

Torah Thoughts Hukkat

5778:

One of the most puzzling sections of the Torah can be found in parshat Hukkat this week. God tells Moses that a person who comes into contact with a corpse is ritually impure for a week, must remain outside the Israelites' camp, and can be purified only by a *kohein*/priest dashing water on them containing the ashes of a pure, red cow, on the third and seventh day of that week. We could be forgiven for responding 'Huh?' Our sages offer many explanations for this ritual, but there is a whole strain of commentary that goes the opposite direction, making the case that the ritual of the *parah adumah*/red cow is a command from God that defies rationality. According to this view, we should obey this law, and others that are equally irrational – kashrut is sometimes mentioned – out of love for God and the Torah.

In fact, when the Torah itself refers to the 'statutes and laws' that we are obligated to follow, some commentators understand those two words as meaning two distinct things. 'Laws,' they say, are those rules of the Torah which can be understood because of their obvious value. We understand the prohibitions against murder, injury or theft because they are obvious and desirable for the proper functioning of a just society. But the word 'statutes,' the commentators claim, refer to those divine commands that are not so obvious, like the ritual of the red cow, yet which are equally binding since they too are the word of God.

Jewish tradition seeks to inculcate certain behaviors and beliefs which, when lived in a total integrated system, lead to righteousness. At least some of our sages teach us that even those things we cannot understand have a part to play in that process. Like a child whom we train to look both ways before crossing the street or to avoid touching a hot burner on the stove, long before they would understand the significance of such measures, God trains us to think and do things which we do not comprehend in order to protect us and train us to be moral. It is possible that we will never understand the meaning of the dietary laws in all their depth, but that in no way detracts from the benefits of eating in a distinctively Jewish way. All of the rest of our tradition follows this logic: We may not always know why we are supposed to do something, but doing it creates a reality that has a value all its own, and which spurs us to think and study it further. Even when we come up short intellectually, we can find fulfillment through experience.

Shabbat shalom