

Torah Table Talk

The Red Heifer:

Acting Out of Reason or Obedience?

Parshat Hukkat
Numbers 19:1 – 22:1

The sojourn in the wilderness is about to come to an end. Almost forty years have passed, Miriam and Aaron both pass away, and Moses is condemned to die in the wilderness after he fails to obey God. When the people complain that they do not have water, God tells Moses to take his staff, and to stand before a rock and to speak to it. In a fit of anger Moses strikes the rock twice and he shouts at the people. "Because you did not trust me enough," says God "to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

Parshat Hukkat opens with the law of the Red Heifer. Death is considered an impurity in ancient times. If one comes into contact with a corpse, one had to undergo an elaborate ritual of purification involving the ashes of a red cow. The sages considered this law a statute, or a law for which there is no apparent rationale or explanation. The law had to be observed out of faith, simply because "God said so." The Rabbis struggled with this idea. Should one act out of faith even when the reasons for our action are not apparent?

Numbers 19:1

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:
This is the statute of the Torah that the Lord has commanded....

Numbers Rabba 19:8

A heathen said to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai: "The things you Jews do appear to be a kind of sorcery. A heifer is brought, is burned up, and pounded [into ashes]. Then, when one of you gets defiled by contact with a corpse, two or three drops of water mixed with these ashes are sprinkled upon him, and he is told, 'You are now cleansed!' "

Rabban Yohanan asked the heathen, "Has the spirit of madness ever possessed you?" He replied, "No." "Have you ever seen anyone possessed by the spirit of madness? The heathen replied, "Yes." "And have you seen what you people do to the man?" "Roots are brought, they are made to smoke under him, and water is splashed on him, until the spirit flees." Rabban Yohanan then said, "Similarly, a man defiled is like a man possessed by a spirit. This spirit is a spirit of uncleanness. When water of lustration is splashed on it, it flees."

After the heathen left, Rabban Yohanan's disciples said, "Our master, you thrust off that heathen with a mere reed of an answer, but what reply will you give us?" Rabban Yohanan answered, "As you live, the corpse does not defile, nor does the [mixture of ashes and] water cleanse. The truth is that the rite of the Red Heifer is a decree of God. The Holy One said: I have set down a statute, I have issued a decree. You are not permitted to transgress My decree. 'This is a statute of the Torah' "(Num. 19:2).

1. How does the gentile challenge the Jewish religion with his question to Rabbi Yohanan? How does Rabbi Yohanan respond and why are his students incredulous when they hear his answer to the gentile's question?
2. There are many passages in the Torah which speak about impurity and uncleanness particularly in connection with death. If impurity (Tumah) is not hygienic, what exactly is it? How does one's association with death make a person "unclean?" How does this effect a person's day to day dealings?
3. Do you think there is more to the ritual of the red heifer than simply obeying God's commandment? If the corpse does not make defile and the liquid does not purify, what exactly does the participant receive from his involvement in this ceremony?
4. Why do you think we have a Jewish custom of washing our hands upon leaving a ceremony before entering our homes? Do we still associate death with impurity?

Sifra, Kedoshim

It is more praiseworthy to do something solely because God commands it than because our own logic or sense of morality leads us to the same conclusion.

1. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. If it is praiseworthy to perform certain acts simply because God says so why do we bother explaining the rationale behind any of the commandment?
3. Can you think of things that you do because "you are supposed to?" Under what circumstances is such reasoning helpful and when is it not helpful?

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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