

**Parashat Chukat and Parashat Balak  
Gay Pride, Red Cows, and The Cleansing Power of Ritual**

by Dr. Caryn Aviv on Friday July 07, 2006

11 Tammuz, 5766

Numbers 19:1-25:9, Shabbat, 11 Tammuz, 5766

After the excesses and revelry of June's gay pride parades, I've been thinking a lot about the power of rituals, how they can transform us (or not), and how they help to remind us who we are.

On the day of Denver's gay pride parade I hosted a "dyke brunch." Bagels and lox with my lesbian friends seemed like an attractive alternative to standing in the hot sun, watching drag queens float by in their boas and tiaras. Blame it on age or recent parenthood, but I just didn't have the energy to eke past the thousands of bare-chested, beer-soaked gay men certain to be cruising each other along the parade route.

As the guests arrived, one 40-something Jewish dyke remarked, "I am just so over Pride lately, who needs it? I guess I've just been out of the closet so long I don't see the reason to even go anymore." To which another, recently-out lesbian commented, "Oh, this was my first gay pride festival ever, it was so much fun. I loved seeing everyone in the parade!"

The exchange revealed how a relatively recent ritual, like the gay pride parade, can yield multiple meanings and interpretations. To veteran queers, the parade and all its attendant activities can seem utterly banal and pointless. For others, particularly young people newly asserting their lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identities, gay pride events often provide a meaningful opportunity to mark a transformative life passage – from being in the closet to celebrating one's identity openly. Love or loathe it, late June's annual gay pride bacchanalia has become *the* standard bearer of queer cultural rituals. In an era of unprecedented assimilation and visibility in American culture, where a recent issue of a major gay magazine posed the question "Are We Becoming Post-Gay?" the concern about whether or not LGBT people even need yearly rituals like the pride parade seems to be a nagging question.

What's the rationale for continuing to celebrate gay pride if so many folks find it passé, unnecessary, embarrassing, or just plain tired? Is it a ritual that the collective queer 'we' no longer needs to remind ourselves that we belong to the community? How can queers think

about a ritual like the pride parade as a way to celebrate and honor the experience of transformation in our lives, to mark the passage of time in a way that remains meaningful, not cynical?

Not surprisingly, Jewish text and tradition reveal insights into the relationship between ritual and communal belonging. *Parashat Chukat* (Numbers 19:1-22:1) offers an opportunity to consider the place and power of ritual, and to understand or call into question why we use rituals, even when they seem odd or defy easy explanation.

*Parashat Chukat* opens with God telling Moses and Aaron to slaughter a red cow (or possibly brown – scholars have puzzled over this ancient Near Eastern edict in bovine aesthetics for years). They are then instructed to oversee an elaborate cow-burning ritual, including the sprinkling of some of the cow's blood toward the front of the *Ohel Moed* (tent of meeting) seven times. The narrative describes in detail the subsequent purification process required of all those Israelites involved in the cow's slaughtering, and how the cow's ashes are then used to ritually purify those who have become impure due to contact with a dead body and other contaminants.

Rashi argued that God directed Aaron specifically to use a red cow (or brown, depending on your aesthetic sensibility) as a symbolic expiation of sin for having created the Golden Calf. (Which begs the question: Should there be some sort of queer “red cow” for the yearly worship of golden boys floating down Main Street in their skivvies on the Absolut Vodka truck?) Recent feminist rabbinic scholars have noted the links between *Parashat Chukat's* concern about impurity, contaminants, and purification, and women's spiritual and physical experiences of blood and water, life and death.

For contemporary queer Jews, what might all this sprinkling of blood and ashes have to do with the annual kitsch-fest we call Pride? In other words, what are some of the deeper purposes of performing rituals when the actual machinations of the ritual don't always make sense or no longer seem relevant?

This leads to some meta-questions about *Chukat Ha-torah* (decrees of Torah) in general. This bewildering conundrum about using an unblemished red cow to purify contaminated Israelites is understood as a “*Chukat Ha-torah*,” a commandment required of the Israelites even though it appears to defy rational explanation. So even if the burning of the red cow might have seemed like a cockamamie thing to do in the desert, the Israelites were commanded to do so nonetheless.

Rashi comments that observing *Chukat Ha-torah* provoked the ire and taunts of other groups. A mere 35 years ago, during the early heady years of gay liberation, jeering bystanders taunted and mocked the activists who defiantly marched in the streets to commemorate the Stonewall



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riots of late June 1969. While the Israelites were commanded by God to do as they were told, even if they didn't understand the rationale, gay activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s insisted on *not* doing as they were told (i.e., stay silent, invisible, unorganized, and closeted). Instead, in response to the injustice of the police repression that sparked the Stonewall riots, queers began what evolved over time into an elaborate public ritual, marking their lives in a meaningful way en masse. For these early activists, the march served as a sort of collective purification ritual, one that transformed the taint and impurity of silence and shame into a collective and cleansing experience of meaningful and defiant political participation. That ritual and (at least initially) transformative process we now take for granted is often dismissed by veteran queer as "(sigh)....the Pride Parade." What gets lost in the current eye-rolling is attention to historical detail and the rationale for such rituals. Both *Chukat Ha-torah* and Pride parades are opportunities to mark the meaningful passage of time (life and death), to foster a sense of belonging to a broader community, and to symbolically transform participants in the ritual from one identity category to another (impure and unclean to pure and cleansed), even if the ritual no longer seems relevant or comprehensible to some parts of the community.

So back to my dyke brunch and the brief exchange between the jaded and newly out lesbians. Seeing the genuine and shiny excitement on that newly out lesbian's face reminded me why people continue to go through the machinations, stand in the hot sun, and jostle for street space with all the tipsy gay boys. We go not because God commanded us to do so, but because it's our yearly reminder that we belong to a collective group of people, that we don't take our identity or our fledgling list of rights for granted. We go not because the commandment seems incomprehensible and therefore we have no right to question it (as most explanations of *Chukat ha-torah* argue), but because the ritual allows us to 'stand within the camp' without fear of contamination or expulsion. Am I arguing that all gay pride parades everywhere are inherently transformative experiences for those who participate? No, certainly not. But as we know from Jewish tradition, communal rituals offer the opportunity to participate in a larger community without shame (or impurity, given the focus of this week's *parasha*). And for some LGBT people, gay pride parades even offer the tantalizing promise of meaning and belonging in an era where both are sometimes difficult to find.



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