

CONTEXT: I gave this at the URJ Kutz Camp during its last summer

Imagine that a person is craving ice cream. They go to the fridge, open the door, take out the ice cream, close the fridge, put the ice cream into a bowl, get a spoon, and begin to eat. To an observer, each action and its sequence is clearly understood. However, now imagine that you are not watching the person, but you are watching the person's shadow on the floor and on the walls. A distorted human shape extends an appendage toward a block, causing it to change shape and something is pulled out and twisted in a strange way. The actions taken are seemingly incomprehensible and the adding of ice cream to the bowl or into the person's stomach does not change the shape of the shadow.

As Jews, we are constantly asking questions and searching for the "why". Some things make sense to us and some don't and the perspective in which we take on things, matters. Many things in life are logical, like you cannot run a mile in one minute. It's just something you can't do and that's okay. There's also an entire category of mitzvot called chukim whose defining criteria is that they transcend human understanding. Our lack of understanding about certain subjects should not limit our experiences. A person eats long before they understand how the digestive system works and most of us use our phones without an exact understanding of its mechanics.

In the Torah, there are many of what I like to call, "because I said so" statements. Sages say there are 613 of these, some logical, some not. Arguably the most illogical commandment begins this week's Torah portion, Chukat. G-d is speaking to Moses and Aaron and G-d says that any person who comes in contact with the dead is unclean - kinda makes sense. It doesn't matter

if this individual indulged in cannibalism or if that person simply walked inside of a tent where someone died. This unclean person, we'll call her Tina, cannot enter the Holy Temple, partake in sacrificial offerings, or sacred foods until she is purified. None of this sounds too crazy just yet but how does Tina become clean again? G-d claims that in order for Tina to be cleansed, she must be sprinkled with the blood and ashes of a red heifer. A red heifer is a female, virgin cow that is entirely red. Two hairs of a different color, and the red cow is not a heifer. The red heifer also cannot have experienced any work in its life time. Work includes physical labor as well as leaning on the cow or placing a garment upon it. Supposedly, only 9 red heifers have ever existed. Based on this logic, many of us too are impure.

While our instinct is to ask why such a commandment would be instructed upon us, maybe there's a deeper connection between the illogical commandment and the illogical phenomenon it pertains to. The most incomprehensible human experience - the phenomenon of death - can be sublimated only with the most incomprehensible of divine mitzvot. Physically and biologically, death makes perfect sense, yet we all- including a man like Moses, find death utterly incomprehensible, and utterly devastating to our sense of reality. Death is a fairly common theme of chukat, consuming Miriam, Aaron, almost Moses, and a few common people due to snakes.

This commandment involves taking one of the most striking emblems of life, and reducing it to ash. We learned a couple of days ago that we are all mere dust and ashes, and that for my sake, the world was created. It is the ashes and the water of the red heifer that make change. We are all merely dust and ash, but that ash dissolves into living water and from water

comes new life. Water is constantly changing. We never walk into the same river twice and yet the river maintains its course between the banks. The water changes but the river remains.

We may leave this wonderful place, and this place may symbolically turn to ash and dust, but its spirit, our spirit, will last forever. We may be mortal, this camp may be mortal, but there is something within us all that is immortal. “The dust returns to the earth as it was but the spirit returns to the G-d who gave it.” Even down here on Earth, something of us lives on, just like how Aaron passed down his priesthood to his sons before his death in the portion. For good or for evil, our lives have an impact on other people’s lives, and the ripples of our deeds spread outward across space and time. We may be mortal, but that does not reduce our life to insignificance. Despite the facets of humanity presented in this portion, that we die and that we make mistakes, existence is not tragic. Live every day you have here completely in the moment. Enjoy each and every second . Don’t dwell on small and insignificant things. This camp was made for all of us.

Shabbat Shalom Kutz camp