

Our Limited Ability to Comprehend God's Mysteries

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Chukat* (Num. 19:1 – 22:1)

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"Zot chukat hatorah asher-tzivah Adonai..."

"This is the decree of the Torah that Adonai has commanded..."

"Ya'an lo-he'emantem bi... — Because you did not trust Me..." *Parshat Chukat* opens with a *chok*,¹ a command for which we can discern no logic or reason — the *parah adumah*.² A perfect red heifer was to be slaughtered, reduced to ash, mixed with water, and used to purify those who became ritually impure by contact with the dead. Although the impure person is purified, the person who applies the water becomes impure.

Next we hear about the complaints of the people who cause Moses and Aaron to plead with God. The two leaders are explicitly told by God to "speak" to the rock in front of the people and the rock will yield water. Moses takes the rod ... which God handed to him ... and strikes the rock. Then, we are told, Moses and Aaron are told by God they may not enter the Promised Land "...because you did not trust Me." By apposing these sentences, the Author implies that the *absence* of a description at this point in the story of Moses "speaking" to the rock *means that he did not speak*. The Author offers this absence as a rationalization for God's bitter punishment of the two leaders.

After being refused safe passage through Edom, the Israelites finally arrive at Mount Hor. God commands Aaron and Moses to pass the priestly vestments to Eliezar, Aaron's son. Aaron dies and is mourned for thirty days.

Finally, when the people are afflicted by serpents as a punishment for complaining, Moses is instructed to make an image of a serpent and place it on a staff. By viewing this image, the people would be cured of their snake bite.

Although, technically, only the first story is a *chok*, we are, in fact, presented with four illogical stories. Why should the purifier become impure by purifying the impure? Why is Moses, who had just prostrated himself before God looking for the ultimate answers, punished for being untrusting? Why is the priestly succession handed to Aaron's sons, not to Moses's? Why does God afflict His people with serpents and then command them to make a

¹ *חוק* = law, rule, or statute.

² Red cow.

graven image to use to cure the bites? We are presented with an enigma. Why does the Author create such dissonances?

Our Rabbis, classic and modern, have struggled to resolve the issues arising in this parashah within the context of our tradition:

“Zos chukas haTorah {these are the decrees of the Torah}.” The entire Torah must be viewed as chukim. There are things that we think we understand and things that we know we don't. Our realization must be that in regard to Hashem's perception and depth, any understanding of ours can only be viewed as abject ignorance.³

We can't base our observance on our understanding of the life-situations that Hashem deals out to us.⁴

A “chok” teaches us that we don't truly understand any of the mitzvos. Even those such as: don't steal, don't murder, that we think we understand, in fact we only have a minute and shallow understanding of what the Creator actually had in “mind.”⁵

The “Toras Chaim” — the instructions for life — that Hashem gave us in the guise of the Torah is the only source of what is intrinsically good and intrinsically evil.⁶

These assertions, however comforting they intend to be, belittle the value of God's gift of free will, and make of our actions a kind of ethical “Russian roulette.” After all, what is the point of having free will if we are, in fact, incapable of discerning “The Way”? These explanations bring up yet another troubling question: How can we ever come to know what it is that God requires of us?

We might reflect on some other reasons for these enigmatic stories and commands. Dissonance generates actions. In the 1950s, Leon Festinger⁷ theorized that when we are mentally conflicted, when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information, we experience dissonance — unease and tension. The more important the issue and the greater the discrepancy between experience and belief, the more intense will be the dissonance we feel. In extreme cases cognitive dissonance is like our cringing response to

³ Commentary on Parashat Chukat by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner; Project Genesis; 2000.

⁴ Ciner (2000), *op. cit.*

⁵ Commentary on Parashat Chukat by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner; Project Genesis; 1998.

⁶ Ciner (1998), *op. cit.*

⁷ Leon Festinger (1919-1989), a social psychologist, is best known for his *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. This *Theory* postulates that the psychological opposition of irreconcilable ideas (cognitions), held simultaneously by one individual, creates a motivating force that leads to the adjustment of one's beliefs to fit one's prior behavior — instead of changing one's behavior to express one's beliefs.

fingernails being scraped on a blackboard — we'll do anything to get away from the awful sound.

One prime method we all use to resolve dissonances generated in gaining (or earning) membership in a community is the mental exertion justifying an initiation as "worth it" because of the positive things we will gain from the benefits of membership. The more difficult the experiences of initiation demanded of us, the greater becomes our need for justification. The more effort we invest in the justification process, the more we develop commitment to the organization. The more difficult the desert experience was to understand, the more cohesive the people became who tried to understand and explain it.

The answers to the troubling questions are clearly unimportant to the Author, who presented them without comment and never resolved them. The more dissonance we experience in being unable to resolve these paradoxes, the more effective they become in accomplishing the Author's intent. *Chukkim* and the accompanying enigmas presented to us by the Author are tools to bind us closer to one another as we wrestle to understand the mysteries of our continuously unfolding relationship with God.

These puzzling stories do, however, carry a magnificent, empowering message for us. Exactly because no one among us understands them, we all have the opportunity to try. No one can say they have special knowledge leading to their resolution or to certain truth. We are all equally invited to the work of understanding what is in the Mind of the Creator. We all stand equally humbled in the presence of the Awful Mystery.