

BALANCING ACT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Perhaps the greatest and most discussed mystery of the Torah is the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, described at the beginning of Parashas Chukas, the first of this week's two parshiyos. Indeed, Chazal, our Sages, tell us (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6) that aside from Moshe, no one has ever fully understood the reasoning behind the Parah Adumah. Even Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) - wisest of all men - said of the Parah (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:23), "I said, 'I will become wise,' yet it is beyond me." (Yoma 14a)

There are many aspects of the Parah Adumah which need to be examined. Most mefarshim (commentators) understand that its greatest mystery is the fact that it renders pure one who is impure, yet it imparts tum'ah (impurity) to one who was previously tahor (pure). Namely, one who has been defiled by contact with a corpse must be twice sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer, mixed with water, after which his tum'ah leaves him. (Actually, it's not quite so simple, see Rambam, Laws of Parah Adumah for full details.) On the other hand, if the same mixture happened to be sprinkled inadvertently on one who was non-tamei, he is rendered ritually impure, and requires immersion in a mikvah. How can the same mixture have such contradictory effects?

K'li Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Efrayim of Luntshitz, [5310-5379; 1550- 1619]) however, offers a brilliant explanation as to how this works. The law is that fruits, grains, and produce can receive tum'ah (ritual defilement) only after having coming in contact with water (or certain other liquids related to water - see Vayikra/Leviticus 11:38, Rambam, Laws of Food-Related Defilement, Ch. 1). If a fruit has not come into contact with water since being harvested, it is not susceptible to tum'ah and can not be rendered impure. Isn't this strange? We normally think of water as the source of all purity! When our hands are impure, we wash them with water. When our bodies are tam'eh, we immerse them in a mikvah or open body of water. Even the ashes of the Red Heifer were ineffective until mixed with water. So how is it that contact with water is a prerequisite to tum'ah acceptance?

This can be understood, he explains, by understanding the scientific principle that all matter lies in a dormant state until it is "awakened" by an opposing force. A frozen object can only be rendered molecularly active by its opposing force - heat. A motionless object can only be jostled into movement by the thrust of something moving. The greater the opposing force, the more powerful the awakening becomes. This is why fruits are only susceptible to tum'ah after contact with water: Water is indeed the source of taharah/purity. Yet in order for tum'ah to "awaken" an object and render it impure, the object must be its opposite; it must have first been in a state of purity in order

for the tum'ah to have its full effect.

Seen in this light, we can look at the Parah Adumah mixture as possessing two opposite forces. The water is the source of all taharah. The ashes of the slaughtered cow represent death, sin (of the Golden Calf - see Rashi), and impurity. Depending on what the mixture comes into contact with, one of the two forces will be awakened. If the mixture touches the body of one who has been defiled, the water is awakened and counteracts the tum'ah with its taharah, thereby rendering the person/object ritually pure. If, on the other hand, the mixture contacts someone tahor, the ashes are awakened, and render him impure.

This amazing explanation, however, "arouses" the question: So what's the mystery? We have given a rational explanation for the contradictory forces of the Parah Adumah. What is it that defies all rhyme and reason?

The "law of opposing forces" holds true with regard to personal growth and interpersonal relationships as well. We all, to some extent, are subject to the obstacle of dormancy and complacency. While ideally we should be in a constant state of forward movement and growth, in fact we go through periods of stagnation and apathy. Often, it is only when we are acted upon by an "opposing force" - when our character and our beliefs are challenged and tested - that we are jostled into a state of new growth and action. Even Avraham Avinu had to go through ten tests in order to attain his maximum spiritual potential.

Yet therein lies the conundrum. As a rule we seek to distance ourselves from undue challenges and tests, for one can never know when the challenge will perhaps prove too difficult. Yet if we are not challenged, we will cease to grow, and will degenerate into a constant state of spiritual slumber. How do we find the perfect mixture - the Parah Adumah waters - wherein the tum'ah awakens the taharah, the challenges arousing the best in us and driving us to heights unreachable by those spiritually-unchallenged?

Perhaps this is the mystery of the Parah Adumah. Ultimately, we are destined to spend our whole lives looking for the Parah-Adumah perfect-balance. Life is not - and will never be - a straight and unswerving line. We must, at times, pull back in order to go forward, much as the archer must first draw backwards in order to achieve the maximum forward momentum. (This is referred to in sifrei Kabbalah as the concept of Ratzo ve-Shov, the constant fluctuation between forward movement and pullbacks.) We search for the perfect balance, yet it alludes us. If, however, we remember that it is only through the setbacks and challenges with which life presents us, that we ultimately attain our greatest growth, then perhaps we will embrace life's obstacles and challenges, instead of shunning them.

Have a good Shabbos.

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