



Parsha Snapshot

Chukas

Parshas **Chukas** begins with instructions for the ceremony of the *Parah Adumah*, or Red Heifer. A completely red cow, which has never borne a yoke, must be slaughtered and burned, and its ashes mixed with water. This mixture is sprinkled on individuals who are *tamei*, or impure, through contact with the dead –touching, carrying or being under the same roof as a corpse. The Torah calls this *mitzvah* a *chok* –a law whose reason is inexplicable. While there are many such *mitzvos*, the Red Heifer is **the** *chok* – the ultimate mystery. The puzzle of the Red Heifer is its paradoxical nature: it alone can remove the impurity associated with death; yet, paradoxically, one who handles its ashes becomes himself impure, and must immerse in the waters of a *mikvah* to be cleansed.

The end of forty years' wandering in the desert approaches, and the Jews prepare to enter the Holy Land at last.

The Jews mourn the passing of Miriam, elder sister of Moses. With Miriam gone, the miraculous water-producing rock ceases to function. The distraught people complain of thirst, speaking harshly to Moses. G-d instructs Moses to speak to the rock, commanding it to give forth water once more. Instead of merely speaking to the rock, Moses hits it. Water gushes forth – but G-d tells Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in view of the Jewish People, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the Land which I have given them." There is much discussion regarding the rationale for Moses' actions and the nature of his error. Some commentators note that after the Exodus, when Moses first brought water from the rock, he was *commanded* to hit it. In this second instance, Moses' attempts to speak to the rock produced no result, and he reasoned that he was supposed to hit it this time as well. In any case, it is axiomatic that an error made by Moses, the greatest prophet of all time, would be imperceptible to anyone of lesser caliber, and he was taken to task only because of the high standard to which he was held.

The Jews approach the territory of Edom, southeast of Israel. The Edomites, descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, refuse to allow the Jews passage through their land; the Jews skirt the land of Edom and arrive at a Mountain called Hor HaHar. There Aaron dies, but not before seeing his son Elazar don the priestly garments and succeed him in the role of Kohen Gadol. The entire nation mourns Aaron, who is remembered as the great peacemaker of Israel.

The Jews, frustrated with the latest delay in entering the Holy Land, complain to Moses once more; they are punished with a plague of venomous snakes. The Jews beg Moses' forgiveness, asking him to pray for them. G-d commands Moses to fashion a copper snake and place it atop a pole; anyone bitten can gaze at the copper image and be healed. The real purpose of the snake was to focus the people's attention Heavenward, reminding them to turn to G-d.

At last, the Jews reach the territory of the Emorites; this land, though still in Transjordan, is part of the territory they are to conquer. Led by Moses, the Jews defeat two giant kings, Sichon and Og, and settle in the cities east of the Jordan River.



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