Chukat: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?



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God teaches Moses the laws of the Red Heifer, whose ashes are needed to purify anyone who has come into contact with a dead body. Then, after forty years of walking in the desert, the Israelites arrive to the wilderness of Zin and are thirsty. God instructs Moses to talk to a rock and command it to give water, but Moses, angry at his rebellious people, strikes it instead and water pours out. God tells Moses that neither he nor Aaron will merit entering the Promised Land. Miriam dies, and Aaron dies, too, and is succeeded by his son Elazar.

After yet another bout of complaining, snakes attack the Israelites, and God tells Moses to place a brass serpent on a pole and tell anyone that whoever gazes towards the heavens will be healed. The people sing a song to celebrate the miraculous fact of having found water in the desert.

Moses leads the Israelites in war against Sichon and Og, the Emorite kings, and conquers their lands east of the Jordan.

> "Moses raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and an abundance of water gushed forth, and the community and their animals drank."

Take a deeper dive

This week's Torah portion kicks things off with what is widely acknowledged to be the most mysterious commandment in all of the Torah.

"This is the rule of the Torah, which God has commanded you to say to the people," God tells Moses and Aaron, and then he delivers a very detailed set of instructions: They must find a totally red-haired, unblemished cow, one that was never yoked. The high priest must have someone slaughter it in his presence outside the camp, and must then take some of its blood with his finger and dash it toward the front of the Tent of the Meeting seven times. Someone must then burn the cow, and the priest should collect cedar wood, hyssop, and wool dyed scarlet with the extract of a very specific worm, and throw all of that into the fire. Then, the priest must wash his clothes and flesh in water. And only then would the Israelites have the proper substance with which to purify anyone who has come into contact with a dead body.

Huh? A red cow? Hyssop and worm dye? Seven sprinkles of blood? Why? None of it makes a lot of sense. And that, explained Chaim ibn Attar, the 18th Century Kabbalist better known as Or Ha'Chayim, is exactly the point. God, he wrote, called the law of the red heifer "the rule of the Torah" because He wanted to make it clear that the Torah was obligatory even when it defied all logic, and that it's not up to us to only uphold those laws and commandments we fully and rationally grasp.

"Anyone who keeps this mitzvah," he explained, "which is a mitzvah without a direct and comprehensible explanation, it's as if they kept all the laws in the entire Torah."

It's not too hard to understand why. God, Or Ha'Chayim argued, may have given us this strange mitzvah precisely to that we may merit to prove how diligently and truly we believe in His laws, and how fully and completely we embrace all of the mitzvot, not because they make sense but even—or precisely—when they don't.

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