

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Chukat 5774

Embracing Torah

Death permeates this week's parasha. There are the obvious deaths - Moshe's older siblings, Miriam and Aharon - and the not-so-obvious deaths: At some point, very quietly, the Torah has "fast forwarded" and skipped 38 years between the previous parashah, Korach, and this week's parashah, Chukat; all the adults that left Egypt, the generation that had been condemned to death as a result of the sin of the spies, has perished. Moshe himself receives a death sentence; the new generation will enter the Promised Land without him.

Parashat Chukat is comprised not only of narrative that is rife with overtones of death, but also of laws that are concerned with the same subject. The parashah begins by introducing the laws of the red heifer ritual, used as an antidote to the impurity that results from contact with the dead.

This is by no means our first encounter with death in the Torah. From time immemorial, from the dawn of human experience, from the beginning of the Torah, people have been dying. On the level of biological reality, we understand

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death; it results either from sudden trauma which compromises the integrity of the biological system, or from systemic breakdown caused by years of wear and tear. But if the mechanics of death are part and parcel of life, it is the philosophical aspect of death that haunts and torments us, and it is regarding this aspect of death that the Torah's philosophy is remarkable.

In Parashat Chukat and elsewhere, we cannot escape the conclusion that death is not a necessary element of the human condition. The physical realities of death which we consider immutable facts of life

need not be so; death as we know it was only one of the possible options for human existence, and it was the option chosen by man himself. Death became a part of our lives in the Garden of Eden, as a result of partaking from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Moreover, even in Eden, even after the sin, there was still another tree that was the antithesis of, or the antidote to death: the Tree of Life. There are, then, two antidotes to death: the red heifer ritual, which removes the spiritual stain left behind by death, and the Tree of Life, which completely eradicates death.

Taken together, these two disparate “antidotes” teach us that although on a biological level death seems inevitable, on a theological level, death need never have been a part of our existence. Had man refrained, as commanded, from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or, even after eating from it, had man eaten from the Tree of Life as well, death would have remained only a philosophical possibility.

What are these miraculous antidotes? What is the unfathomable secret that would make death external to human reality? What is this source of eternal life? It is Torah, the common denominator between the Tree of Life and the red heifer ritual. Both are identified as “Torah,” not in a general sense but in a very specific sense. In the book of Proverbs (3:18) the Torah is described as a “Tree of Life to those who embrace it,” while in our present parashah, the red heifer ritual is introduced as “the decree of Torah” (“Zot Chukat haTorah”) –in a definitive, exclusive sense. Torah is as accessible as the fruit of a tree, and as mysterious as the most inscrutable Divine decree; it is both attainable yet of unfathomable, unlimited depth; Torah is the very source of eternal life. God Himself gave this gift to mankind at the dawn of creation, in the form of the Tree of Life - but man forfeited the rights to it. Later, in an almost unbelievable act of kindness, God gave mankind a second chance: At Sinai, God once again gave man access to this source of eternal life, in the form of Torah. Equally unbelievably, mankind once again failed to seize the opportunity.

Had things worked out differently at Sinai, had the Torah been properly received, death would have been vanquished. The first steps in this process were experienced at the foot of Mount Sinai: Tradition tells us that in preparation for receiving the Torah, all the sick were healed, all the infirm were restored to full health. Even today, so many hospitals are named in commemoration of the great healing experienced at Mount Sinai. Had the people only stayed the course, had they not squandered the opportunity to take hold of the source of

eternal life that is Torah, there would never have been a need for hospitals at all; sickness and death would have become memories, theoretical possibilities that belonged to the abandoned path of ignorance and impurity. Instead, when Moshe descended with the Tablets of Testimony, the people were busy singing and dancing in worship of a calf made of gold. We would do well to imagine how history would have played out had they instead danced and celebrated around Moshe as he descended from on high, grasping the Torah he had received from God's hand. By choosing the calf over Torah and turning their backs on Moshe, who was the ultimate symbol of God's transmission of Torah to mankind, they once again chose death over life.

As a result of their choice, they should have been eradicated on the spot; if not for Moshe's intercession, that is precisely what would have happened. Instead, their sin re-mapped the course of history, and continues to resonate in this week's parashah. According to a tradition cited by Rashi, the golden calf served as the impetus for the red heifer ritual: As a counterbalance to death, to the choice they made that was symbolized by a calf, they would be

commanded to sacrifice this very special cow, a heifer of unique color; the mother cow would be used to "clean up" the mess created by the mischievous calf. The rebellion of the golden calf is thus transformed into a Torah experience, symbolized by the red heifer and all its mystery. The desire to create and worship a concrete god is combatted with an act of surrender to a law we do not understand, and the horror of the physical reality of death is tempered by the Torah's reminder, through the red heifer ritual, that this condition is not inevitable. Just as death is the result of our own poor choices, so, too, can eternal life be achieved by grasping the Tree of Life – Torah.

Tragically, the people's poor choices did not end at Mount Sinai. They continued to reject the source of life. Over and over, they failed to embrace Moshe, failed to take advantage of the opportunity to dance around him and rejoice in the man who was, for all time, the embodiment of Torah. Their litany of complaints seems unending; in Parashat Chukat, they are incapable of finding an appropriate way to address the water crisis, and revert to their habitual complaining, nagging,

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baiting and loss of faith. In responding to them, Moshe deviates ever so slightly from God's instructions, and momentarily ceases to embody Torah. For this, he forfeits the right to lead the people into the Land of Israel and the privilege of serving as the Messiah.

Had Moshe led the people into the Land of Israel, ushering in the messianic age, death would have been eradicated and history would have reached its apex. Sadly, the people never properly embraced Moshe. They continued to turn away from the Tree of Life and Moshe, our Torah Master. Death remained an inextricable part of their lives, and Moshe, the living antidote to death, perished along with them. But unlike them, when Moshe died, no one became impure; God Himself conducted the funeral and burial. Moshe had no part in the sin of the golden calf, and no ashes of the red heifer were needed after his passing.

All of us, descendants of those who failed time and time again to choose life, continue to grapple with death. For our ancestors, the ashes of the red heifer served as a reminder of what might have been had they made better choices. Sadly, after generations of similarly poor choices, even this spiritual antidote is no longer available to us. Instead, we live with death and impurity, facing the consequences of the choices we continue to make.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-chukat.html>