

## Finding a Deeper Truth

This Shabbat, we read the portion of *Chukat*. This title means a law that does not make rational sense. The law to which this is referring is the commandment of the *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer. One who came in contact with a dead body, or was housed in a structure that simultaneously housed a corpse contracts the most severe form of *Tumah*, ritual impurity. The remedy for this impurity is the mixture of the spring water, blood and ash of the red heifer, sprinkled on the impure person. After the weeklong purification process, the person who is ritually impure will recover full access to the sacred realm.

The *Parah Adumah* is the archetypal mitzvah used to describe the *Chok*, the law without human reason. The *midrash* offers an interesting narrative to highlight this point. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, a great Talmudic teacher and his students were engaged in Torah study and an idolater posed the question: The ritual that you perform for the Red Heifer seems like magic?! Why do you do this? And the rabbi answered: If you wanted to exorcise hysterical, evil spirits from a person you would take smoke and sprinkle incense upon him to relieve the person from his hysteria. So that's what we do too. At this the idolater felt satisfied and left.

Rabbi Yochanan's students heard their teacher's reply and immediately protested: For him that reply was acceptable, but that is not so for us! And the teacher replied to his eager students: In truth, the dead do not make one impure and the holy water does not make one pure. God decreed it thus and we are bound to follow. (B'midbar Rabba, 19:8)

These two approaches to the matter of the red heifer represent two attitudes that we face in our lives as Modern Jews. We live in integrated societies –Jews and non-Jews and believers and doubters share the world. And we are faced, every day with a skeptical mind and inquiring eye. Our values and practices are not only put to the test in every media, technological and informational platform. Everyone's values are held up to the lens of public scrutiny and popular opinion.

Rabbi Yochanan offers an approach to help us negotiate this tension. There is an inner and outer conversation. The community of faith does not owe an explanation to those from without. However, the community of faith cannot remain a mystery in the public eye. The interaction of sacred and secular is productive. The students of Rabbi Yochanan ask about the true, inner meaning of the red heifer, only after the idolater leaves. They were vexed, as we all are, by the red heifer. It is an odd practice and it demands our attention. But they did not, or could not, ask their rebbi until the outsider broke down a barrier. Then, Rabbi Yochanan shared with his students the inner truth. There *is* a deeper meaning to the red heifer that the students were, perhaps, not ready to hear. Yet the deeper truth could only be heard by those who reside in the inner circle.

These are some themes that emerge in light of the tragedy in the Charleston. We are separate communities of faith; we do not inhabit the same spiritual, covenantal world, but we share a commitment to God and to goodness. Our worlds overlap in those margins. And that is where we can speak to each other. These tragedies are becoming numbingly normal. That is tragic onto itself. But the intrusion into the holy places and sanctuaries shortens the distance and bursts the bubble of denial. The pain allows us to ask the hard questions and offer the meaningful gesture in ways that we would not or could not before. And we pray, despite this entire trauma, that we discover a deeper, inner truth that will restore peace and renew hope.

With blessings of a Shabbat of Consolation and Shalom,  
Rabbi Menashe East