

## *Chukat 2018*

*Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/23/18*

As you likely know, there are 613 commandments, or mitzvot, in the Torah, and there are many ways in which our Tradition categorizes them. We separate them into commandments that are between Gd and Humanity (called Ben-Adam La-Makom), and those that are between human beings, one with the other (Ben Adam L'Adam). We can also separate them into the 248 Positive Commands (Thou shalt...) and the 365 Negative Commands (Thou shalt not...).

Yet another way that the Sages categorize them is according to their rationale. So, for instance, there are mitzvot that are labeled "mishpatim." These are rules that are logical and essential to maintaining a civil society. Laws like, "Thou Shalt Not Murder;" "You must return lost objects;" and "Help others in distress;" these are all fundamental building blocks of a stable society. Those are called "Mishpatim."

Then there is a category called "Edut." The word means "witness" and these commandments bear witness to our Jewish identity. They are the stuff only Jews do because we identify as Jews. Things like keeping kosher, shaking a lulav, making Kiddush, these all fall into the category of Edut. But there is a third category, the most famous example of which is in our portion today, called "Chukim." Chukim are commandments/mitzvot for which there is no logical explanation. We observe them because we believe they are the stated will of Gd. The most famous example is sprinkling of the ashes of a young cow with red hair as means of purifying someone who has had contact with a corpse. That's a commandment for which there is no logical explanation, nor is it a way in which Jews self-identify. We just do it because we believe in The Higher Power.

The Midrash tells the story of a Roman aristocrat who asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai to explain this strange ritual. The Rabbi replied, "Just as a person who is afflicted with a certain disease is cured of his illness by taking a certain medicine, so too do the ashes of the Red Cow, when prepared in the prescribed way and dissolved in water disperse the unclean spirit." The Roman left, apparently satisfied with this answer. But Rabbi Yochanan's students who heard this exchange were not willing to accept this reason. So they said, "That answer made the Roman happy, but what answer do you have to satisfy us?!" Thereupon Rabbi Yochanan said, "The dead man does not make a person impure, nor do the ashes make him pure again. My answer is that this is a "Chok," a Heavenly Decree and, consequently, we mere mortals have no right to question it."

Now I suppose that many people would look at this category of Jewish law and life, and say, "Well, that's what's wrong with religion! I can understand why we need rules for treating one another right." (I was on a shuttle bus at U of P hospital last week and I overheard a woman saying to a friend, "Yes, he knows right from wrong. He grew up in the church.") And we know the importance of feeling part of a team or of a community. But following rules just because Gd says so seems to be, far and away, the weakest of the three legs on which we base our religious system. But I would argue that it is among the most important, and truly one of the most important reasons we need religion today.

I believe that these unexplainable commandments are here to teach us humility. We human beings can rationalize anything. If we want to do something, there's almost always a good way of explaining why we should, even if it looks immoral, indecent, or cruel. But by maintaining that

there are non-rational rules that we must follow we are reminded that we are not Gd; we are not the ultimate power and authority in the world. So even though we can rationalize doing something abhorrent, we need to know that it's not all about us. Chukim, the unexplainable ways of Gd, teach us humility, plain and simple.

We humans, by definition are finite and thus limited in our understanding. Our talents are different, our minds are different, and our experiences vary from one another. Individually, we comprehend only a small, unique fraction of the world. But together, we arrive at a far-grander view of the Universe. Humble people realize their understanding is limited and embrace it. As a result, they wisely look for answers outside of themselves.

Humility appreciates others. All human life carries inherent value. Our souls hold no more value or importance than the person sitting next to us, no matter where we may be sitting. A humble person appreciates the fact that the world does not revolve around him or her. Humility teaches us to accept our position as just a tiny piece in the giant puzzle. It does not mean that we cannot make a difference in the world. In fact, just the opposite. Humility gives us the perspective we need to look wider and deeper into the lives of those around us, the world in which we live, and the Gd-given souls within each of us. We grow in soul, and ironically deepen our self-understanding, by seeing the world with reverence and humility, as well as boundless curiosity for the lives of others, and the world we share together.