

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1-22:1)

A Sad Shabbos in New York State

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

G-d said to Moses, *“This is the decree of the Torah...”*

This week’s Torah Portion opens with a mitzvah that defies human logic.

There are many complex laws of ritual purity and defilement. One who has become ritually defiled, e.g., by contact with the dead, is not permitted to enter the Temple until undergoing a purification process. (Although it is different in many ways, 21st Century Jews can relate to this rule in a small way by the fact that even nowadays, it is customary to wash one’s hands after leaving a cemetery.)

This purification was accomplished by being sprinkled with a solution of spring water and ashes. These ashes came, primarily, from a red cow that had been slaughtered and burnt. Although this concoction had the ability to bring a defiled person to a state of ritual purification, the process of making this mixture caused one who was pure to become defiled.

Confused yet? That’s ok; King Solomon didn’t understand this Mitzvah either.

The Red Cow is the quintessential *“Chok,”* or divine edict, with no understandable explanation. The Talmud tells us that the Red Cow “purifies the defiled, and defiles the pure.” The person who burns the cow, the person who collects the ashes, the person who adds the other ingredients – all of them become “contaminated” through the ceremony that purifies the “client.” The same mystical blend that allows one who has come in contact with the dead to enter the Temple causes those involved in preparing the concoction to be temporarily barred from entering the Temple!

The message of the Red Cow is that *“...This is the **DECREE** of the Torah...”*

The key is that we recognize that we are incapable of fathoming the wisdom of G-d and His Commandments. He is our King, and we must obey.

Sometimes we will, on some level, understand the Commandments. Sometimes we will not.

Other Mitzvahs are easier to understand than the Red Cow.

G-d created man...male and female He created them. G-d blessed them and G-d said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply...”

*The man could not find a companion... so G-d cast a deep sleep upon the man... G-d fashioned ... a woman, and he brought her to the man... and the Man said, "... bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, this shall be called 'Woman' ('Ishah' in Hebrew), for she was taken from the **Man** ('Ish' in Hebrew). Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife... (Genesis, 1:27-28;2:20-24)*

This is very easy to understand. G-d wants the world to be populated. Therefore He created men and women, with the ability and desire to engage in relationships that will cause the world to be filled with future generations of humans.

Mankind has always recognized that there is a special relationship between men and women, and has solemnized these relationships with an institution called "marriage."

To be sure, non-conventional human attractions have been known to exist; that's why the Torah needed to spell out the prohibition against acting on those attractions. While some societies have not condemned these activities the way the Torah does, it was always recognized that the institution of marriage was about a man and a woman. A man doesn't marry his car. A man doesn't marry his pet iguana. And a man doesn't marry a man.

Last Shabbos, we read the story of Korach. Korach didn't like the way the Commandments were working out.

G-d told Moses to appoint Aaron as High Priest. Korach didn't like that. G-d told Moses to appoint another relative to a position Korach wanted. Korach didn't like that either.

It became clear to Korach that there was a conflict between his personal agenda and the Commandments that G-d was giving to Moses. However, rather than recalibrating his agenda to be in line with the will of G-d, Korach decided that he needed to discredit Moses and redefine G-d's will to match his own. (For more on Korach, see "True Blue.")

Last Friday night, as the Nation of Israel was about to read the Torah section of Korach, the State of New York decided to emulate Korach.

There are those who will make the claim that same-gender attraction is "normal." I won't, at least for the sake of this discussion, dispute that claim.

Let us look at the Seventh and Tenth Commandments.

Will anyone argue that the attraction of a man for someone else's wife is unnatural? There is no shortage of former presidents, vice-presidents, governors, and golf stars who can illustrate that such a proclivity is very, very common. Should we, therefore, extend the concept of marriage to include one's neighbor's wife?

Is it not "normal" to covet one's neighbor's house, wife, and possessions? What about stealing and murder? Are not those, too, normal factors of the human condition? Should we, therefore, in order to accommodate personal agendas, redefine Torah prohibitions to permit that which G-d has condemned as prohibited?

Or should we recognize that "*This is the decree of the Torah...*"; that we fulfill G-d's will by fulfilling His Commandments, whether or not we find them consistent with our personal preferences?

G-d put us into a world full of temptations that threaten to lead us away from the proper path. We may want to steal, but G-d tells us to fight that urge to steal and do the right thing. Some of us, as former President Carter admitted, lust after other women in our hearts. And some men lust after other men in their hearts.

To all of those people, the Torah tells us, don't do it; it is wrong. Overcome your desire to sin.

Is it easy? It depends upon the sin. I personally find it very easy to avoid the sin of eating lobster, snails, and crabs. Some people find those temptations to be overwhelming. Yet, the Torah says to overcome that temptation and to practice abstinence.

(This is not about JEWISH Law. This is about HUMAN Law. [See "How to be an Orthodox Jewish Gentile."])

How did this tragedy/travesty in New York happen? It's really rather simple.

No one likes to be on the outside looking in. No one wants to live a lifestyle that society considers aberrant and sinful. Therefore, it's not sufficient to live that lifestyle privately in the face of the rejection of others. Rather, you must force society to endorse and celebrate your lifestyle and pretend that it is acceptable.

You must redefine standards of morality and call a sin an "alternate lifestyle." You must redefine words, such as the one that used to mean "happy." (There should be no gaiety in undermining G-d's will.)

That is why politicians march in parades that celebrate something that used to be considered a source of embarrassment and shame. And that is why political leaders who are more interested in keeping their jobs (let's see if THAT works out for them!) than standing up for what is right folded and brought about a

situation that will further the eroding of society's standards.

Typically, those who advocate for acceptance of this lifestyle will paint those of us who disagree as bigots and homophobes. That is part of the agenda. You define yourself as normal, and define those with traditional values as being out of the mainstream.

It is essential to keep in mind that the Torah requires us to treat our fellow man with compassion. But that doesn't free us from our obligation to speak out in support of what is right, and in opposition to what is wrong. And this new law is wrong.

The Talmud (Bava Basra, 74a) reports that somewhere out in the Sinai Desert there is still a small hole where the ground opened up and miraculously swallowed Korach and his cohorts. If you put your ear to the ground, you can still hear their voices: "Moses is true and his Torah is true!"

Eventually, Korach figured it all out and realized how wrong he had been. Eventually Korach recognized that G-d is wiser than we are, and that our mission is to learn from His wisdom and apply that wisdom to our lives.

Some day the modern-day Korachs will realize that lesson as well.

In the meantime, I just look at the mistake that New York State made last Shabbos, and I shake my head in amazement and sadness. Some people are gay; this is nothing to be gay about. I am profoundly sad. A little bit angry, but mostly sad.

Have a great Shabbos

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