



**Parashat Chukat**

**A Little Bit of Soap**

by Noach Dzmura on Friday July 04, 2008

1 Sivan 5768

Numbers 19:1 - 22:1

In this week's Torah portion, an unusual—red—cow, is ritually slaughtered. God commands Aaron the High Priest to witness the slaughter. Through the ritual process and the act of witness, the remains of the cow, specifically the remaining ashes, were mixed as needed with water to create what is translated in JPS as “the waters of lustration.” The waters of lustration were used to purify anyone who had been made ritually impure by coming in contact with a dead body. If a person failed to purify his body with the waters of lustration on the third (to initiate the ritual cleansing) and the seventh (to seal the ritual cleansing) days after touching a dead body, they were cut off from the people. This is the most serious penalty in ancient Israelite law. It is essentially a death sentence to be cut off from one's people in the middle of the desert.

What renders a red cow's ashes “clean” enough to be used to purify a person? What is involved in such a powerful act of witness? I suspect it entails recognition of the cow's suffering, recognition of the act of murder, the acknowledgment of the end of an entire population of cows that might be brought into the world through this cow, and finally the certain knowledge of a kind of ritual *magick* (awareness) that through this death an entire people could be rendered pure.

But then there's the very practical recognition that ashes contain lye and fat. When mixed with water, these components form soap, which is still the cleaning agent we most frequently use today to render our own bodies “pure”.

I want to mention one more thing about this *parasha*, and then you may each continue with your summer vacation.

The waters of lustration are used to render ritually pure those persons who have come into contact with a dead body. Later in this *parasha*, many more than two things happen, but I want to concentrate on just these two things. Miriam dies and is buried, and the people are without water. While the *parasha* doesn't say so, this means that Miriam's body would have been prepared for burial and buried, at a time when the community could not have made the waters



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of lustration. This means that more than one person volunteered to touch Miriam's body in the certain knowledge that they would be cast out from the tribe after the deed was done.

The text led me to this conclusion not through its voice, but through its silence. It is our job as queer persons to recognize all of the silent voices speaking to us from this text that guides our footsteps along the path to righteousness.

I offer this Torah Query in memory of those persons—notably not Moses her brother—who, out of love for Miriam, sacrificed their lives and their connection to a beloved people, to perform one last act of love for a friend.



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