

With Purim behind us and Pesach three weeks away, we observe the third of the four special Shabbatot that precede Pesach. The rules surrounding the “red cow,” which are enumerated in the Maftir reading and have to do with ritual purification of people and objects that have had contact with a corpse, are difficult for us to understand today, and were even problematic for our ancestors. The Talmud devotes an entire Mishna treatise to the subject, which among other things, was a source of contention between the opposing factions of Pharisees and Sadducees. According to Rabbi Meir (Parah 3:5) only seven cows ever qualified for use in this ritual. Moses burned the first one in the desert, Ezra burned the second when he inaugurated the Second Temple, and the remaining five were burnt after Ezra’s time. Other sages maintain that seven cows were burnt after Ezra, naming those who performed the rituals. Another legend holds that the tenth and last cow will be burnt by the Messiah. Indeed, finding an appropriate cow was extremely difficult because as few as two hairs that were not red rendered a potential candidate invalid. Therefore, the ashes were carefully preserved, and although no more cows could be prepared after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, enough ashes remained to perform the ritual for many more years. After the ritual had ceased, the rabbis still derived an important teaching from its contrary regulations that render the impure pure and vice versa: It is an eloquent example of a *chok*, a seemingly illogical statute that still must be observed because of its divine origin. Reading it today, we remember the importance our ancestors placed on separating the holy from the mundane, and we recognize it as the signal to begin meticulously cleaning our homes in preparation for Pesach. But studying the significance of the *chukim* also illustrates the importance we place on teaching and learning. Featured in this week’s parashah is the tragic story of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron’s eldest sons. Theories abound as to why these young men were killed. In my commentary on Parashah Mishpatim I suggested that it was because they misunderstood the limits of their capacities. They had ascended the holy mountain with Moses, Aaron, and the 70 elders, which gave them a certain status. Along with their father and their younger brothers, they had just been anointed as priests, and in the inauguration rituals, they had assisted Aaron, bringing him the blood of each offering, and the pieces of the burnt offering and the peace offering. However, in all these events they and their brothers were not center stage. Theirs were the supporting roles appropriate to their age and status. They were not authorized to bring offerings of their own. Their error was the result of youthful hubris. Talmud tractate Eruvin 63a: “... Is the disciple not liable to receive the death penalty if he issues his ruling not in the teacher’s presence? ... The sons of Aaron died only because they issued a halachic ruling before Moses, their teacher. ... It is stated in the Torah: ‘And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar ...’ ... It was further related that Rabbi Eliezer had a certain disciple who issued a halachic ruling in his presence. Rabbi Eliezer said to his wife Imma Shalom, ‘I will be surprised if this one completes his year,’ ... And so it was ...” In other words, students are not permitted to issue rulings in the presence of their teachers. The young men’s offense was not the fire, it was their independent action. Sanhedrin 52a quotes an aggadic (explanatory) midrash: “And it had already happened that Moses and Aaron were walking on their way, and Nadav and Avihu were walking behind them, and the entire Jewish people were walking behind them. Nadav said to Avihu, ‘When will it happen that these two old men will die and you and I will lead the generation, as we are their heirs?’ The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, ‘We shall see who buries whom ...’” This seems outlandishly harsh, but history has taught us that the curse Isaiah issued against the recalcitrant Jews before the destruction of the first Temple “... they shall behave haughtily, the youth against the elder and the base against the honorable” (Isaiah 3:5) has brought untold suffering to the world. Judaism is among those cultures that understand the vital importance of honoring our elders. We are encouraged to argue with them, dispute their rulings, and offer solutions of our own. Jewish literature is full of stories about teachers who take great pride in their students’ ability to outstrip them. But first, we must give honor where honor is due. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. The opening verse of Pirkei Avot reminds us that “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.” In other words, we are part of a long chain of learning. One of the main ways we learn is by asking questions, and if we want to keep learning, every answer will spawn new questions. Soon the children will ask us those four questions that will help them understand the story of Pesach; and they will also want to know about the different kinds of *mitzvot*, including those strange *chukim*. Just like the sages of the Talmud and our own elders, we do not have all the answers. So, we keep asking questions, learning from the wisdom of others, adding wisdom of our own, and, in deep respect and gratitude, taking our place in our unbroken chain of teachers and students.

Shabbat shalom!