

Chukat 2017 sermon Delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner

Marcy and I have been anticipating this moment for many weeks now. It is so good to finally be here at ICM on the cusp of a new beginning for all of us. I have been reflecting on the wonderful strengths of this community, the warmth of the way we embrace old friends and visitors alike. The deep caring for each other and for the greater good of the residents of our area. The deep commitment of our lay leadership to Jewish values and to the synagogue. For me it's an incredible opportunity to bring what I love about synagogue life, liturgy, music, Torah, learning and Jewish values to Manchester. For Marcy it's bringing her years of experience and skills to impact the greater community's mental health services. For both of us it's about embracing a congregation and being a part of your lives.

The last few weeks have been packed with emotions for Marcy and me as we have been saying goodbye to old friends, congregants, colleagues and clients. And the goodbyes were coupled with explanations about where we were going and what our new community would be like. I found myself repeating many times that we were going to Manchester VERMONT, not Manchester NEW HAMPSHIRE! I had to explain "No there is no airport in Manchester, you must be thinking of Manchester, New Hampshire." And then there was the tossing and packing and tossing and packing and packing and packing. Also there may be a question about our sanity for traveling with two cars and two cats for twenty-one hours. You can ask us about the trip over dinner. Now, I want to talk to you about new beginnings. It's a new beginning for us and a new beginning for ICM. New beginnings are always coupled with reflecting on who we are and where we have been in order to have clarity about where we are going and what values we carry into the future. This week's Torah portion has something to teach us about reflecting on who we are which goes hand in hand with reflecting on our past mistakes, taking responsibility and owning our mistakes and our future. It's not easy to find these meanings in this week's parsha, however...

As I read through this week's difficult Torah portion, Chukat, it made me think of all the bar and bat mitzvah students that I've trained over the years. Let's see, that would be roughly 1,237 b'nai mitzvah students. It's one thing training a student to decode the Hebrew letters and pronounce the words correctly. It's one thing to make sure the student knows how to sing the melodies of the Torah tropes. But when a young person is confronted with a portion such as this one which is bogged down with a highly detailed description of rituals for purification, that's a different story. What relevant lesson can one glean from all of these ancient rituals directed at the Israelite who has had contact with death?

In order to purify the person you bring a red cow with no blemish and no defect in which no yoke had been laid. And then there's slaughtering the animal and sprinkling blood and ashes. Then burning it all with Cedarwood hyssop and Crimson stuff. You can read all about it in the parsha if you care to learn all of the sordid details. These are the laws of Para Aduma - the red Heifer.

The laws of the Para Aduma typify the type of rituals in the Torah that defy our modern sensibilities. Our reason does not allow us to see any logic in these laws of purification. In response, some commentators, including Rashi, point out that the rituals outlined here are part of a *chuka*, or laws that defy normal human reasoning and we must accept them because no human being is capable of understanding God's ways. Commentators contend that it would be unseemly to search for rational explanations. Is God's word only acceptable if we completely understand it? Rashi states, "These laws are decrees from God and we have no right to question them."

If we take that approach. If we subscribe to this assertion then why even read the Torah portion such as this?

If one thinks about a good portion of modern Jewish history we may note that Jews have been looked upon in many lands, in many generations as the people with odd laws, customs and traditions that are antiquated. The Jews ways make no sense.

One Rabbinic leader in the Reform movement says:

"Rashi understood what it was like to live as a minority in a majority culture. He understood the pressure to "fit in;" he understood what it was like to be the brunt of relentless bullying for being different; he understood the pressure to explain and justify himself according to the standards of the majority. And yet, Rashi also understood that enough was enough: It was time to stop listening to the jeers of the "nations of the world" and learn to have faith and confidence in the wisdom of our tradition, even if it doesn't make sense in the eyes of our neighbors. Nearly a thousand years ago, Rashi announced that it was time for us Jews to stop questioning ourselves, stop thinking of ourselves through the eyes of the majority, and start appreciating ourselves for who and what we are."

Now let's go back to our imaginary bar or bat mitzvah student and the struggle with a difficult Torah portion. What do we say to the student, sStarting to look at a parsha like this? I might say "What seems here as completely illogical points to what makes the Jewish way of life special." When we engage with the text, when we struggle with Jewish laws, we emphasize that being Jewish means living a

highly considered life. It means being intentional about our behavior and how we engage with the world. We will probably never understand the true meaning of this ancient ritual of the red heifer. What we do understand, and what we should be proud of, is that our laws and rituals are about transforming the everyday into something holy and sacred.

The message is that we should own who we are. In spite of a lot of what we read today in the news it is still indeed a time in the world when thankfully there is a great appreciation of different cultures and religions. We need to own who we are and be proud of it. And that is coupled with the charge to celebrate the diversity around us.

Another aspect of owning who we are is owning our actions including our mistakes. Later in the parsha we get an example of owning our mistakes. The community was without water and they joined against Moses and Aaron, the people quarreled with Moses, saying, “Why have you brought us into the wilderness for us to die here? Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us to this wretched place, a place with no rain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!”

This is the famous incident where the people of Israel are again complaining in the desert as they have no life giving water. Moses and Aaron turned toward God in desperation and God instructs Moses to gather the people and speak to a rock in their presence and then God will provide a miracle and water will come pouring out from the rock. But what did Moses do? He took the staff as God instructed and instead of speaking to the rock he struck the rock twice after speaking harsh words to the people. He seems to have grown quite impatient with the people. And the Torah says that for this transgression, Moses and Aaron will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. The commentators all feel that this is a very harsh punishment. It's interesting that in spite of this rather harsh punishment Moses never complains. He owns up to his mistakes, accepts the punishment and continues to lead the people right to the edge of the Promised Land.

So the lessons for us in these first two sections of our Torah portion is to own up to who we are and to own up to our mistakes. As we reflect on the recent history of this wonderful community we know that at one time there were harsh words spoken and mistakes made. But how do we move forward? By taking full responsibility for our past, learning from our mistakes and realizing we all have the same overarching goal, to be one community, warm and welcoming to all. A place of comfort for diverse expressions of Judaism. I believe our diversity is a strength

which we only realize as a strength if we celebrate it by treating every individual with kavod, the Jewish value of honor based on the concept that we are all created in the image of God.

So Moses makes a mistake and owns up to it but the commentaries offer a variety of explanations as to what Moses' sin was which ultimately keeps him from entering the promised land.

Rashi says that it was because he struck the stone instead of only speaking to it, as G-d had instructed. According to Maimonides, it was the fact that he got angry and said, "Hear now, you rebels." to the people.

The chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak sees Maimonides' explanation (that he rebuked the people angrily) and Rashi's explanation (that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it) as two sides of the same coin. If a leader's influence on the community is achieved through harsh words of rebuke, then his relationship with the environment is also: he will have to forcefully impose his will on it to get it to serve his people's needs and their mission in life. If, however, he influences his community by lovingly uplifting them to a higher place so that they, on their own, will desire to improve themselves, the world will likewise willingly yield its resources to the furtherance of his goals.

So as we move forward to an exciting new time for Israel congregation, let all of us who lead and participate follow this advice of Levi Yitzchak, let us work for and strive to influence our community by lovingly uplifting each other to a higher place. A place of honor, love and respect and ultimately a place filled with joy. So as a community I think we are ready to sing a new song together and embody the following quote from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov:

"Get into the habit of singing a tune. It will give you new life and fill you with joy." Marcy and I look forward to singing a new tune in our new community, a tune that will fill us all with joy. Shabbat Shalom.