

## Parashat **Chukkat** -- Hazzan Neil Schwartz

June 30, 2012 -- Cong. Agudas Israel

The usual topic of discussion during a *D'var Torah* for today's Parasha is the mystery of the "Red Heifer", which really is an all-brown cow. It was slaughtered and completely burned, together with certain types of wood. The resulting ashes, when mixed with water, were a substance that could cleanse impurity. Yet the very process of making this substance made the workers themselves impure.

As a youngster and again as a parent, I read all of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books in the "*Little House on the Prairie*" series, not knowing that someday I would be living on the prairie. In those books there is occasionally reference to making home-made soap, which is a combination of lye, water, and animal fats. Wood ashes are the source of lye, a very caustic chemical. It was hot, tiring work; a project which took all day.

*Parashat Chukkat* tells us to burn the cow completely together with certain woods, and to mix that fatty ash with water for a priestly purification ritual. I think that this mysterious commandment, so little understood that it had to be called a "*Chok*" or "just do it" type of commandment, has a very simple explanation - they were making soap!

However, this is not the main lesson that I wish to share today. In Chapter 20 there is the episode of Moses hitting the rock to release water for the thirsty Israelites. Since God had told Moses to just **speak** to the rock instead, this act of temper caused God to punish Moses by not allowing him to enter the Promised Land. Our commentators have wrestled for centuries with the notion that this harsh punishment did not fit that crime.

God's excuse is that by speaking to the rock and receiving water, Moses would have once again shown to the complaining Israelites God's magnificent power. Let's look at the context of this event to see what may have caused Moses' rash act of temper, not usually considered a good leadership trait.

Ever since the escape from Egypt, the Israelites have been complaining. While some of the complaints were legitimate, such as fearing the possibility of being trapped between Pharaoh's charioteers and the banks of the Reed Sea, most of the complaints

were less legitimate. The Israelites as a group in the Wilderness sound like a bunch of whiney little kids on a long car-trip: "I'm hungry!" "I'm thirsty!" "Are we there yet?"

Most of the time Moses takes their complaints to God, and like a good parent, God provides quail and manna for food and the occasional oasis for water. However, on a couple of occasions, God gets so mad at the ungrateful Israelites, He is ready to wipe them out and start all over with Moses. That happened at the Golden Calf episode and again just last week with Korach's rebellion. Both times it was Moses who implored God to have patience with the wayward Israelites and to forgive them.

If God can almost get away with temper-tantrums in response to 40 years of whining and complaining, then why is Moses so harshly punished for his display of temper? We recognize the state of being from which Moses does his rash act: for chaplains, we call it "caregiver fatigue", and for clergy we call it "professional burn-out". The only antidote for those states of being nowadays is to find a substitute for a while, and take a break by getting away from the situation. This is especially important when there are public expectations that constrain a leader's ability to "recharge".

We saw in the Book of Exodus that Moses is a "Type A" personality, where his own father-in-law Jethro had to tell Moses how to delegate justice administration to tribal leaders for regular cases, and just adjudicate the harder cases himself. We saw Moses make an error of judgment two weeks ago, when he appointed political leaders to scout out the Promised Land instead of trained military spies, and the entire Israelite nation paid the price of wandering for 38 more years as a result of this misjudgment.

Moses does not appear in a traditional *Haggadah*, so that we understand the Exodus was God's handiwork. 40 years later, Moses should not cross into the Promised Land because the new generation of Israelites needs a young new leader, Joshua. However, in this case of Moses hitting the rock for water, God could have been less harsh with Moses. Every leader makes mistakes, and our Hebrew Bible reflects this fact from the Patriarchs to Moses to the Kings and the Prophets. Perhaps that is why this episode of another mistake Moses made follows the mysterious soap-making recipe with its ritual of cleansing. There is always room in our Jewish tradition for a leader to be cleansed and forgiven, and to move forward in service to the community.