

D'var Torah – Parashat Chukas
by Gloria Bein
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Shabbat Shalom!

A noted contemporary speaker introduced his talk by saying, “Before I speak, let me say a few words.” Consequently, before I give you my interpretation of this week’s parsha, Chukas, let me explain.

What am I doing here? What does it mean to feel delight and almost ecstasy when I’m chanting a Haftarah? Why do I continue? Is it just the mental challenge? No, it’s more than that! Standing behind this reading desk, I feel a close communion with G-d. Also, although my father left this earth in 1970 after chanting the Sheva Brachas at my younger daughter’s wedding, he’s alive as I chant in the Ashkenazic tones. I actually hear his voice as a Baal T’filah, a lay person leading the congregation in prayer. I also think of Harold Mondshein who gave me my first trop lesson shortly before he passed away. I think of him with great respect and admiration. Thus, there is a “method to my madness.” I am inspired, and I am happy.

So, let us now go to our D’var Torah. I shall explore the meaning, revealing the Torah’s brilliance, that after thousands of years, the Torah still has relevance to our every day living.

Chukas, meaning *Statute*, is a set of rules specified by the Torah for which there are no apparent reasons. We are introduced to the red heifer, which is included in a special purification ceremony performed by those who had touched or had been under the same roof as a dead body. As part of the rites, a red heifer without blemish was slaughtered and burned together with cedar wood and hyssop. Its ashes were gathered, mixed with water from a running stream, and sprinkled upon the unclean person on the third and seventh day of his impurity. After laundering his clothes and immersing himself in a mikvah, he could once again participate in sanctuary worship.

Rabbi Yochanan informed us that the dead man does not make a person impure, nor do the ashes make him pure again. Therefore, the red heifer law is a heavenly decree, and man has no right to question it. Herein lies the answer to the rationale of the Chukim. We cannot always comprehend the workings of G-d, for as humans, our understanding is limited.

The red heifer is a classic example of a law that defies rational explanation. Indeed, the commentaries ask us to accept this law without understanding it, as a sign of love and trust in G-d. They add that it’s almost unseemly to search for a rational explanation. Human failure to understand a truth does not make it less true. (I underlined this last sentence.) King Solomon, the wisest man in the Bible, said, “I have labored to understand the word of G-d, and have understood it all, except the ritual of the red heifer.” Again, I repeat, these laws are decrees from G-d, and we have no right to question them, and it is sufficient for us to know that by obeying the statutes, we are performing G-d’s will.

Our sages comment that laws are incomplete until the leaders of the community went about telling others of the Torah's commands. The average Jew had to be informed of how the Torah expects him to behave. Perhaps it was because few knew how to read. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all Jews to bring other Jews closer to Judaism. This is why we are asked to fulfill two functions: to learn about Torah and to teach it to others.

But how can these tasks be fulfilled? Is everyone expected to become a professional teacher? Teaching about Judaism and the Torah's laws is not confined to the classroom alone. Rather, conveying our ideals to others is the full-time occupation of every Jew, regardless of his profession. For it is through our everyday lifestyle and our normal behavior that we can set a good example for others. Most people look to certain models for guidance. If a Jew can serve for others to follow, then he has served as a most successful teacher, no matter what he does for a living.

Naura Hayden, the noted author, nutritionist, and television entertainer, expressed it thusly, "Good and G-d are alive and well, and living in each one of us."

The parsha also records the passings of Miriam and Aaron. Each was sorely missed. Miriam, the sister of Moshe, was a great prophetess and leader in her own right. It was due to her greatness that miraculously, the Jews were given a well of water traveling along with them during their sojourn in the desert. When she died, the well disappeared, and the Jews began to fully appreciate Miriam's presence.

The Hebrews were very discontented when they did not have water. G-d instructed Moses to speak to the rock. Instead, he strikes it. Consequently, Moses is informed by G-d that he will never enter the Promised Land, as punishment for disobeying instructions.

The loss of Aaron was also deeply mourned by the people. The Torah makes a point of telling us that when Aaron died, all the congregation wept for thirty days. This was because he considered it his personal mission to settle all quarrels within the congregation, and foster peace among all. He went out of his way to see that husbands and wives were reunited after they had a quarrel. When he heard that two people were involved in a misunderstanding, he would go to one of them and tell him that he had recently met his friend and had heard him say, "The quarrel was my fault, and I bitterly regret it." Then, he would go to the second person, and tell him the same fabricated story. When the two met again, they would hug each other, and be friends once more. Thus, the entire nation wept when Aaron died, for they remembered the compassion and boundless love he had had for them.

So, what relevance does this have for us today? When we are blessed with the presence of a great personality, we must take advantage of it, not take him for granted while he is alive, and only appreciate him after his death. Unfortunately, the latter is all too often the case.

Yerushalmi, the philosopher, said, "Monuments need not be raised for the pious. Their deeds are their monuments." How true!