

Parshat Chukat-Balak
Complete Faith and Incomplete Knowledge
Sarah Kaufman - Class of 2025

The *para adumah*, the ritual of the red heifer, is the paradigmatic example of a *chok*, a mitzvah that defies rational explanation. Jews throughout the ages have been uncomfortable with the idea that we may not know the reason behind a *mitzvah*, let alone one as odd as the *para adumah* — it purifies those who are impure from contact with the dead, yet it makes the person administering the ritual impure.

Some philosophers have tried to rationalize it, as well as other *chukim*. These Jews, like the Rambam and R. Saadia Gaon, try to create a system of *ta'amei mitzvot*, reasons for the commandments, while others, like R. Yehuda Halevi, say it's not a worthwhile use of our efforts. We should accept these irrational laws as irrational and simply live with them.

The *midrash* offers a third possibility, that the reason for *chukim* will be revealed in *Olam Ha'ba*, the World to Come. The Tanchuma comments on the second line of our *parsha*, ויקחו אליך, “take for yourself a red heifer,” (Bamidbar 19:2) and says:

רבי יוסי בר חנינא אמר, אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה, אני מגלה לך טעם פרה. אבל
לאחרים, חקה. דאמר רב הונא... דברים המכסים מכם בעולם הזה, עתידין להיות צפויים לכם
לעולם הבא, כהדין סמיא דצפי, דכתיב: והולכתי עורים בדרך לא ידעו.

R. Yose bar Chanina says, The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe, “To you, I am revealing the reason for the heifer, but to others it is a *chukah*...” Rav Huna says... Things that are hidden from you in this world are going to be clear to you in the world to come, as with the blind person who gains their sight. So it says [in Isaiah 42:16], “I will lead the blind by a road they do not know [...these things I have done].”

Only Moshe understands the reason behind the *para adumah* because God chose to reveal it to Moshe directly. The rest of us, who are not given the opportunity to speak *panim el panim* (face to face) with God, cannot understand the rationale. Rav Huna disagrees and uses *pesukim* from Tehillim and Zecharia to demonstrate that actually we

will gain understanding — eventually. In *Olam Ha'ba*, we will know the reason behind the *para adumah*. For now, we must be content with uncertainty.

The *midrash* continues in a different direction, based on the same text in Isaiah:

וּכְתִיב: אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים עָשִׂיתִים. אֶעֱשֶׂה אֵין כְּתִיב, אֶלָּא עָשִׂיתֶם, שְׁכַבְר עָשִׂיתִים לְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחֲבֵרָיו. דְּבָר אַחַר, דְּבָרִים שְׁלֵא נִגְלוּ לְמֹשֶׁה, נִגְלוּ לְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחֲבֵרָיו. וְכָל יִקְרָ רְאֵתָה עֵינוּ (איוב כח, י), זֶה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחֲבֵרָיו.

The text [Isaiah 42:16] says: “These are the things I have done.” It is not stated, “I will do” but rather “I have done,” as I have already done for R. Akiva and his colleagues. Another interpretation: things that were not revealed to Moshe were revealed to R. Akiva and his colleagues, as it says, “His eye sees every precious thing” (Iyov 28:10) — this is R. Akiva and his colleagues (Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 8).

The idea that R. Akiva and his generation may know things that Moshe did not seems almost heretical at first glance. But perhaps the *midrash* is in dialogue with the Gemara in Menachot 29b, when Moshe sits in the back of R. Akiva’s classroom. Moshe has no idea what’s going on but is comforted when R. Akiva justifies his claim with “It is *halakha* transmitted to Moshe on Har Sinai.” Perhaps, then, some matters were only revealed to R. Akiva and his colleagues, but all of it is still derived from Har Sinai. R. Akiva is simply expanding on what was already given to Moshe, even if it seems incomprehensible to Moshe himself.

Moshe needs justification to alleviate his confusion and frustration, and he receives it! But we cannot achieve the same level of comprehension as Moshe Rabbeinu. Sometimes, we are instead forced to live with uncertainty. We will not — and cannot — ever know God’s rationales for us. The Mei HaShiloach, the Ishbitzer Rebbe, notes when God tells Moshe to make the second set of tablets, God uses the language פסל לך (Shemot 34:1). He says:

והענין בזה כי מלת פסל הוא דבר מחותך במדה וקצב ובהשלמה בלי חסרון שום דבר בעולם וזאת אינו נמצא רק בתורת מרע"ה, אבל בשכל אנושי אין באפשר לתקן דבר כזה בשלימות הגמור



The idea here is that the word *pese/* means something which is cut, delimited, finished and without anything missing. But this is only found in the Torah of Moses. In human thought, nothing can be finished and made completely whole (Mei HaShiloach, Yitro, 5).

Our knowledge will always be incomplete. We will always live in uncertainty of *mitzvot* such as the *para adumah*, in part because Judaism is an ongoing process of engaging with God and God's laws. The process is never complete, so our knowledge can never be complete.

Like Moshe in R. Akiva's *beit midrash*, we find ourselves often confused and frustrated. And yet we can live with such discomfort because of our trust in God. Our faith allows us to hold both our uncertainty and our trust simultaneously and seemingly paradoxically. And, if anything, there's always *Olam Ha'ba*.



Sarah Kaufman came to Yeshivat Maharat after working with high school students at the Tikvah Fund. She received her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University in International Relations and History. Sarah planned to enter the world of Washington, D.C. think tanks after completing internships at various policy research institutions but decided during her senior year to instead pursue further her Jewish education. She then spent a year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and discovered her love of *beit midrash* learning. Sarah lives in Manhattan and can be found baking challah, browsing used bookstores, and wrestling with Jewish texts.