

HAFTORAH COMMENTARY - PARSHAS PARAH

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Yechezkel 36:16

This week's Haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Parah, describes the Jewish people's ultimate state of purity. The prophet Yechezkel says in the name of Hashem, "And I will sprinkle upon you pure waters which will purify you; from all your impurities and repulsiveness I shall purify you." The prophet is referring to our final stages of purification wherein we will be completely cleansed from all sin. He likens this experience to that of one who is purified from ritual uncleanness. However, it is worthwhile to note the specific process which is chosen. Instead of comparing our purification to the traditional immersion process the prophet compares our final stages to the sprinkling of the holy waters. This elaborate and specific procedure was reserved for one who came in contact with a corpse. This contact produced a severe state of ritual uncleanness which required a unique purification procedure. This symbolism suggests a corollary between our association with sin and our association with death. Our ultimate state of purity will apparently be likened to the removal of the ritual effects of death.

In order to properly understand this relationship let us examine for a moment the nature of this unique purification process. In the special Torah reading for Parshas Parah, we learn about the sacrificial service of the red heifer. Its complex conditions and regulations indicate the uniqueness of this sacrifice. After slaughtering the heifer and sprinkling its blood outside the Bais Hamikdash, the heifer was completely burned. Its ashes were then mixed with spring water and a ritual mixture was produced. This mixture which was then sprinkled on the person who came in contact with the corpse ritually cleansed him from his impurity. Our Chazal (Sages; see Rashi Bamidbar 19:2 II) comment on the unusual nature of this sacrifice and explain that it served as an atonement for the Jewish nation's sin of the golden calf. They reveal that the effects of that sin are ongoing and a constant atonement is necessary. It stands to reason from this that the ritual impurity of death is interrelated with the spiritual impurity caused by the sin of the golden calf. For as we see, before one can be purified from contact with death he must undergo spiritual atonement for the sin of the golden calf. The spiritual impact of that sin is apparently so powerful that it produces an ongoing effect on the ritual purity status of every Jew.

This intriguing phenomenon can be understood through the profound insights of Chazal in Mesichta Avoda Zara (5a). The Talmud teaches us that the Jewish people once transcended the curse of mortality and qualified to be eternal physical beings. Their display of readiness to accept and follow

the will of Hashem was so sincere and intense that they actually transformed their physical bodies into semi spiritual entities. Even their bodies cooperated with their spiritual drives and contributed to their perfect service of Hashem. However, the Talmud informs us that this experience was unfortunately short-lived. After forty days of spirituality the Jews succumbed to fear and anxiety. They responded to the devastating notion that their leader Moshe Rabbeinu could have permanently departed from them and they desperately sought some new approach to life. This panic resulted in the shameful sin of the golden calf. In retrospect it was that serious plunge which returned the curse of mortality to the Jewish people. From that point and onward the body returned to its total physical entity, bearing the shame of sin. It possessed, once again all of the earthly urges and cravings which lure one away from fulfilling the will of Hashem.

We now return to the ritual ashes and the sacrifice of the red heifer. The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva 263) explains the origin of the ritual uncleanness of death. When one passes away, the soul leaves and the body remains a total physical entity. Now, barren of any association with spirituality the body projects a complete image of vanity. It represents earthly urges and desires and is associated with all the sinful practices of its lifetime. This identity and association stems back to the shameful plunge of the golden calf. It was then that the Jewish body reverted back to its present physical state, introducing ritual impurity after death. Atonement from this sin became a prerequisite for ritual purity. One must first recognize the severe repercussions of straying from Hashem, seeking alternate approaches to life. Only after detaching himself from this deep-rooted urge can he qualify to be cleansed from the ritual impurity caused by such association. The waters of the red heifer can now detach him from the impurities of the physical body and restore him to the proper appreciation for his true entity, body and soul.

We have now discovered the direct corollary between the purification from the effects of death and our ultimate state of purity. The prophet describes our ultimate purity in the following words. "And I shall give you a new heart and I will place a new spirit in your midst and I'll remove the stone heart from your flesh." Ramchal in Daas Tvunos (3:40) explains that these words refer to the lifting of the curse of mortality. The level of spirituality will be so uplifting that the body will be elevated to a semi state of spirituality. Even our physical urges and cravings will be directed to Hashem and no trace of sin will remain. The ritual waters which originally detached us from our association with death and the urges of sin will ultimately remove the entire curse of death from amongst us. Our acceptance of the will of Hashem will be so sincere and intense that even our physical bodies will only crave to serve Hashem. May we merit to witness this very soon.

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