

PARSHAS PARAH

by Rabbi Dovid Siegel

Yechezkel 36:16

This week's Haftorah, read in conjunction with Parshas Parah, describes the Jewish people's state of purity in the time of Mashiach. Hashem reminds them of their sinful behavior that kindled His wrath and sent them into exile. After endless years of darkness Hashem will purify His children and return them home. The prophet Yechezkel says in Hashem's name, "And I will sprinkle pure waters upon you that will be purify you from all your impurities and repulsive actions..." (36:25) Yechezkel is referring to the Jewish people's ultimate state of purity wherein Hashem will totally cleanse them from sin. Yechezkel compares this spiritual cleansing to purification from ritual impurity. It is worthwhile to understand this particular analogy. Instead of comparing this purification to the traditional immersion process Yechezkel compares it to the sprinkling of the red heifer waters. This detailed and mysterious procedure purified one from direct contact with a corpse. Such contact produced the most severe state of ritual impurity and required a unique purification process. Yechezkel's analogy suggests a direct corollary between sin and death. Apparently, the ultimate removal of sin is similar to the removal of the impurity of death.

Let us examine the nature of the red heifer process and understand its relationship to sin. We read in the maftir portion of Parshas Parah that the kohain was commanded to slaughter the heifer and sprinkle its sacrificial blood outside the Bais Hamikdash's walls. The kohanim then burned the heifer's body and mixed her ashes with spring water producing a ritual mixture. The mixture was then sprinkled on anyone who was associated with a corpse. The Sages comment on the unique nature of this sacrifice and explain that it atoned for the Jewish nation's sin of the golden calf. They show how every detail of this sacrifice ran parallel lines with the details of the sinful golden calf experience. (see Rashi to Bamidbar 19:2 II)

This indicates a direct relationship between the spiritual impurity of death and the golden calf. For this reason the purification process began with atonement from the golden calf sin. In fact, the purifying mixture was a product of the atonement of that sin. Whenever the Jewish nation required purification ashes they would atone for the golden calf sin and produced their necessary mixtures. Apparently, this sin's impact was so far reaching that it left an indelible impression on the Jewish people's ritual purity. Yet, this atonement was specifically related to association with a corpse and only required when producing purifying ashes.

We can appreciate this intriguing phenomenon through the Sages' profound insight in Mesichta

Avoda Zara (5a). They teach us that when the Jewish people received the Torah they transcended the curse of mortality. They cleaved to Hashem's will with such intensity that their bodies were transformed into semi-spiritual entities. After two thousand years of world existence the body finally cooperated with the soul and created a harmonious unit of Hashem's perfect service. Regretfully, this lofty experience was short lived and, after forty days of elevation the Jewish people succumbed to fear and anxiety. They doubted if their revered leader Moshe Rabbeinu would ever return and desperately sought a qualified spiritual replacement. This set the stage for their insincere Egyptian converts who seduced the Jewish people into idolatry. This infamous plunge returned them to mortality. Their bodies returned to their physical state replete with all earthly urges and cravings.

We can further develop this through Sefer Hachinuch's understanding of the red heifer and its ritual mixture. He explains death's ritual impurity in the following manner. When one passes away, his soul departs from his body leaving behind a total physical entity. The body, barren of any trace of spirituality, projects a penetrating image of vanity and reflects a lifetime of earthly urges and sinful practices. Direct contact with a barren body damages one's spirituality and renders him ritually impure. This impure status has a positive effect and forces one to view his body and its effects in a different manner. His impure predicament reminds him that his body was meant to unite with his soul and he helps one senses the repulse of total earthly cravings. (Sefer Hachinuch Mitzva 263)

In truth, this vanity and sinful association traces back to the Jewish people's shameful sin of the golden calf. That single act returned the Jewish body to its physical state and created its ritual impurity. During that infamous scene the Jewish people traded their closest relationship with Hashem for shameful bodily cravings. Although this became reality their brief Har Sinai experience proved that one can free himself from earthly drives and direct his total being towards Hashem.

We now understand the red heifer's crucial role in the purification process. We realize that atonement from the golden calf was a prerequisite for ritual purity. Hashem introduced this impurity to assist one in detaching himself from his physical drives. One's impure state sent him a clear message about the body's shameful role in sin. However, one was reminded that his physical cravings were not necessarily part of his Jewish psyche. There was a time in the Jewish people's history where body and soul craved for something of true content and substance namely, association with Hashem. The first step of purification was to contemplate the damaging effect of physical drives. After detaching oneself from his deep rooted urges the red heifer mixture completed the process. Its goal was to remind one of his true potential, to unify body and soul thereby achieving spiritual perfection.

We can now begin to understand Yechezkel's comparison between ultimate purity from sin and the red heifer mixture. The prophet Yechezkel describes this ultimate purity in the following words, "And I shall give you a new heart and place a new spirit in your midst and remove the stone heart from your flesh..." (36:26) Ramban teaches us that this refers to the Jewish people's pure desire to fulfill Hashem's will. The time will ultimately arrive for the body and all its drives to take a back seat.

The Jewish people in the Messianic era will return to Adam's perfect state before his involvement in sin. Their single minded desire will be similar to that of the Jewish people during their first forty days at Har Sinai. They will totally detach themselves from physical passions and crave for the closest relationship with Hashem. (Ramban D'vorim 30:6) This process will ultimately return them to their semi-spiritual state of Har Sinai. This time, however, it will be everlasting and Hashem will permanently remove the curse of mortality from His people. (see Daas T'vunos 3:40)

The analogy of the purifying waters is now complete. Throughout the years, the red heifer's sacrificial waters purified one from association with earthly cravings. The ritual mix removed ritual impurity and reduced one's sinful urges. In addition, the atonement process brought one in contact with his soul's innermost cravings, to cleave to Hashem. It linked one to his glorious past at Har Sinai and inspired him to his glorious future in Meshiach's times. And it will ultimately complete its role and detach the Jewish people from all physical drives and passions and direct body and soul's total focus towards Hashem.

How timely is this lesson immediately following Purim with our sights set on Pesach. The mitzvos of Purim allows us to contact our innermost feelings and ascertain our true essence. After this uplifting experience we begin preparing for our total redemption. Indeed, the Sages teach us that as the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt in the month of Nissan they will be ultimately redeemed in that same month. May we merit that this refer to our upcoming Nissan.

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