



Shabbat Table Talk Page



Overview

- **Parashah: Chukat** (חֻקָּה, "Decree of")
- **Chapters: Numbers 19:1-22:1**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Korach) established the authority of Moses (not Reuben) as the leader of Israel, and the authority of Aaron (not the other sons of Levi) as God's chosen priestly line. The Israelites (i.e., laymen) were warned to keep their distance from the priestly duties and to allow the appointed representative of the LORD intercede on their behalf.

In this week's Torah portion (Chukat), God first gives the "law of the red heifer," a special whole-burnt offering whose ashes were used to purify someone contaminated by contact with a dead body. The red heifer had to be a perfect specimen that was completely red, "without blemish, in which there is no defect." The sages interpreted "without blemish" to refer to the cow's *color*, that is, it was to be without a single white or black hair. This is the only sacrifice in the Torah where the color of the animal is explicitly required. Moreover, the cow was never to have had a yoke upon it, meaning that it must never have been used for any profane purposes.

Unlike other sacrifices offered at the altar at the Tabernacle, the red heifer was taken *outside the camp* to be slaughtered before the priest, who then took some of its blood and sprinkled it seven times before the Tabernacle. Then the red heifer would be burned in its entirety: its hide, flesh, blood, and even dung were to be burned (unlike other Levitical sacrifices). Also unlike other offerings, the blood of the sacrifice was to be completely burned in the fire.

Hyssop, scarlet yarn, and a cedar stick would then be thrown upon the burning red heifer, which were the same items used to cleanse from *tzara'at* (skin disease). These items, along with the blood of the red heifer, were therefore assimilated into the ashes of the sacrifice, which were gathered and mixed with living water to create what was called the "waters of separation" for the Israelite community. Anyone that came into contact with death (i.e., a corpse) was required to be cleansed using these waters. The purification procedure took a full seven days, using three stalks of hyssop dipped into the water and shaken over the defiled person on the third day and then again on the seventh day. After the second sprinkling, the person was immersed in a mikvah and was declared "clean" the following evening.



(Synopsis continued...)

The Torah portion then jumps ahead 38 years later when the people of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Tzin. Moses' sister Miriam died (on Nisan 10) and was buried. After her death, the people thirsted for water and complained. The LORD then instructed Moses to take his staff (as a sign of authority) and to *speak* to the rock to yield its water. Moses was angry at the rebellious Israelites, however, and struck the stone instead. The water issued forth, but God told Moses that neither he nor Aaron would be permitted to enter the promised land because of their disobedience.

The camp of Israel then moved on to Mount Hor, near the land of Edom. Moses called an assembly of the people and explained that Aaron was going to die. He then led Aaron and his son Elazar to the top of Mount Hor, where he removed Aaron's High Priestly garments and put them on his son Elazar. Like Moses, Aaron was denied entry to the Promised Land because he sinned at Meribah. The nation mourned for Aaron for 30 days.

While Israel was still in a state of mourning over Aaron, a Canaanite king named Arad decided the time was right to attack Israel. His campaign was initially successful, and his army even took some Israelites captives. However, the Israelites made a vow to the LORD and promised to utterly destroy the Canaanites and their plunder. Their counterattack was successful, and Arad, his armies, and all of his cities were completely annihilated.

After leaving Mount Hor to go around the land of Edom, the people grew impatient and another rebellion brewed. This time the people murmured not only against Moses, but against the LORD Himself. Consequently, the LORD sent "burning serpents" that bit the people and many people died. The people confessed their sin and appealed to Moses for help, who then interceded on their behalf. God then instructed Moses to make a figure of a snake and to mount it on a pole so that "everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

The portion continues with details about the route through the Transjordan, including a song Israel sang about a miraculous well of water given to them in the desert. Moses then led the people in battles against the Amorite kings Sihon and Og who had powerful kingdoms east of the Jordan River. After these two climactic battles, Israel journeyed to the wastelands of Moab poised to cross the Jordan and to capture Jericho.





Preliminary Questions



1. What does the word *Torah* (תּוֹרָה) mean? ¹
2. What is *Torah she'bikhtav* (תּוֹרָה שֶׁבִּכְתָּב)? ²
3. What is *Torah she'bal peh* (תּוֹרָה שֶׁבֶּל פֶּה)? ³
4. What is the Hebrew word for “commandment,” and what does it mean? ⁴
5. According to tradition, how many commandments occur in the written Torah? ⁵
6. Approximately how many commandments occur in the New Testament? ⁶
7. What is the Hebrew word for “statute,” and what does it mean? ⁷
8. In the written Torah, what are the three basic categories of mitzvot? ⁸
9. What does the word *mishpatim* (מִשְׁפָּטִים) mean? Can you give an example? ⁹
10. What is distinctive about *chukkim* (חֻקִּים) and can you give any examples? ¹⁰
11. Are all people intended to keep all the commandments? ¹¹
12. What is *midrash* (מִדְרָשׁ)? ¹²
13. In Jewish tradition, what does the word *halakhah* (הֲלָכָה) mean? ¹³

¹ “Direction” or “teaching.” It does not mean “law” as is commonly taught by many Christian teachers.

² “That which is written,” referring to the text that has been meticulously transmitted since the time of Moses in the form of a *Sefer Torah* (i.e., a kosher Torah scroll).

³ Torah “which is oral,” referring to the legal and interpretative traditions handed down by word of mouth until these were codified in the Mishnah and Gemara (i.e., the Talmud). The argument for oral tradition derives from the system of judges that Moses instituted in the desert. The scribal traditions also are based on oral law as well.

⁴ *Mitzvah* (מִצְוָה), from *tzava*, meaning to instruct or to command. A mitzvah is a divine commandment.

⁵ 613. The word *Taryag* (תַּרְיָג) is an acronym that refers to the 613 commandments given in the written Torah. Jewish tradition divides these into 248 positive (“Thou shalt...”) and 365 negative (“Thou shalt not...”) commandments. The positive commandments are called *mitzvot aseh*; the negative, *mitzvot lo ta'aseh*.

⁶ Over 1,000 distinct commandments have been identified.

⁷ *Chok* (חֹק), meaning a decree “inscribed” without a reason (i.e., a divine fiat). The plural is *chukkim*. These decrees are to be obeyed from a sense of trust and loyalty, not because they “make sense” to us...

⁸ *Mishpatim* (“laws” or “rules”), *chukkim* (“decrees”), and *eidot* (“testimonials”).

⁹ “Judgments” (or laws), derived from the Hebrew word *shafat* (“to judge”). An example is not to steal or lie.

¹⁰ *Chukkim* (“decrees”) are not rationally comprehensible and therefore function as “divine fiats.” Some examples include the laws of *kashrut* (kosher foods); *tzitzit* (fringes); *teffilin*, the sacrifice of the Red Heifer, and so on.

¹¹ No. Some pertain only to women, others only to priests and Levites, others to kings, etc. According to the Mishnah, women are exempted from those mitzvot that are restricted by time.

¹² A exegetical method that uses stories, allegories, and speculation to further explain the Biblical text. Collections of midrashim (such as the Mekhilta, the Sifra, the Midrash Rabbah, etc.) are considered part of the Jewish Oral Torah tradition. Some midrash are homiletical (aggadah), whereas others are legal (halakhah).

¹³ The way to “walk” (i.e., the way to apply the various commandments in everyday life). Traditional halakhah includes takkanot (case law), gezerot (restrictions), and minhagim (customs). These correspond to the three categories of mitzvot found in the written Torah.



Parashah Questions

1. What is distinctive about *parah adumah* (פָּרָה אֲדֹמָה), or red cow sacrifice? (Num. 19:2) ¹
2. What do the words “clean” (*tahor*) and “unclean” (*tamei*) mean? ²
3. Why is the law of the red cow called “the” decree of the whole Torah? (Num. 19:2) ³
4. What basic type of sacrifice was the Red Heifer? ⁴
5. What was the basic recipe for creating the purifying waters? ⁵
6. What is the significance of *cedar wood* added to the sacrifice? ⁶
7. What is the significance of *hyssop* added to the sacrifice? ⁷
8. What is the significance of scarlet yarn added to the sacrifice? ⁸
9. What is the primary source of spiritual *uncleanness* in life? ⁹
10. How were the purifying waters applied? ¹⁰
11. What was ironic about the ritual of the Red Cow? ¹¹
12. According to Jewish tradition, what miracle was associated with Miriam? ¹²



¹ It was truly a “holy cow” - entirely red, completely defect free, and never used for profane purposes. Two or more black hairs found on the cow would disqualify it for use in the ritual. The cow was to be a “heifer,” that is, a young female cow that has never borne a calf. Some claim the red cow is atonement for the Golden Calf at Sinai.

² Tahor means ritually acceptable whereas tamei means ritually impure.

³ It is called “the” decree because cleansing from death is the central ritual act. Note that the word *ashes* (אֵפֶר) is composed of the same letters as the word for healing “cure” (רָפָא) as well as “beauty” (פֶּאֶר).

⁴ A whole burnt offering (korban olah). Unlike other olah offerings, however, the hide was burned along with the blood of the cow.

⁵ The red heifer is ritually slaughtered outside of the camp and some of its blood was sprinkled toward the Tabernacle seven times (similar to the blood ritual of Yom Kippur). Then its hide, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, would be entirely burned. The priest would add cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet to the sacrificial fire, and the remaining ashes were then gathered and placed in a vessel containing pure water. The priest and the one who burned the cow were both to wash their garments, bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. The ashes of the cow were to be used to create the water of purification. (Num. 19:1-9).

⁶ Cedar (one of the tallest of trees) is thought to represent pride or arrogance.

⁷ Hyssop is thought to represent humility or lowliness (it grows low to the ground).

⁸ The crimson was to signify the blood; the thread bound the cedar and the hyssop together (Isa. 1:18).

⁹ Contact with a corpse. Death represents a state of uncleanness and impurity. This also explains the taboos about touching blood, such as niddah laws.

¹⁰ They were not applied by hand, but by dipping three hyssop branches into the basin and then shaking off the water onto the contaminated person on the third and seventh day.

¹¹ Everyone involved in handling the Red Cow at any stage of the ceremony – from its sacrifice to the application of the waters in the cleansing ceremony – became unclean themselves. To become clean again, they had to wait for a day, immerse themselves in a mikvah, and wash their clothes. It is ironic because the offering cleanses those who are impure but makes the offerer unclean. In that regard, it is a picture of a wounded healer.

¹² The well of water was given in his merit (alluded to in the “Song of the Well” in Num. 21:16-18). The Apostle Paul mentions this “rock” as the Messiah in 1 Cor. 10:4).



13. What punishment came to Moses for hitting the rock instead of speaking to it? ¹³
14. Why was Moses punished so severely for this act of disobedience? ¹⁴
15. According to Jewish tradition, what miracle disappeared after Aaron died? ¹⁵
16. What special quality so endeared Aaron to the people? ¹⁶
17. If someone touches a dead body, he becomes unclean (tamei). For how long? On which days does he undergo purification? ¹⁷
18. The people had to circumvent Edom because the King would not allow them to pass through, and once again they began to complain of their hardships. How did God punish the people for their lack of faith, and how was the punishment removed? ¹⁸
19. Where did Miriam die? ¹⁹
20. What was Moses' sin when the people complained that there was no water? ²⁰
21. What was Moses' punishment for failing to follow God's instructions? ²¹
22. Where was Aaron buried, and what action of the people showed that they honored him? ²²
23. When Moses sent messengers to the King of Edom, how did he describe the relationship between Israel and Edom, and on what basis? ²³
24. Who were Sihon and Og? ²⁴

¹³ He had to die in the desert and could not lead the people into the promised land.

¹⁴ The Rock was a picture of Him who was stricken for His people (Isa. 53:4 and 1 Cor. 10:4), and Moses' second striking suggested that the Messiah would need to be stricken a second time in order to provide the needs of the people. No! The Rock that was once smitten was now to be addressed as the "Living Rock" (1 Cor. 10:4).

¹⁵ The clouds of glory dissipated and stopped surrounding the camps.

¹⁶ Of Aaron it was said he was *ohev shalom v'rodef shalom* – a lover of peace who pursued peace.

¹⁷ He was unclean for a full week (7 days). He underwent purification sprinkling on the 3rd and 7th days.

¹⁸ God sent "fiery serpents" to bite them; Moses prayed for the people and God told him to fashion a fiery serpent and mount it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and be saved from the venom. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Humanity as a whole has been "bitten by the snake" and needs to be delivered from its venom. Just as the image made in the likeness of the destroying snake was lifted up for Israel's healing (Num. 21:4-9), so the One made in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3) was to be lifted up as the Healer of the world.

¹⁹ Miriam died in Kadesh in the desert of Paran.

²⁰ God told Moses to take his staff, gather the people along with Aaron, and then speak to the rock so that it would give forth water. Instead, Moses gathered the people together, called them rebels and then struck the rock twice with his staff. A midrash says that after Moses struck the rock the first time, only a few drops of water appeared, so then he struck it a second time...Because of this quarrel, the place became known as Meribah, or "striving."

²¹ Because he failed to obey the LORD, Moses was prevented from entering the promised land.

²² Aaron was buried atop Mount Hor; the entire assembly wept for 30 days.

²³ The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the oldest son of the Isaac and Rebekah, and therefore Moses called them "brothers." The Edomites' original country, according to the Torah, stretched from the Sinai peninsula as far as Kadesh Barnea, south of the land of Moab. In Rabbinic Literature, Edom became associated with Rome, probably dating from the time of the Bar Kochba revolt.

²⁴ Two nephillim who were kings in Canaan. Sihon was king of the Amorites, and Og was King of Bashan.



For Next Week:

- Read parashat **Balak** (Numbers 22:2-25:9)
- Read the Haftarah (Micah 5:6-6:8)
- Read the New Testament (Rom. 11:25-32; 2 Pet. 2; Jude)