

# Parashat Chukat 5771

July 1, 2011

*By Rabbi Maurice Harris*

This week's Torah portion, Chukat, is fascinating. We open the parashah still in the second year of the Israelites' wanderings in the desert following their exodus from Egypt, but by the time we reach the end of the parashah we're in year number 40. There are strange laws and unusual episodes, the deaths of leaders and of dreams, pitched battles, winged serpents, temper tantrums, water miracles, and leadership transitions, all within the contours of a single week's reading from the Torah.

Chukat starts with a description of the priestly ritual that the Israelites are to follow whenever they come into contact with a corpse. The priests are instructed to take the ashes of a red cow and use them as part of a purification ritual. The laws of the *parah adumah*, or red heifer, have perplexed rabbis for thousands of years, and continue to be the subject of speculation to this day.

Then, the Torah portion jumps forward 38 years in time, leaving us to wonder what happened to Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the Israelites during all those long years in the desert. When the story resumes, we read about the death of the prophet, Miriam. Shortly after losing his sister, Moses and Aaron face a grumbling, thirsty population of Israelites clamoring for water. God instructs Moses to take his rod, approach a particular rock, and speak to the rock to give forth water for the people. Amidst the peoples' complaints, however, an over-stressed Moses finally comes unglued. With Aaron watching helplessly, Moses throws a fit in front of the entire assembly, yelling at them for their endless rebelliousness and striking the rock repeatedly with his rod. Water gushes forth, but in the aftermath of this drama God informs Moses that he and Aaron will not be accompanying the Israelites into the Promised Land. It's a shattered dream following almost 40 years of shepherding this difficult flock.

Shortly afterwards, Moses's brother Aaron, the High Priest, dies. In the space of a short time span, Moses has lost both his siblings and his dream of entering the holy land. Aaron's oldest surviving son, Elazar, assumes the mantle of High Priest.

In the next scene, the Israelites, now approaching the Jordan River, the boundary of the Promised Land, go into battle against the nation of Arad. They are victorious, and momentum is building towards their eventual conquest of the Land.

But then, another moral failure on the part of the Israelites. Backsliding into old bad habits, they begin railing against Moses, and this time it is God who loses all patience with them. God dispatches creatures known as seraph serpents – winged snakes – who bite the people and infect them with a deadly venom. Moses intercedes by fashioning a bronze figure in the shape of one of these creatures, attaching it to the end of a staff, and raising it up where all the people can gaze at it. The act of looking at this statue has healing powers and saves many lives.

Finally, the parashah closes with accounts of two more Israelite victories in battle. They make camp near the land of Moab for now.

As I thought about the parashah, like many commentators before me, I was struck by how much death and transition it contains. It opens with a purification ritual that deals with the dead, and then goes on to tell of three deaths in a row: the death of Miriam, the death of Moses and Aaron's dream to enter the Promised Land, and then the death of Aaron.

This Torah portion presents several transitions too. It transitions from the beginning of the Israelites' years of wandering to the end of those years. It describes the transition of power from Aaron as High Priest to Elazar. And, in describing the events that lead to Moses being denied the opportunity to set foot in the Land of Israel, it foretells the impending transition of leadership from Moses to his loyal assistant, Joshua. The Israelites themselves are in transition too – from being a group of victims and whiners to becoming a group that can fend for themselves, including in battle.

Endings and new beginnings, transitions in leadership – these themes are so prominent in Chukat. I found myself shaking my head this week and thinking, "If only there were some impending transitions in *our* community, or in *my* life, then I could easily write a d'var Torah on that aspect of the Torah portion!" (*ironic pause & smile*)

Oh, I suppose there actually are some important transitions happening around here after all. Rabbi Yitzhak has returned from sabbatical, which included a good stretch of time in the Promised Land; Yedida Bessemer has relocated to Los Angeles and begun her new masters in Jewish education program; I'm stepping down in a month; and in just under 3 weeks, Rabbi Boris joins our staff. For the first time since our move into this wonderful building, TBI stands at a moment of significant community transition.

What guidance does this parashah, Chukat, potentially offer us, as we stand looking across the centuries at this account of our ancestors in their moment of transition? Like them, we approach this transitional time from a place of growing strength. In their moment, that sense of growing strength was understood through the metaphor of being able to fight their own battles successfully. I think that that's Torah-speak for saying this rag-tag group of Hebrews had finally found a way to grow up.

In our case, we don't have any battles to fight with neighboring armies – there's no need for us to raid Camas Ridge Elementary and claim their playground as our own, fun as it might be to do so. But we're a community that really can fight its battles. We were strong enough to overcome some obstacles to build this facility, and we weathered the transition of moving into this building with impressive signs of adaptability and the ability to grow into the potential that this new space provides us. We've weathered this tough economy for non-profits and despite some hardships continued to improve our programming and serve the needs of the congregation. In other words, we're a strong congregation, well-organized and well-governed, with a community that's been tested through different challenges and that's not only survived but grown towards

its goals. I think some wisdom we can glean from Chukkat is that we can draw confidence in our community's *capacity for transition* by noticing the battles we've fought and won, by noticing our recent history of successes.

Chukkat is a parashah about community transitions, but the transitions aren't chaotic. They follow a structure that's intended to serve the needs of the community. Aaron dies, but the priesthood goes on, and a new High Priest emerges. Moses learns of his final fate, but the community won't be leaderless after his death. Joshua, who is well-trained and has lots of experience, and who brings skills that will be in high demand once the Israelites are in the Promised Land – Joshua waits in the wings to take the reins. In other words, Chukkat gives us a chance to think about transitions that are planned, and that reflect a model that supports the community's health and success.

Our current situation is similar. We're going through a planned transition with a lot of thought and care behind it. The staff and lay leaders who've guided it have followed a structure for transition that has served the community well before. We have a wide range of feelings – myself included – as we face change: feelings including loss and uncertainty, alongside curiosity, excitement, and hope about the next chapter in the life of the congregation. The feelings are strong, no doubt, and they'll only get stronger in the coming weeks. And yet, I believe we can approach this time with a good dose of trust and optimism. For one thing, we're blessed with the continued big-hearted and soulful leadership of Rabbi Yitz, and we're also going to be blessed with the gifts and strengths that Rabbi Boris brings with him. But beyond those blessings, this congregation can approach this time of transition with trust and hope because of its well-developed capacity for transition, and because of its deep-running and well-tested strengths.

Richard Gladstein and Dale Lupu co-author a web site called Midrash Meditation. They write, “May we understand that change, both small and large, is continual. And may we discern those times when our best action is to be patient and wait for change to take place on its own, and when the most skillful response is to initiate change with an intentional breaking of our own patterns.”

For me, the decision to step down from my rabbinic role is a decision I feel sadness and loss over, and I'm open about that. My family's needs and life considerations tipped the scales in my own mind to the side of becoming convinced that “the most skillful response” to my life's challenges was to “initiate change with an intentional breaking” of one of my core patterns – in this case, the pattern being my rabbinic life at TBI. Not an easy decision, but, I think, the right one at this time.

As I prepare myself for this process of endings and new beginnings, I'm struck also by the first part of the passage by Gladstein and Lupu. “May we understand that change, both small and large, is continual.” It's so easy to forget this. We're all constantly changing, and so is Temple Beth Israel. Even if our entire staff were to stay exactly the same for years to come, the staff members would continue changing and growing each day, and the community would too. The

sign of a healthy community is not one in which things stop changing. Rather, in a healthy community, feelings are acknowledged, including feelings of loss or uncertainty, and people come together to support one another through change so that new life and growth continues to characterize the life of the community. That's us. TBI isn't perfect, but on the whole, we're healthy.

Tonight happens to be not only Shabbat, but Rosh Chodesh, the start of a new month in the Jewish calendar. We've reached the point in the lunar cycle of the new moon. Rabbi Vicki Hollander offers us a prayer for the beginning of this new monthly cycle, and I invite us to consider its spirit of hopefulness and anticipation of blessing as we move towards our own community rabbinic transition. Her prayer is written in the singular, but I've adapted it for us as a group.

Gift us with length of days,  
a life of peace,  
of goodness,  
a life of blessing,  
a life which can sustain us;  
a life we can face with vigor,  
a life wherein we are touched by awe,  
a life where we struggle, aware of when we get off track;  
a life without shame;  
a life of richness,  
of honor;  
a life wherein we feel Torah's light,  
wherein we find Your Presence;  
a life where the inner questions of our hearts know deep response,  
and peace.  
So may it be.

Shabbat shalom.