that they need His miracles to survive in the desert at all, a place that would naturally be very dangerous

Important “Chazal’s and “Rashi’s

- Even King Shlomo, wisest of men, did not understand the law of the red heifer
 - **R. Akiva (Yoma 14a):** the mystery is that the waters of the cow’s ashes purify someone impure, but if sprinkled on a pure person the water make him impure
 - **Midrash, Kli Yakar:** the mystery is that this ‘purification ritual’ looks like sorcery
 - **Ramban:** the mystery is that this is a semi-sacrifice but is done out of the Temple
- When Miriam died, the well that accompanied them for 40 years dried up [proving that it was in her merit] (Taanis 9a, but in Bava Metzia 81b it is attributed to Avraham’s merit)
- The king of Arad heard that the clouds that protected Israel in the merit of Aharon disappeared at his death, and he thought that was a sign to attack (Rosh Hashana 3a)
- Can a snake give life or death? Rather, if Israel looked upwards and subjugated their hearts towards Heaven, they’d be healed (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8)
- R. Shmuel bar Nachman in the name of R. Yochanan: “therefore the singers say...” (21:22) those who rule over their desires have said, let’s consider the calculations of the loss due to a mitzvah against its reward, and the reward of a sin against its loss, and if you do so, you’ll be built in this world and settled in the world to come (Bava Basra 78b)
 - **Malbim:** generally, military battles contain lessons for “the battle of desires”

A Short Vort

Why would the Torah include a mitzvah which is totally unintelligible, and would cause the nations and the *yetzer hara’* to ridicule the Torah (*chas ve-shalom*)? R. Yosef of Salant (and many others) writes that the reason for giving us commandments that we cannot understand reminds us that even though God granted us profound cognitive abilities, we are ultimately limited in understanding His ways, especially with regard to how the world is run. A person who needs to use the *parah adumah* is someone who has encountered death, and may question why it would be that the world has suffering and destruction with no apparent reason. The “cure” for the impurity that comes with this encounter is the ultimate non-understandable law, the red cow, to remind us that even though we may not understand what’s behind it all, that is only because of our limited abilities, but God certainly knows what He is doing.