

Transitions are difficult, as we all know. And that liminal realm when we stand poised between what has been and what is to come is particularly fraught. Small children hover between the excitement of entering the world of school and the anxiety of not having a parent close by. Middle schoolers juggle changes in their bodies along with shifts in their social lives. Later we deal with transitioning from school to the work force or to institutions of higher learning, as well as the increasing responsibilities of emerging adulthood. Finally, as adults we undergo a wide variety of transitions that profoundly affect us. Ideally, each new transition should help prepare us for the next one, but the road is not always smooth, especially if we resist and cling to the past. Along the way, we encounter countless rules and regulations, some of which remain difficult to understand. We all know why we must stop when the traffic light is red, but why is chewing gum outlawed in Singapore, and why in some countries are insults punishable by fines or imprisonment? To children, most rules can seem as absurd as these, and when challenged, exasperated parents often resort to the old standby, "Because I said so." In Hebrew, a *chok* is a statute, an unchanging law that we may or may not understand. Our *chagim* and Shabbat are *chukim*, because they are based on solar and lunar cycles, unchanging forces of nature beyond our control and often beyond our comprehension. Arcane and paradoxical, the red heifer ritual is one of those *chukim*. But do the ashes of this rare cow really purify? A midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:8) offers insight: A gentile asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai about the ritual of the red heifer, and he in turn asks him what he would do for a person with a restless spirit. The gentile describes a similar ritual with burning roots and water, and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai points out the parallels. He then teaches his incredulous students, "By your lives, a dead person doesn't make things impure, and the water doesn't make things pure. Rather, God said, 'I have engraved a rule, I have decreed a decree, and you have no permission to transgress what I decreed ...'" In other words, HaShem says, "Because I said so." But the rabbi goes on to explain that rituals like these are ways to transform and transition from one state of being to another. 39 years have now passed since the Exodus, and most of the people who left Egypt have died. Their children and grandchildren are now on the threshold of emotional adulthood, but because they are still dependent on HaShem for their sustenance and on Moses for making sure they receive it, they are not quite ready for that important step into their new state of being. They are like teenagers, with one foot in the big, wide world, and one foot still under their parents' roof. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are each in their own way parental figures, and as we see time and again, this is exactly what the people need as they continue to complain and rebel. But that time is ending, as it must. First, Miriam dies – with little fanfare in our reading. In fact, this event is only mentioned in a laconic 5-word phrase at the end of a longer verse. But the implications are huge. Miriam, the first of our biblical women to be called "prophet," is associated with water. The Talmud (Ta'anit 9a) teaches that 3 good sustainers rose up during the Exodus, with 3 good gifts through their agency: the well for Miriam, the guiding pillar of cloud for Aaron, and the manna for Moses. When Miriam died there was no water, but the well returned in the merit of both Moses and Aaron. When Aaron died the cloud disappeared and the Canaanite king of Arad heard and thought he can go to war against the Israelites, but both the well and the cloud reappeared in the merit of Moses. When Moses died, all of them disappeared. According to this Talmud passage, these deaths did not occur simultaneously; Miriam died in the month of Nisan, Aaron in Av, and Moses in Adar. The Talmud continues in another direction, but the story teaches us that no matter how transitions are precipitated, the actual process of transformation is best taken step by step. Our wonderfully conceived mourning rituals offer one of the best examples: During the period from death to burial, we are exempt from focusing on anything but the immediate necessities of arranging the funeral. Sitting shiva lets us concentrate on processing our loss while sustained by the company of our community. After shiva, we have another 3 weeks to gradually reemerge into the world, and for those who have lost parents, formal mourning lasts for 11 months, ending with the unveiling of the headstone sometime near the first *yahrzeit*. The transition of bereavement is an integral part of life, and in a sense, our ancestors are now going through this process as they end their 40-year journey. Miriam, Aaron, and Moses are the right leaders for the beginning when the people are transitioning from slavery to freedom. Rules and regulations are lifted gradually, only to be replaced by others that still govern our lives and hopefully help us to make sense of our world. But there will always be those *chukim*, which can frustrate us if we let them, but which can also provide excellent guidelines for moving through transitions. The people now have to learn how to obtain water, how to defend themselves, how to feed themselves, and how to form a stable society. Transition wasn't easy then, and, as we all know, it still isn't. It takes time, and requires conscious work to integrate the past and move forward to the next phase of life.

Shabbat shalom!