

BUILDING WITH FAILURE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Chukkas, the first of this week's two parshayos, begins with the laws of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer. Any Jew who has had contact with a corpse, even indirect contact such as walking in a cemetery, or being under the same roof as a corpse, becomes ritually impure ("tameh"). The only way to remove this tum'ah is through the sprinkling of the Parah Adumah ashes. Nowadays, with the absence of the Red Heifer ashes, we are all regarded as ritually impure, since in the course of day-to-day life, avoiding all contact with a corpse is not feasible (consider that entering a hospital creates a likely situation of "being under one roof with a corpse," and even walking outside leaves open the possibility of "walking over an [unknown] grave").

Rambam (peirush ha-Mishnayos; Parah 3:3) asks: Seeing as how the production of the Parah Adumah ashes requires the services of an "ish tahor" - one who is already ritually pure - how will it be possible to re-establish the mitzvah of Parah Adumah in the future (when Mashiach comes)? Apparently, he answers, we will have to seclude two small infants from society, and ensure they never leave the premises of a ritually-pure home built especially for them, until they reach the age of being able to supervise the creation of a new set of Parah Adumah ashes. For, concludes the Rambam, "there is no [practical] difference between one who was never tameh to a corpse, and one who was tamei his whole life but then became purified [through the Parah Adumah process], except that one who has become purified [after being tamei] is on a higher level of purity than one who was never tamei to begin with, because [the Torah] calls him 'tahor' [but still, both are acceptable to create the new ashes]."

In a nutshell, the Rambam observes that the Torah ascribes greater purity to one who has been tamei only to be rendered pure through the Parah Adumah [in that the Torah calls him "tahor" - pure], than to one who is inherently tahor, never having been in contact with a corpse. A brilliant and insightful observation to be sure - but why? How is it possible that one who was once tamei is on a higher level of purity than one who was never tamei to begin with?

Chazal (our Sages) teach (Bereishis Rabbah 3:7) that before the world (as we know it) was created, Hashem created numerous [other] worlds and destroyed them. Simplistically, it seems that Hashem needed a few attempts until He "found the right recipe" for the universe, not unlike the housewife who need to burn a few cholents before getting it right. Obviously, though, the analogy is off the mark. Had Hashem so desired, He could easily have "got it right the first time." Why then did He choose to create the universe in this fashion?

Rabbi Tzadok haCohen explains that Hashem wanted to set an example for all creation: The best construction must come on the heels of previous failure. To build properly, one has to suffer destruction - to see his handiwork fall apart - and then start building again. When failure is used to ensure greater eventual success, then the failure itself becomes an integral part of the creation process. This explains the concept of the Rambam: One who has experienced tum'ah can then go on to achieve taharah (purity) - whereas one who was never tamei is simply "not impure."

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 84a) tells the story of Reish Lakish, who was once an outlaw of great renown, until a chance meeting with Rabbi Yochanan, who, after witnessing Reish Lakish's great strength, told him that if he would dedicate his immense energy to Torah study, then R' Yochanan would give him his sister as a wife. The rest, as they say, is history. Reish Lakish became the brother-in-law of R' Yochanan, and emerged as one of the great Torah scholars of his generation.

Many years later, there was a discussion the beis ha-midrash (study hall) regarding daggers and swords - at which point are they considered ready for use (and thereby become susceptible to tumah). R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish argued the point, the latter claiming that they are not truly ready for use until they have been cooled with water. Apparently, the discussion became quite heated, until at some point R' Yochanan blurted out in frustration: "You, Reish Lakish, should know - after all, does not a bandit know the tools of his trade!"

Reish Lakish retorted, "If so - why did you do me a favour [of channelling my strength into Torah study]? There they called me Rebbe [i.e. head of the bandits], and here they call me Rebbe!" The Gemara says that R' Yochanan became depressed by Reish Lakish's answer, and could not be consoled.

Yet what did Reish Lakish say that was so offensive to R' Yochanan? On the surface, it appears that R' Yochanan's words were the crueller of the two!

R' Tzadok explains that what Reish Lakish was telling R' Yochanan was the following: "Indeed, it is as you say - I was once a great thief. But I repented from my ways - I built upon my failures, and because of this my Torah is indeed greater than yours, for you have known in your life nothing but success. You mockingly refer to my days as a thief, yet I proudly declare that it is indeed only as a result of this that I have attained such great levels of Torah scholarship - greater than you will ever know!" R' Yochanan was offended by his words, and could not be consoled.

Of course, one should never seek failure in order to bring about the eventual success that follows. But failure is all around us - it is an integral part of being human. Often, we become disheartened by our lack of perfection, by the constant give-and-take of everyday life. Wouldn't it be nice, we lament, to just always do the right thing - not to make so many mistakes. Yet this is the wrong attitude. Our failures and imperfection are given to us to build upon, and to learn from.

To build a solid building, one must first dig deep into the ground, and then slowly begin pouring the cement that forms the building's foundation. The holes have been dug - it is our choice whether to

build upon them, or to bury ourselves with them.

Text Copyright © 2000 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Project Genesis, Inc.](#)**
