

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Khukat**

This week I was once again schooled in the value of “Robert’s Rules of Order.” They do not exist in Israel. As a delegate for the North American Reform Jewish movement to the World Zionist Congress, I marveled at the lack of order that prevailed at meeting after meeting. There is no such thing as “calling for the question,” “taking turns at having the floor to speak,” or even decorum at the podium. The committee and plenary meetings were procedural circuses, and when tempers flared there was no control. Now, I am not one who likes to follow the rules all the time, but there are times when rules are a good thing. Ecclesiastes says that there is a time and place for everything under heaven. Of course, this is at best a subjective statement, because for every rule there are at least twenty exceptions. There are some rules, though, that make more sense than others, hence making observance more rational, as well.

Our Torah speaks of three types of rules: Mitzvot, Khukim, and Mishpatim. The last one is easiest to grasp. Mishpatim are sentences, as in legal decisions. Mitzvot are ethical precepts. They are intentionally open to interpretation, so that they can be personalized and can evolve generation after generation. Both mitzvot and mishpatim have some basis in rationality. Observance is founded in making sense out of situations. According to tradition, the last category is the most difficult to understand. Khukim are rules for the sake of rules. Tradition teaches us that they are not necessarily based in rational thought; they exist because they exist. Despite everyone’s attempt to link keeping kosher to health concerns, the Torah is silent as to any reason why one should honor dietary laws other than “God said.” The requirement to wear fringes is a khok (singular of khukim). There is no rational reason given for observance (no matter what we may thrust upon it as a reason).

This week’s parsha starts with the khok olam, the eternal law regarding the use of the red heifer. One is supposed to find a perfectly red heifer and burn it. Its ashes are to be taken outside of camp to a place where one can purify himself by “bathing” in its ashes. Yes, you read correctly, one cleanses himself by bathing in the ashes ... and it is a law for all time. No reason is given for this practice, it is just done. Midrash argues that it is atonement for the golden calf, but that would mean that parents have to pay for the transgressions of their children, and with five of my own, that is not an interpretation I am willing to hear. Still, it is a law for all time, and yet no one does it any more. The excuse offered for not doing this, by those claiming to be absolutely Torah true is that they cannot find a perfect heifer and an imperfect one would be a greater blaspheme. There have been red heifers found since, but then the line is that they have to be offered at an altar in the Temple in Jerusalem (even though in the Torah there is no Jerusalem, yet).

So what do we do with this absolute rule of law? How can we ignore it? Perhaps we do not. It is hard to think of the Torah as giving specific rules when one starts with the belief that the text is an allegorical metaphor. Perhaps jumping through the hoops to excuse not performing the khok only makes matters worse. What if we look at these khukim not as the most stringent and irrational of “rules,” rather as the most flexible of behavioral attitudes? Perhaps Torah is intentionally silent about why we keep kosher or how to specifically do so. The point might have everything to do with personal integrity and discipline and have nothing to do with pleasing God. First, I do not believe God wrote the text, and second, I have

a hard time believing that God arbitrarily cares and decides what can and cannot go in my mouth. I think God has a whole lot more important things to worry about (not that I think God operates on this level to begin with). Why wear fringes? We wear them to remind ourselves that the miracles of creation exist in every direction that we look. As to the red heifer, I think we have to really think hard about taking a life so that we can burn it and bath in its remains. I think the khok might be goading us into a wonderful wrestling match with the whole concept of purity. If it can only be obtained through this type of ritual that leaves one more physically dirty, then perhaps we are learning that there is no such thing as purity. We do the best we can, and have to be mindful that there are no easy ways of cleaning up the messes we create, and certainly not vicariously through some other life. I cannot imagine performing this ritual and feeling cleaner on the back end of it. I would only feel dirtier, having wasted the life of the animal. Especially given the tempers that flared this week when factions at the Congress did not get their way, I have to believe that this built in flexibility demands that we take responsibility for making good decisions. Blindly following narrow ideologies, and blindly accepting these difficult rules as essential and inerrant removes people from the real blessings and challenges of life. I was reminded up close and personal what happens when people build fences around the inde" fence" able. I like the challenge to make sense out of the world around me. I grow in spirit every time I have to wrestle with make sense of these "irrational rules," and make them relevant to the real world in which I live. I am not saying that one should not observe, I am saying that the observance has to be the symbol for the value one attains from the process of observance, and that the "Godly" value is not in the blind adherence to a khok. We need to study more and think more ... and believe in our heads what we know in our hearts: faith (following rules intuitively) has to lead you to places that make more sense than the ones that you left. Performance of ritual itself will never move one closer to God, only engagement will. Shabbat Shalom.