

'IT WOULD be mistaken to think that God gives commands that are meaningless.' (Pixabay)



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PARASHAT CHUKAT  
SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

# Logic and obedience

This week's Torah portion of Chukat tells us one of the commandments that became a conceptual symbol: the commandment of *para aduma*, the red heifer. To someone unfamiliar with it, it sounds odd, but perhaps that is one of the commandment's important messages. Let's learn about the red heifer.

According to the Torah's statutes, a person who comes in contact with a dead human body, or was even under the same roof as a dead body, becomes impure. The implications of this impurity focus on the proximity of this person to the Temple.

Nowadays, when we have no Temple, there is almost no practical significance to these *halachot* (Jewish laws) about impurity. In actuality, we have probably all been under the same roof as a body, in a hospital or at a funeral, for example. But when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it had significance. Such a person could not enter the area of the Temple or come in contact with the sacrifices, and certainly could not eat food that had purity, such as certain sacrifices or *truma* that were given to the *kohanim* (priests) from the agricultural harvest.

So, what was this person supposed to do? The Torah offered him a way to purify himself using the red heifer. The details of the commandment are less important for our purposes, but we will describe them briefly.

A red heifer is located that has never been used. It

is slaughtered and its meat is burned, and then the ashes are mixed with pure stream water, followed by a special ceremony that lasts seven days during which drops of this water are sprinkled on the impure person. This description sounds foreign to our modern, Western ears, but this does not mean that Western culture is better than ancient rituals practiced thousands of years ago. The significance of these ceremonies can only be understood after profound intellectual and emotional efforts.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be noted that the ceremony of the red heifer was mocked even in ancient times.

THE WELL-KNOWN commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, France, 11th century) said the following about the words "This is the statute of the Torah" at the beginning of this week's parasha: "Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, 'What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?' Therefore, the Torah uses the term 'statute.' I have decreed it; you have no right to challenge it" (Rashi, Numbers 19: 2).

This is not to say that the commandment has no reason or logic. It would be mistaken to think that God gives commands that are meaningless. Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker, writes adamantly about this.

"But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that

every one of the 613 precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits" (Guide to the Perplexed 3, 31).

This doesn't mean we understand everything. This definitive statement is a general one, but when we look at each commandment individually, we definitely find some we don't understand. This is where the value of obedience comes into play, or as Rashi put it, "I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it." As people, as Jews, we obey God's statutes and are sure this is the right and best way to live.

When we look at the stories in the Book of Exodus of the tabernacle being built, we find a sentence that is repeated many times. Everything that was done, was done "as the Lord had commanded Moses." The significance of the repetition is to emphasize that when we are facing a commandment from God, we must obey. We can try to understand it, to research and delve into its meaning, to ask and to search for answers. But at the same time, the obligation to obey cannot be undermined.

The commandment of the red heifer reminds us, today as well, of the limits of human understanding, and of the obligation and need to recognize our proper place in the face of a commandment from God. ■

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JUDAISM 3.0  
GOL KALEV

# The age-old question: Is God still with Israel?

The epic story of how the Israelis lost, then regained their deterrence

The Song of Sea describes new geopolitical realities that followed the miracles God did for Israel: "Then were the chiefs of Edom affrighted; the mighty men of Moab, trembling took hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away. Terror and dread falleth upon them"

Yet sometimes thereafter, those chiefs of Edom were no longer afraid. They deny Moses's request for a "transit visa" on the way to the Promised Land. They threaten Israel and then attack with a heavy force. The Israelis retreat.

Edom's shift is logical. After all, the miracles of the Exodus occurred years ago, the well-advertised intention to conquer Canaan did not happen and the Israelis were stuck in the desert. Edom could have reasonably concluded that God was no longer with Israel.

They were also likely aware of Israel's sins, repeatedly angering God: the Golden Calf, the spies, the murders. Moreover, the question if God is with Israel was raised by the Israelis themselves: "Is the Lord among us, or not?" they asked early on. Then in the Ma'apilim war, God clarified that he was not. Indeed, Moses communicates to the generation of Israelis that because to their sins, they were pre-exiled from their land.

Centuries later this dynamic is replicated. Europeans in the Middle Ages concluded that God was no longer with Israel, and that Europeans replaced Israel as God's chosen people. Here too, the Jews themselves provided supporting evidence, citing in their weekly prayers, "Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land."

Indeed, the exiled Jews in the second era of Judaism were perceived by Europeans just as they were by the Edomites, as weaklings who could be bullied – certainly not people who should be allowed to dwell in the cafés of Europe nor near the wells of Edom. (When Europe finally allowed Jews in, a populous counter-movement emerged that ultimately led to the European-wide genocide of its Jews).

Edom's rejection seems to catch Moses by surprise. He appeals, upgrades the carriers of the message, and sweetens the terms (A similar protocol used by Moab when trying to recruit Balaam). The Israeli submissive attitude is reminiscent of their last encounter with Edom centuries prior.

Back then, Jacob (Israel) feared retribution from Esav (Edom), and took extreme measures to contain the anticipated attack.

YET ESAV did not attack, and even granted Israel's requested terms of travel. This time the reverse: Esav denies Israel and indeed attacks! Israel surrenders.

Not only the path to the Promised Land had been blocked, but Edom's refusal was indicative of an international coalition that had likely emerged in order to stop the Israeli advance. "The people who came out of Egypt" as they were described by the King of Moab, made no secret of their intentions to invade. Therefore, there was an alignment of interests to stop



JEWISH MUSICIANS in Russia, 1890: The exiled Jews in the second era of Judaism were perceived by Europeans just as they were by the Edomites. (paukrus/Flickr)

them, as evident by the Moab-Midian alliance.

The first battle of Edom – an arrowless battle in which the Israelis unconditionally surrendered – demonstrated to the coalition that the Israelis were indeed no longer as powerful, and that God might no longer be with them.

Therefore, it is no surprise that when the Israelis renew their efforts to advance toward Canaan, they are attacked by another member of the coalition: the Canaanite King of Arad. He delivered a devastating blow to Israel and took captives.

If there were still minority opinions in the nations' intelligence apparatus about the viability of the Israeli threat, it was likely gone after Arad. The indication that God was no longer with the Israelis was overwhelming: They were stuck in the desert for 38 years, their high priest is dead, their elderly are dead, the generations born in the desert are demoralized, crying for 30 days!

On top of this, in every single military confrontation, the Israelis have been humiliated: the Ma'apilim war, Edom, Arad. Things look just like as Moses warned. The nations concluded that God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, "to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the Earth."

The chiefs of Edom are no longer affrighted; the mighty men of Moab are no longer trembling, and as evident from the battle of Arad, the inhabitants of Canaan are no longer melted away.

But then the story twists. After their initial defeat, the Israelis engage in a religious ritual. They vow to God, and just as in Egypt, "The Lord hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed

them and their cities." With their first victory in 38 years, Divine deterrence had been restored. The chiefs of Edom were affrighted again – so much so that as the Israelis advance in their vicinity, Edom does not attack!

FROM A geopolitical point of view, Edom's failure to attack in the second go-around is hard to understand (akin to the future inhabitants of Edom's failure to attack in 1973). Israel was vulnerable: lack of water, low morale, bitten by serpents, "and much people of Israel died." Sihon and Bashan attacked when Israel came to their vicinity, Edom did so before. Why not now?

Evidently, the counter-operation in Arad was an inflection point in the biblical narrative. It generated deterrence that enabled the Israeli journey north toward Canaan. This is just as centuries prior, following that encounter with Esav, an Israeli counter-operation in Shechem generated deterrence needed for the Israeli advance south into Canaan: "And they journeyed; and a terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob."

*With their first victory in 38 years, divine deterrence had been restored. The chiefs of Edom were affrighted again*

Once the crossing of Edom was completed, the Israeli anthem evolved from "Then Sang Moses" to "Then Sang Israel." This song was once again heard clearly throughout the region: Raahcav reports of melting away of the inhabitants of Canaan. Instead of opposing Israel, she chooses to bless Israel. A splinter Midianite group decides to do the same. Hence, God's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled in both directions: "And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse."

Today, as Israel's deterrence has once again been restored, more and more of the current inhabitants of Edom, Moab and Canaan seek to benefit from the new song of Israel, composed by Theodor Herzl and carried through Zionism. Indeed, among the 6,000 participants at a recent Herzl's birthday celebration hosted by the America-Israel Friendship League and the Herzl Center, were people from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Observant Muslims, Christians and Jews alike maintain that God is indeed with Israel. But in a stunning development of human history, a new movement arose in recent centuries, for which the age-old question is outright irrelevant: European atheism

As frustrations in Europe mount, so does the intensity of its opposition to Israel. Hence, the Abrahamic equation is once again coming alive: There are those in Europe that opt to oppose, and a growing number of Israel's neighbors who choose to be blessed. ■

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