

PARSHAS TZAV - PARSHAS PARAH

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Yechezkel 36:16

This week's Haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Parah, projects the Jewish people's ultimate state of purity. The prophet Yechezkel addresses the Jewish nation in the name of Hashem, "And I will sprinkle pure waters upon you and you will be cleansed from all your impurities and repulsiveness." The prophet is referring here to our final stages of purification wherein we will be totally cleansed from sin. He compares this purification to the ritual purification from spiritual uncleanness. Careful examination of this comparison reveals a significant dimension of our ultimate purity. Instead of making reference to the traditional immersion process the prophet compares our final stages of purity to the sprinkling of the pure water. This particular procedure was reserved for one who came in contact with a corpse. Such contact conveys a severe state of ritual uncleanness and requires a unique purification process for its removal. This specific symbolism suggests a corollary between our association with sin and our association with death. Apparently, our ultimate state of purity from sin will be likened to the ritual state of purity from contact with the dead.

In order to properly understand this relationship it is worthwhile to examine the unique nature of this sprinkling purification process. In the maftir Torah portion for Parshas Parah we read about the sacrificial service of the red heifer. Its complex details and regulations display the uniqueness of this sacrifice. Unlike all other sacrifices the slaughtering of the heifer and the sprinkling of her blood took place outside the walls of the Bais Hamikdash. The entire heifer was subsequently burned and its ashes were mixed with spring water to produce a ritual mixture. This mixture which was then sprinkled on any person who came in contact, directly or indirectly, with a corpse and ritual purity was achieved. Our Chazal (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. The ashes of the sacrifice were preserved in order that the atonement from this sin could be continued for generations. Chazal reveal that the effects of this sin are ongoing and constant atonement is necessary. It stands to reason 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. Apparently the spiritual impact of this sin is so powerful that it creates an ongoing effect on the ritual purity status of every Jew.

This intriguing phenomenon can be understood through the profound insight of Chazal in Mesichta Avoda Zara (5a). The Talmud teaches us that at the time the Jewish people received the Torah they qualified to transcend the curse of mortality and become eternal physical beings. Their display of readiness to accept and follow the will of Hashem was so sincere and intense that they had actually transformed their physical being into a semi spiritual entity. During those elevating moments, even their bodies cooperated with their spiritual drives and contributed to their perfect service of Hashem. Even their bodies' cravings and urges were translated into spiritual ones which brought the Jewish people closer to Hashem.

However, the Talmud informs us that, unfortunately, this experience was short-lived. After forty days of semi-spirituality the Jewish people succumbed to fear and anxiety. They responded to the devastating notion that their leader Moshe Rabbeinu had permanently departed and they desperately sought a new approach on life. Their panic resulted in the shameful sin of the golden calf. After somewhat detaching themselves from Hashem their bodies returned to a complete physical state and forfeited their recently acquired spiritual entity. In retrospect, it was this serious plunge of the golden calf which returned the curse of mortality to the Jewish people. From this point onward their bodies remained in a physical state, bearing the shame of sin. They possessed, once again, all of the earthly urges and cravings which lure one away from the fulfillment of the will of Hashem.

We now return to the ritual sprinkling process and the sacrifice of the red heifer. The Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva 263) explains the cause of ritual uncleanness brought about by death and association with it. When one passes away, his soul leaves the body and it remains a complete physical entity. Now, barren of any association with spirituality the body projects the image of vanity. It represents earthly urges and desires and is now identified with all the sinful practices of one's lifetime. When one comes in contact with this sinful identity, now lacking any spiritual quality, he receives a degree of spiritual impurity.

As we have learned, this identity and association projected by the body stems back to the shameful plunge of the golden calf. It was then that the Jewish body reverted back to a physical state, producing ritual impurity after one's death. Atonement for this sin is therefore a prerequisite of ritual purity from contact with death. One must first recognize the severe repercussions of straying from the ways of Hashem and seeking alternate approaches to life. Detaching oneself from Hashem results in severe spiritual decline and accents the curse of mortality. One then succumbs to his physical urges and cravings and plunges into sin. Only after one detaches himself from such cravings and urges can he qualify for purification from the ritual impurity caused by such drives. The atonement waters of the red heifer will now detach him from the impurities caused by association with a barren physical entity and restore him to a proper appreciation of his true entity, the combined unit of body and soul.

With this we gain insight into the corollary between purification from the effects of death and our

ultimate state of purity. In describing our ultimate state of purity the prophet says. "And I shall give you a new heart and I will place a new spirit in your midst and 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 ultimate level of spirituality will be so uplifting that the body will be restored to a semi state of spirituality. Even our physical urges and cravings will once again, be directed to Hashem, leaving no trace of sin to remain. In essence, these very same waters originally designed to purify us from our association with vanity and earthly cravings will ultimately remove the entire curse of vanity and sin from us. This purification process will reflect such a sincere and intense desire to associate with Hashem that it will transform even our bodily urges and cravings into spiritual drives for our perfect service of Hashem. May we merit to experience this in our very own days!