

# FROM CALF TO COW

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## Friday Night:

*G-d told Moshe, "When you count the Children of Israel to determine their numbers, each one should be counted by giving an atonement-offering to G-d for his life. This way they won't be stricken by the plague when they are counted. Everyone counted must give a half-shekel, according to the standard of the sanctuary, where a shekel equals twenty gerahs. Such a half-shekel is to be given as an offering to G-d. (Shemos 30:11-13)*

Rebi Shimon ben Lakish said: The Holy One, Blessed is He looked into the future and saw that Haman would weigh out money to [annihilate] the Jewish people, and said, "It is better to put their money before the money of that evil person!" Therefore, we read Parashas Shekalim early [in advance of Adar]. (Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:5)

Though it is true that we read Parashas Shekalim in advance of Rosh Chodesh Adar, it is more amazing that Purim tends to show up in or around the week that we read this week's parshah, which the Talmud says is connected to the holiday of Purim itself. Now THAT'S Divine Providence!

Then again, that is what the holiday of Purim is all about: seemingly unrelated events and people coming together for a spectacular finale, revealing the "hand" of G-d behind everything. This is what is meant by:

A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he doesn't know the difference between cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai. (Megillah 7b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 695:2)

Because, ultimately there is no difference. As the Nefesh HaChaim points out (Likutim, 26), the yetzer hara dances to a tune that G-d plays (I'm paraphrasing a bit here), and as Rashi states even more explicitly:

The Canaanites heard ... (Bamidbar 21:1).

"He heard that Aharon had died and that the Clouds of Glory had lifted ... Amalek is a "punishing strap" for Israel always ready for punishment." (Rashi)

Mordechai may be the "right hand" that draws one close to G-d, and Haman/Amalek may be the "left hand" that pushes one away--but they are both hands of G-d. Our job, the rabbis teach, is to turn

the left hand into a right hand, so that G-d only deals with us mercifully, and keeps our enemies at bay.

The secret to doing this is actually in the mitzvah of the half-shekel. The shekalim given served two purposes: a donation to the Mishkan (and later, the Bais HaMikdosh), and to count the Jewish people. According to Tradition, Divine blessing does not rest on anything which is counted or measured (Ta'anis 8b; Pesikta d'Rav Kahanah, 18:2), so half-shekels were counted instead.

This was no coincidence that the shekalim served these two purposes at the same time. It was a way of telling the Jewish people that their very existence was tied to the Temple service. When it comes to the life of a Jew, there is only one "hat": service of G-d, no matter where we are and what we are doing.

Haman, and Amalek in general tries to split the world of the Jew into two parts. It is the first step in getting the Jew to eliminate the Torah-part, because it is hard to wear two "hats" at one time, and it is far easier to jettison the religious side than the secular side. Thus, the half-shekel given in the desert and Temple times was in anticipation of Haman's efforts to uproot Judaism.

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## Shabbos Day:

*Moshe took the [his] tent and set it up outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the "Appointed Tent." From that time onward, anyone who sought G-d went out to the Appointed Tent, outside the camp. When Moshe went out towards the tent, all the people stood up; every man stood by the entrance of his tent, and watched Moshe until he entered the tent. (Shemos 33:7-8)*

After the camp had been purged of the population that had caused and worshipped the golden calf, there was still an effect to be felt. The Midrash says that when Moshe heard that the Divine Presence would no longer lead the Jewish people, making the Jewish people seem like "outcasts," Moshe followed suit and did the same: he moved his tent 2,000 amos (about 3,000 to 4,000 feet) outside the camp.

You would have thought that this dramatic move would have humbled all the people, and would have made them respectful of Moshe. However, the Talmud tells another tale:

And [they] watched Moses until he entered the tent ... Rav Ami and Rav Yitzchak [differed on this verse]: One comes to degrade; one says it comes to praise. The one who says that it means to degrade, it is ... (Kiddushin 33b)

"They used to look and see how thick his thighs were and how fat his neck was, and say, 'From ours he ate, from ours he drank ...' " (Tanchuma, Pekudei 4)

This is not unlike what we read at the end of the Megillah (speaking of Purim). Even though

Mordechai engineered a remarkable redemption from the evil grip of Haman, still, he was only held in high esteem by the "majority of his brothers." Majority? Only the majority? Apparently, there were still many, albeit a minority, who did not look favorably toward Mordechai, in spite of all he had accomplished on behalf of the Jewish people.

The Ibn Ezra says that the reason is simple: people are jealous. With Haman out of the way, and a festive atmosphere in Persia, some forgot how close they had come to annihilation, and became petty all over again. It was their pettiness that interfered with their being able to appreciate the reality of what really happened, and their appreciation of Mordechai's greatness.

This is what the rabbis teach:

Rebi Yehoshua said: A stingy eye, the yetzer hara, and hatred of others take a person from the world. (Pirkei Avos 2:11)

A crisis has a way of suspending negative traits. However, once the crisis is over and life calms down somewhat, then it becomes clear who was changed by the circumstances and who was not. Indeed, it did not take long for some of the population to forget how close G-d had been willing to eliminate the Jewish people, and how Moshe saved their lives--at the risk of his own life. They overlooked the fact that Moshe was the humblest and most honest person in the world, as was Mordechai in his time.

Their stingy eyes, their yetzer haros, and their hatred interfered with their mental vision, as it always does, and it lowered their spiritual sights. The result? In the end, their own shortcomings were projected onto others far greater than they, and made the innocent appear guilty, and the guilty, to appear innocent!

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## SEUDAH SHLISHI:

*G-d told Moshe, "Write down these words. According to what I have said is the covenant with you and with Israel." He was there with G-d for forty days and forty nights, [and] did not eat bread or drink water.* (Shemos 34:27-28)

That's right--40 days and 40 nights without food, and Moshe was no worse for the wear. Then again, if you can go up into Heaven and remain alive, and even talk to G-d and survive, why should you need food? This is what the Torah tells us later:

... Man does not live by bread alone, but by whatever G-d says should exist does man live. (Devarim 8:3)

And if G-d wants to keep a person alive without food and water, then why not?

But why forty? Why was Moshe up on Har Sinai receiving Torah for a period of forty days and night?

We saw some meaning in the number forty in last week's parshah. However, in this week's parshah, there is a whole other dimension. It says in a certain book that, if you calculate 24 hours over forty days, the total is 960 hours. What makes this number significant is the fact that it happens to be that this is the amount of "lugin" (one "log" equals about 10 ounces) that makes a mikvah kosher.

The point of a mikvah is to purify either people or things. But purify from what? Spiritual impurity is not like a virus, or germs in general, which may be invisible to the eye without a microscope, but are nevertheless physical. Spiritual impurity is not physical at all, though it can end up having direct physical effects.

Spiritual impurity can come from many physical sources, such as a dead body. However, they are, in essence, rooted in the same concept: chitzonios (literally, "externalities"), those things lacking spiritual significance. The less spiritual something is, the more chitzoni it is. The more directly something makes you aware of G-d's Presence, the more p'nimi--essential--it is.

A number associated with spiritual impurity is the number 320 (for reasons too complex to discuss here). This aspect of impurity represents three levels of sources of spiritual defilement, which makes the total 960. Hence, the mikvah, which must contain at least 960 lugin of non-drawn water, comes to undo the effects of the 960 "elements" that cause a person spiritual defilement.

Hence, Moshe's stay on Mt. Sinai acted as a sort of mikvah for him. It separated him from the world of chitzonios, and made him into a fitting container for the light of Torah he was trying to receive. In fact, this might explain the Midrash that says that every day Moshe kept forgetting the Torah G-d taught him. It was only on the fortieth day, when the mikvah-process was complete, that Moshe received all of Torah, and kept it.

This too was the purpose of the Babylonian Exile, and the Purim Redemption that followed. Suffering has a tendency to humble people, and to inspire teshuvah. It is teshuvah that fashions us into a fitting vessel for the light of G-d, which comes through redemptions. This is why it says in the Megillah:

For the Jews, there was light ... (Esther 8:16)

It is no different for us on our days of Purim, during which we try to become a fitting "container" to receive the light of Torah.

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## Melave Malkah:

### Parashas Parah

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "This is the statute of the law which G-d commanded to be told. Tell the children of Israel to take an unblemished, completely red heifer, which has never worn a yoke ..." (Bamidbar 19:1)

Having "survived" Purim, we now move on to preparations for Pesach. First-things-first: Get rid of the 2,000 pounds (kilos in Canada, Europe, and Israel) of chometz you received for Purim in your Mishloach Manos. After you have done that, consider Parashas Parah, which is the special maftir for this week's reading--the third of the four special readings at this time of year.

The Red Heifer was made into a liquid mixture that was used for purifying those who had come in contact with the dead. This was essential, especially for someone who would need to participate in the sacrificing and eating of the Pesach-Offering on Pesach. Hence, its reading this week in advance of Pesach.

However, Parashas Parah also represents a transition from the Purim mode to the Pesach mode, and we need to understand how. To do this, we need to better understand Parashas Zachor, which we read last Shabbos as the special reading and maftir in advance of Purim.

The Torah writes:

You must keep a perfect and accurate weight, and a perfect and accurate measure. This will serve to prolong your days on the land, which G-d, your G-d gives to you. However, all those who don't act accordingly and are not righteous are offensive to G-d, your G-d. Remember what Amalek did to you along your way ... (Devarim 25:15-17)

The Netziv asks: What connection is there between the mitzvah to keep perfect weights and measures, and the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek? His answer involves many details and should be read in its entirety, but the upshot of his piercing insight is that keeping accurate weights represents tremendous trust in G-d and His desire to take care of us.

Why else would one cheat in business? If we believe that G-d runs the world--that is, all aspects of daily life--then we have to believe that if we're doing our best to live meaningful lives, He will give us all we need when we need it. If we don't have something we want, we have to take it for granted that it is better for us not to have it than have it, at least at that time. Otherwise, G-d would give it to us. Cheating means we don't believe in this and feel a need to look out for ourselves.

This, explains the Netziv, is why the mitzvah to deal justly in business is so serious. Aside from the fact that it is the "nice" thing to do, it also represents one's trust in G-d and His ability to take care of our needs--which Amalek comes to undermine. It is Amalek's desire to make us doubt G-d's desire and willingness to take care of our needs, and he "forces" us to sin to better take "care of ourselves" ... to make up for what G-d doesn't do for us.

The passage from Purim to Pesach is the process of increasing one's faith in G-d and His benevolence. Moving away from Haman and Amalek means to move towards Mordechai and belief in G-d's love of His people, and willingness to turn the world (and nature) upside-down to take care of His people's needs.

What better test of this faith is there than the mitzvah of Parah Adumah--the Red Heifer--which, as

Rashi points out, makes no sense to the nations of the world, the yetzer hara, and even to us. It is a "chok," a statute--there is nothing to compare it to down here in our world. Hence, it is the quintessential paradox--and for that matter, a supreme test of faith for the Jew, and an important stepping stone to freedom from our own personal "mitzrayims" every year.

Happy Pesach cleaning ...

Have a great Shabbos,

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