

The Pardes Center for Jewish Educators presents

An Interactive PARSHA EXPERIENCE



Parsha: Chukat

Title: Trust in the Unexpected!

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The Parsha at First Glance

Spotlight on the Parsha:

Chukat contains an idea that is quite confusing – spiritual purity and impurity. Just like a person can be in a happy or sad mood, or a person can be wide awake or very tired, so too a person can be spiritually pure (*tahor* in Hebrew) and spiritually impure (*tameh* in Hebrew). Our parsha explains that contact with, or



being in the same room as, a dead person makes a person become *tameh*. It also explains that for a person to become spiritually pure they need to be sprinkled with a special mixture.

Zoom In:

The creation of the special mixture that is sprinkled on a *tameh* person involves one of the most unique *mitzvot* (commandments) in the whole of the Torah – the burning of the *parah adumah* – red heifer (cow). A completely red colored heifer is burned in a fire, its ashes are mixed with spring water and then sprinkled on a person. This is how the Torah, Bemidbar 19:5-6, describes the creation of the ashes:

The cow shall be burned in his sight— its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included	וְשָׂרֵף אֶת-הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו ; אֶת-עֹרָה וְאֶת-בְּשָׂרָהּ וְאֶת-דָּמָהּ, עַל-פְּרִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָף.
and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow.	וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן, עֵץ אֲרָז וְאִזּוֹב--וְשָׂנִי תוֹלַעַת ; וְהִשְׁלִיךְ, אֶל-תּוֹךְ שָׂרִפַת הַפָּרָה.

This is certainly one of the more perplexing mitzvot contained in the Torah.

Questions for Consideration:

1. Have you ever been told to do something which doesn't make any sense to you?
2. What was it and how did you feel doing it?



The Parsha Through Another Lens

The mitzvah of the parah adumah is so strange to understand that even the wise King Shlomo could not understand it:

*In reference to what did King Shlomo [Solomon] say (Kohelet 7:23), "I thought to be wise to it, but it is distant from me"... King Shlomo said: All of the Torah's commandments I have comprehended. But the chapter of the red heifer, though I have examined it, questioned it and searched it out - "I thought to be wise to it, but it is distant from me."
(Bemidbar Rabbah 19:3)*

We have a special name for mitzvot that do not appear to make any rational sense. It is called a *chok*, or statute. Unlike mitzvot like 'Do not steal' which is easily understandable as if everyone started stealing society would soon breakdown. And unlike commandments like 'Live in sukkot (booths)' which reminds us of our history and journey in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, the red heifer is an example of a commandment that appears to make no rational sense. Even the wise King Shlomo could not figure it out!

Do we follow these laws blindly or simply ignore them? Or perhaps we ask every 3-year old's favorite question 'but why?'

Rashi, the famous 11th century commentator, on *Bemidbar 19:2*, already expects us to ask that question and brings a midrash that informs us that in this case a why question will not work:

Because Satan [the Accusing Angel] and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, "What is this command and what reason is there for it?", on this account the Torah writes the term Chukat about it, implying: It is statute from before Me; you have no right to criticize it.



The midrash that Rashi brings is saying that the mitzvah of the parah adumah needs no explanation. No answer to the *why* question is needed. God told us to do it, it is a *chok* [statute], and no more explanation is needed.

So how do we deal with laws that are beyond our understanding?

Part of the answer revolves around trust. Do you trust the person who is giving you instructions? Hopefully, when a parent, teacher or doctor tells you to do something you trust that what they tell you to do has some benefit. A child trusts his parents when they tell them to brush their teeth, or look both ways before crossing a road, because it is good for them. An adult will trust the doctor who tells them to take a foul-tasting medicine because they trust it will make them better.

The same goes for commandments that are a *chok* - statute – we have to trust the giver of the commandments, God.

Game on

Trust fall:

A young person [the faller] stand a little bit in front of an adult [the catcher], with their back facing the front of the adult. The faller holds their arms out a little bit, so when they fall backwards the catcher can in the arms of the adult. The following clip shows what it looks like <https://gph.is/2qwlkvZ>. This may be hard for a young person to do, could take multiple attempts, and in the end they may not be able to do it. BUT the process should be fun and light hearted.

Questions to ask after this activity:

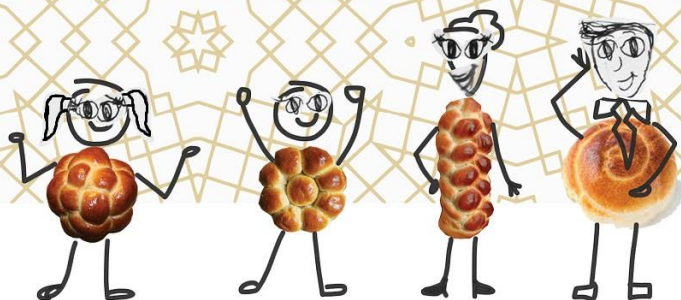
How did you feel before falling back?

Did you hesitate, or try and stop yourself once you fell?

When have there been other times in your life you've had to rely on others?

Was it easy?

What stops you from trusting others?



Transiting to talking about mitzvot and God?

Are there any times in your life you've done something and trusted that 'God is there for you?'

How do you feel about mitzvot that don't make any sense to you – do you do them anyway?

What, if anything, holds you back from trusting God?

Shabbat Shalom!