

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Chukat  
July 13, 2024 \*\*\* Tamuz 7, 5784

Chukat in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2959/jewish/Chukat-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2959/jewish/Chukat-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Chukat," means "Statute" and it is found in Numbers 19:2.

Moses is taught the laws of the red heifer, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After forty years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies, and the people thirst for water. G-d tells Moses to speak to a rock and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and strikes the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

Aaron dies at Hor Hahar and is succeeded in the high priesthood by his son Elazar. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people "speak against G-d and Moses"; G-d tells Moses to place a brass serpent upon a high pole, and all who will gaze heavenward will be healed. The people sing a song in honor of the miraculous well that provided them water in the desert.

Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og (who seek to prevent Israel's passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie east of the Jordan.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Judges 11: 1-33

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/696127/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/696127/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah describes how the people of Israel were attacked by the nation of Ammon. The Israelites engaged Jephtah to lead them in battle against this military threat. Jephtah first sent a missive to Ammon, declaring his peaceful intentions. In his message, he also discussed the Israelites' conquest of the lands of Sichon and Og, victories which are related in this week's Torah reading.

Jephtah the Gileadite was the son of a harlot. He was sent away from his home by his half-siblings, and settled in the land of Tob where he became a great

warrior. When the nation of Ammon attacked the people of Israel, Jephthah was called upon to lead the Israelites in battle. Jephthah agreed, on one condition: "If you bring me back to fight with the children of Ammon, and G-d delivers them before me, I will become your head." The Israelites accepted his terms.

Jephthah tried to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict by sending messengers to reason with the king of Ammon; but the latter remained inflexible. Jephthah then successfully led his countrymen in battle, and they trounced and eliminated the Ammonite threat.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Descartes' Error by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/descartes-error/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/descartes-error/>

In his 2011 bestseller, *The Social Animal*, New York Times columnist David Brooks writes:

*We are living in the middle of the revolution in consciousness. Over the past few years, geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and others have made great strides in understanding the building blocks of human flourishing. And a core finding of their work is that we are not primarily products of our conscious thinking. We are primarily the products of thinking that happens below the level of awareness.[1]*

Too much takes place in the mind for us to be fully aware of it. Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia estimates that the human mind can absorb 11 million pieces of information at any given moment. We can be conscious of only a tiny fraction of this. Most of what is going on mentally lies below the threshold of awareness.

One result of the new neuroscience is that we are becoming aware of the hugely significant part played by emotion in decision-making. The French Enlightenment emphasised the role of reason and regarded emotion as a distraction and distortion. We now know scientifically how wrong this is.

Antonio Damasio, in his *Descartes' Error*, tells the story of a man who, as the result of a tumour, suffered damage to the frontal lobes of his brain. He had been known to have a high IQ, was well-informed, and had an excellent memory. But after surgery to remove the tumour, his life went into free-fall. He was

unable to organise his time. He made bad investments that cost him his savings. He divorced his wife, married a second time, and rapidly divorced again. He could still reason perfectly but had lost the ability to feel emotion. As a result, he was unable to make sensible choices.

Another man with a similar injury found it impossible to make decisions at all. At the end of one session, Damasio suggested two possible dates for their next meeting. The man then took out a notebook, began listing the pros and cons of each, talked about possible weather conditions, potential conflicts with other engagements and so on, for half an hour, until Damasio finally interrupted him, and made the decision for him. The man immediately said, "That's fine," and went away.

It is less reason than emotion that lies behind our choices, and it takes emotional intelligence to make good choices. The problem is that much of our emotional life lies beneath the surface of the conscious mind.

That, as we can now see, is the logic of the *chukim*, the "statutes" of Judaism, the laws that seem to make no sense in terms of rationality. These are laws like the prohibition of sowing mixed seeds together (*kelayim*); of wearing cloth of mixed wool and linen (*shaatnez*); and of eating milk and meat together. The law of the Red Heifer with which our parsha begins, is described as the *chok* par excellence. As it is written:

"This is the statute of the Torah." [Num. 19:2](#)

There have been many interpretations of the *chukim* throughout the ages. But in the light of recent neuroscience, we can suggest that they are laws designed to bypass the prefrontal cortex, the rational brain, and create instinctive patterns of behaviour to counteract some of the darker emotional drives at work in the human mind.

We know for example – Jared Diamond has chronicled this in his book *Collapse* – that wherever humans have settled throughout history they have left behind them a trail of environmental disaster, wiping out whole species of animals and birds, destroying forests, damaging the soil by over-farming and so on.

The prohibitions against sowing mixed seeds, mixing meat and milk, combining wool and linen, and so on, create an instinctual respect for the integrity of nature. They establish boundaries. They set limits. They inculcate the feeling that

we may not treat our animal and plant environment however we wish. Some things are forbidden – like the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The whole Eden story, set at the dawn of human history, is a parable whose message we can understand today better than any previous generation: Without a sense of limits, we will destroy our ecology and discover that we have lost paradise.

As for the ritual of the Red Heifer, this is directed at the most destructive pre-rational instinct of all: what Sigmund Freud called *thanatos*, the death instinct. He described it as something “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides”.<sup>[2]</sup> In his essay *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, he wrote that “a portion of the [death] instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness”, which he saw as “the greatest impediment to civilisation.”

The Red Heifer ritual is a powerful statement that the holy is to be found in life, not death. Anyone who had been in contact with a dead body needed purification before entering the sanctuary or Temple. Priests had to obey stricter rules, and the High Priest even more so.

This made biblical Judaism highly distinctive. It contains no cult of worship of dead ancestors, or seeking to make contact with their spirits. It was probably to avoid the tomb of Moses becoming a holy site that the Torah says, “to this day no one knows where his grave is” ([Deut. 34:6](#)). God and the holy are to be found in life. Death defiles.

The point is – and that is what recent neuroscience has made eminently clear – this cannot be achieved by reason alone. Freud was right to suggest that the death instinct is powerful, irrational, and largely unconscious, yet under certain conditions it can be utterly devastating in what it leads people to do.

The Hebrew term *chok* comes from the verb meaning, “to engrave”. Just as a statute is carved into stone, so a behavioural habit is carved in depth into our unconscious mind and alters our instinctual responses. The result is a personality trained to see death and holiness as two utterly opposed states – just as meat (death) and milk (life) are.

*Chukim* are Judaism’s way of training us in emotional intelligence, above all a conditioning in associating holiness with life, and defilement with death. It is fascinating to see how this has been vindicated by modern neuroscience.

Rationality, vitally important in its own right, is only half the story of why we are as we are. We will need to shape and control the other half if we are successfully to conquer the instinct to aggression, violence, and death that lurks not far beneath the surface of the conscious mind. [1] David Brooks, *The Social Animal*, Random House, 2011, x. [2] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *On Metapsychology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p. 294.

### Heroes and Humans: Hukat by Amy Kalmanofsky

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/heroes-and-humans-2/>

One of the things I love most about the Bible is that it presents humans, not heroes. Even the Bible's greatest figures have virtues and vices.

Moses has many wonderful attributes that qualify him to lead the Israelites. He fights against injustice (Exod. 2:11–12) and overcomes his own limitations and fears to challenge authority (Exod. 4:10). He is persistent, facing Pharaoh ten times to demand Israel's liberation. He is also a careful arbiter for his people (Exod. 18:13–16). And he is humble (Num. 12.3).

But Moses also has shortcomings. His initial reluctance when God first approaches him to become Israel's liberator could indicate cowardice, or worse, a lack of faith (Exod. 4:11–12). Moses also has a temper. He gets angry at the people (Exod. 32:19) and at God (Num. 11:10–15).

His anger gets the better of him in this week's parashah when, frustrated yet again by the complaining people, Moses strikes a rock twice instead of commanding it to produce water as God directed him, and yells at his recalcitrant people (Num. 20:6–11).

Given the great things Moses accomplishes and the intimate relationship he has with God, one expects God to forgive him this tantrum. Instead, God punishes Moses along with his brother Aaron and denies them entrance into the land of Israel.

Generations of readers question how the punishment fits the crime and search for more serious wrongdoing. After all, a moment of anger should not cancel a life's work. Moses must be guilty of more.

Rashi suggests that by striking the rock, Moses showcased his own power; he failed to sanctify God before the people by not demonstrating how an inanimate rock would respond to God's command. Similarly, Ramban suggests that Moses expressed doubt in God's power by asking the Israelites: "Shall we get water for

you out of this rock?" Moses should have stated affirmatively "We will get water for you," or better yet, "God will get water for you."

Like these rabbis, I believe that Moses is held accountable for more than his anger and his ego. In my reading, God holds Moses accountable for not instilling the people with faith, as God states explicitly in verse 12: "You did not make them believe in me" [לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי]. This is a serious wrong—enough to prevent Israel's great liberator from entering the land.

At this point in the Torah's story, it has been a long time since Israel stood at the banks of the Reed Sea and declared their faith in God and Moses (Exod. 14:31). Since then, Israel's faith has faltered time and again. Wandering through the desert, the people expressed their preference for slavery over starvation (Exod. 16.3; Num. 11:5) and Egypt over Israel (Num. 14.3). They worshipped a cow made from earrings (Exod. 32) and rebelled against God's and Moses's authority (Num. 16:1–11).

Certainly, God holds Israel accountable for its lack of faith [אֵינְכֶם מֵאֱמִינִים] (Deut. 1:32) and condemns this first generation to death in the desert outside of the land of Israel (Deut. 1:35). I suggest that God also holds Moses accountable for Israel's faithlessness and condemns him to a similar fate. In my view, Israel's persistent doubt and denial is a failure of Moses's leadership.

For many, holding Moses accountable for Israel's failures seems unfair. It certainly is sad, if not tragic. But it also offers a profound lesson in leadership, particularly religious leadership.

Leaders cannot stand apart from their communities. Communities choose leaders that reflect who they are and the values they hold. Leaders are best able to guide and transform communities they are aligned with and are a part of. Leaders shape their communities, but communities also shape their leaders. Given the symbiotic relationship between leaders and their communities, it makes sense that leaders be measured by their impact on their communities. Religious leaders in particular should be measured by their ability to create holy communities that are bound by shared values that transcend human experience. Religious leaders should inspire their communities to look beyond themselves to have faith in a greater power and a stronger moral force.

Moses certainly had faith in God, but he could not translate that faith to the desert generation. He could not make this generation believe that God would lead the people from slavery to freedom, from the desert to the promised land.



Moses failed to transform Israel's first generation into a holy nation [גוי קדוש]. Instead, as Moses declares before striking the rock in anger, frustration, and resignation, they remained a community of rebels [מרדים].

Heroes are people we admire. Humans are people to whom we can relate and from whom we can learn. Moses successfully lays the groundwork for a holy community defined by transcendent values that continues to flourish. For this, he becomes the hero of the Jewish people. But Moses also was very human, and his humanness is as profound and as powerful as his heroism. *(This commentary was originally published in 2021.) (Amy Kalmanofsky is Dean at List College and Kekst Graduate School at JTS)*

### [Chukat: Leading and Listening by Maetal Gerson](https://truah.org/resources/maetal-gerson-chukat-moraltorah-2024/)

<https://truah.org/resources/maetal-gerson-chukat-moraltorah-2024/>

Last month, we saw unprecedented heat waves move through weather systems throughout the globe. Within the U.S., warnings of excessive heat were a common phenomenon, with temperatures soaring 10 to 15 degrees above average in southern states and record highs in the North. Across the Atlantic, rising temperatures combined with a lack of vital services took a deadly toll on Muslim pilgrims making their way to Mecca to perform the Hajj, as more than a thousand pilgrims died, many of them due to heat stroke. Finally, because these heat waves are arriving earlier in the season, populations, especially vulnerable ones, are at a higher risk of dying due to the unique dangers that early-season heat brings. The earth is facing a catastrophe, and we are not acting nearly fast enough to save one another.

It is incredibly frustrating and alarming for me to see these changes in temperature take place across the world. I have grown up with climate scientists warning over and over again about the disastrous effects of carbon emissions, deforestation, and pollution on climate change and have seen leaders again and again fail to recognize and act on this climate emergency. I find it alarmingly reminiscent of Moses' failed leadership in this week's parshah, Chukat.

This week, we find the Israelites located in a scorching desert in a state of turmoil. This turmoil is attributed to a severe natural disaster that occurred through the death of Miriam, Moses' sister. Miriam, according to commentators, provided a source of water to the Israelites during their 40 years in the wilderness. When she died, the Israelites were left in a deadly drought (Talmud

Taanit 9a). The Israelites respond to this disaster in anger, pointing out to Moses that to perish by thirst is the worst fate — even more so than perishing by disease. Moses responds in two ways — famously striking the rock instead of speaking to it as he was commanded, and belittling the people of Israel by responding to their desperation with harsh language. Many understand Moses' action of striking the rock to reflect his lack of trust in God and to be the factor that led to his inability to enter the Land of Israel. However, it is his anger at the people and disregard for their plight that some rabbis find to be the significant factor in the loss of his privilege to serve as the Israelites' leader as they enter the Holy Land. His words indicate that he was not in touch with the reality of the situation in front of him, the suffering of the people, or his own role as a leader.

When reading the commentaries for this section of the parshah, we find support for the Israelites' reaction to the dangerous situation. The 13th-century commentator Chizkuni on Numbers 20:2 suggests that, unlike in other instances where the Israelites were quarrelsome, the complaints that the Israelites made here were, in fact, legitimate. The Israelites were facing the real danger of dying of thirst. Not only that, but the Tur HaAroch (13th-14th century) points out that this is the first time that the complaint *lo makom zera*, "not a place where you can plant a seed," occurs in the years of the Israelites' wanderings. To imagine this scene is to imagine a truly horrible situation of profound suffering that the people found themselves in. Moses' angry response to their plea reflects not only his inability to treat the people with decency and respect but also how he fundamentally lacks a grasp on the reality of the emergency at hand. In today's world, we see how leaders are delusional about climate change, for many fail to grasp the reality of the extent of harm and suffering that will occur if immediate and forceful action is not taken.

In the Chasidic work *Netivot Shalom* (Chukat 2), the sin that Moses commits is not striking the rock but addressing the people with disdain by calling them a term that describes something irredeemable. "Shimu na hamorim, listen, you rebels!" He belittles the people, something that the rabbis take very seriously, for it signifies an irreverence towards God and an all-consuming contempt for the people to whom he is speaking. We find another example in *HaKtav VeHaKabbalah*, a 19th-century commentary:

Some of the Sages held the view that Moses and Aaron's sin was that they slighted the Israelites' honor; they slighted the honor of people who



had not sinned... They only assembled, and perhaps this was for the sake of requesting Moses and Aaron to make efforts in prayer in order to satiate their thirst. They did not sin at all, and yet Moses spoke harshly to them and called them rebels. (HaKtav VeHaKabalah, Numbers 20:10:1)

In response to ecological and social unrest, Moses speaks with harshness and contempt. The Torah requires an understanding of not only the natural disaster at hand but also an understanding of the human pain and anguish that comes with it.

In response to the havoc that climate change is creating in this world, communities demand action and change. Perhaps Moses' behavior should give us pause when we think about what we are required to do when responding to the climate disaster. Facing this disaster means facing one another with respect and sincere empathy. Only then can we manage the amount of work it will take to fix that in which each of us has a stake.

When leaders, policymakers, and legislators renege on their promises, favor the demands of fossil fuel industries, and leave considerations for the health of the most affected communities as a low priority — this is a way that they are fundamentally disrespecting communities and refusing to be in touch with a reality that we all share. We pay dearly for this. This parshah, by showing what it means not to listen to one's community, leaves open the possibility of what it means to listen. Had Moses been capable of hearing from his community about their desperation with empathy and compassion, I imagine it less likely that he would have struck the rock. I hope we can listen and heed each other's warnings, for that is the start of sacred action. *(Maetal just completed her first year as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. She is an Avodah Service Corps Chicago alum and is currently working as a Climate Organizing Fellow at Dayenu.)*

### [Chukat: Water Consciousness by Rabbi Yonatan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/07/06-chukat-water-consciousness)

<https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/07/06-chukat-water-consciousness>

This week's parsha, Chukat, is yet another piece in the narrative of the Jewish people and water. The word mayim (water) is mentioned twenty-two times. The portion begins with the para aduma, Hashem's command to mix water with the ashes of a red cow for purification. Miriam then dies, and the well that provided Bnei Yisrael with water (based on Miriam's merit), disappears.[1] The Jewish

people quarrel with Moshe, complaining, "There is no water to drink!"[2] Moshe and Aharon then strike the rock and Hashem brings forth water. Additionally, Moshe asks the Edomites to pass through their land, with a promise not to drink their water,[3] or alternately, to buy it from them.[4] The Jewish people travel by way of the Sea of Reeds (where Hashem had split the sea for them) and, on their desert journey, complain again about lacking water. They finally arrive near the East Bank of the Jordan and sing an exultant song about their appreciation to Hashem for water.[5]

Bnei Yisrael's experiences with water in the desert can be understood as a spiritual training to cultivate appreciation for Hashem's goodness. Hashem takes the essential, tangible resource of water (without which we cannot live for more than a few days) and gives it to us in an environment where we do not have it. We learn to appreciate water and to know who really provides it by taking it for granted, losing it, and then having it granted once again by Hashem; the see-saw experience of having water and then losing it develops the spiritual muscles of appreciating Hashem.

While there is a lesson to be learned from this cycle, it is easy to feel frustrated with Bnei Yisrael when reading about their ingratitude during their constant struggles with water. We can understand Moshe's anger, expressed as he strikes the rock, an action for which he is punished harshly.[6] How, after water was miraculously provided for them so many times, could Bnei Yisrael take it for granted?

Considering our own experience with water, perhaps it should be easier to sympathize with Bnei Yisrael. Today, indoor plumbing is incredibly convenient; it frees us from gathering and lugging our water from streams and cisterns to our homes. A significant portion of America is dealing with severe drought, but our water system remains strong—many could not tell you where the water that comes out of their taps actually comes from.[7]

We also lose sight of how much energy goes into bringing every gallon to our faucet. In many areas of the United States and around the world, electricity-producing generators supply power to pumps that raise water hundreds or even one thousand feet. Elevating the water from underground aquifers to tanks at the top of local mountain ranges, eventually making its way to our homes.[8] It is estimated that the energy used in the water supply accounts for almost 5% of America's total energy use, and likewise 5% of the total carbon emissions. This

shows that misusing water is also wasting energy and can contribute unnecessarily to climate change.[9]

Climate change is causing sea levels to rise, projected to impact sandbars like Long Beach (New York), and islands like Manhattan, as well as causing more intense storms and floods. [10] Even though all water is part of the same global cycle, as long as water continues to flow from our faucets at the desired rate, we are not forced to look to its source. Like Bnei Yisrael, when we have water, it is easy for us to take it for granted, and therefore when it disappears, it is easy to consider this necessity as something that is owed to us, something to be demanded.

It is perhaps this sympathy that underlies Hashem's response to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem instructs Moshe to coax water from the rock by speaking to it, a patient demonstration of Hashem's dominion and the miracle of water. Hashem wants to work in harmony with nature to teach Bnei Yisrael to be appreciative, even though Moshe's performance of His instructions is much less harmonious. While Bnei Yisrael do not learn the lesson immediately, complaining once more and being punished with fiery snakes, their song towards the end of the parsha finally reflects this message: "Spring up O well – sing to it –"[11]

The Torah is a blueprint for spiritual living in a physical world. It enables us to transform our daily, mundane behaviors into holy acts. If we can preserve our connection to Hashem's sustaining power in our world of great abundance, we can transform our lives and the world in holy ways. This is our challenge. And in light of mounting global environmental issues, what might also be called, a revolutionary moment in our history. The great sage, Rabbi Tarfon, teaches that "The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great and the Master is pressing." [12] Perhaps our issue of water is quite parallel - the climate is changing, the seas are rising, and the glaciers are melting, but the reward is great. Every tenth of a degree of warming we can mitigate, every community that we can provide water for, and every moment of appreciation we can find in nature is a reward in and of itself, paving the way for a better future and better world.

[1] Rashi on Bamidbar 20:2, Ta'anit 9a [2] Bamidbar 20:3 [3] As per Targum Onkeles (Israel, 2nd century) to 20:17 [4] As per Rashi (France, 11th century) to 20:17 [5] Bamidbar 21:17-18 [6] Bamidbar 20:12 [7] For information on the current state of drought in America, see [here](#). [8] To understand where household water in America comes from, start [here](#).

[9] See [this report](#). [10] Read the [IPCC report on sea level rise](#), and this

explanation of a Rutgers report for a look into what Sea Level rise might mean for New Jersey. [11] Bamidbar 20:12 [12] Pirkei Avot 2:15, translation from [www.chabad.org/library](http://www.chabad.org/library) *(Yonatan Neril is an interfaith environmental advocate, NGO director, and rabbi. He is the founder and current director of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, a non-profit organization based in Jerusalem. Neril speaks internationally on religion and ecology.)*