

# THE RED HEIFER REALITY

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Let us consider that the second half of Bamidbar is all about the Parah Adumah of last week's Parsha. It is all about recognizing the nature of our mission and its inherent and inevitable dangers.

To be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation we must engage the rest of the world in a profoundly intimate relationship. We cannot simply present them with the facts of G-d's existence and caring without bringing them into the circle of our lives. On some deep level we will have to open our hearts to them, to care about them and love them as did Avraham and Sarah; otherwise, we will fail in our mission as teachers to bring them closer to G-d.

The dangers are more than obvious and in many ways force us to reexamine the extraordinary couple who started this process that literally changed the course of history and defined the meaning of destiny.

Avraham and Sarah lived in a world opposed to monotheism although that same world remembered the Mabul (Great Flood) and lived in the shadow of what had been Migdal Bavel (Tower of Babel). (Avraham was 48 when G-d destroyed the Tower and dispersed the languages and nations.) Into that world Avraham and Sarah emerged as an irrepressible force of chesed (kindness), and a power of goodness.

By the power of their love for all of G-d's children they engaged the world and invited them into their home. The famed Tent of Avraham is best described as the Tent of Sarah. Over Sarah's tent the cloud of G-d's shechinah (presence) was ever present. In her tent the miracle of G-d's sustaining the world was revealed with the dough that miraculously increased in size. In her tent the light of knowledge, harmony, and peace miraculously stayed lit from Friday evening to the following Friday evening. It was Sarah's tent that revealed the true nature of their family. Her tent was the private residence of Avraham and Sarah that defined their extraordinary ability to influence a world without compromise, or taint of impurity.

On the other hand, the Avraham's Tent was the public hall where the world came and went in search of truth and enlightenment. It was the hall where Avraham and Sarah greeted their guests and cared for their physical needs. It was the study tent in which they sang the inescapable song of creation that drew all hearts into a spiritual world as deep and different as the deepest depths of the sea. However, the private home, the home they shared with G-d Himself, Sarah's Tent, was exclusive to them and only them. Even the three angels had to stay outside Sarah's tent.

We also know that Avraham and Sarah were exceedingly careful about the environment where they pitched their tents. Their encampments were always at the cross-roads, and never inside the cities. The cross-roads attracted guests that were adventurous travelers willing to dare the dangers of the unknown road as well as the unexplored pathways of their souls. They stayed outside of the cities because they knew the dangers and attractions of the pagan world and the tendency of all people toward assimilation. It was best to stay away. (In contrast to Lot who thought he could withstand the influences of Sodom and Gomorrah and was instead destroyed by them.)

We also know the strength of Sarah's and Avraham's convictions when it came to maintaining the sanctity of the family homestead. Even when it meant sending away their beloved Hagar and Yishamel, Sarah did not hesitate and Avraham listened to what he was told.

The Tents of Avraham and Sarah were the precursors of Eretz Yisroel and the Bais Hamikdash. From them we learn the measure that must be engaged if we are to accomplish our mission of being "a light unto the nations." Yet, the Parah Adumah illustrates the inherent and possibly unavoidable dangers of interacting with society. Although we will change their lives by developing their souls, we will pay a price with our own. The Kohain who administers the purification will himself become impure.

As an important side note, we find that G-d forewarned us against the dangers of assimilation by focusing on the children. They are the ones most vulnerable to assimilative attack. It is presumed that the parents, the adults, will have developed sufficient ego strengths and disciplines to survive the mission of influencing the outside society. Yes, there will always be a price to pay, and yes we must take extra measures to make sure that our homes are citadels of truth and purity so that we are protected as we do battle with society; however, the children must always be protected. They are not strong enough to withstand society and its enticements. They must always be protected.

The famous insight of Rav Ruderman Zt'l, regarding the different approaches of Eliyahu Hanavi and Elisha underscores this very same concept. The Rosh Hayeshiva explained that Elisha's request from his teacher Eliyahu that he become twice as great as Eliyahu was predicated on Elisha's fears for himself. Whereas Eliyahu engaged the Jews from the distance, Elisha engaged them from up close. Eliyahu remain above the frays of society. He did what he had to do for the sake of the Jewish people, and when necessary, escaped into the mountains and forests in search of sanctuary and strength. Elisha on the other hand walked among the people, living their lives, sharing their homes, eating at their tables. He realized, as did Eliyahu, that he would have to be twice as strong as Eliyahu if he was to survive his own mission. Eliyahu granted him his wish.

If we analyze the placement of the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) at the end of the 40 years and the importance of its message to the generation that would take possession of Israel, we can see a clear pattern to the sequence of the Parshios starting with Shelach and the Miraglim (spies).

The Spies returned from their mission with a demoralizing and disheartening message of inability

and fear. The commentaries suggest a rational for their intent. They suggest that the Miraglim saw Israel as "a land that devours its inhabitants." It was a land that demanded great personal and national discipline to maintain its sanctity. At the same time, possessing the Promised Land meant leaving the purified sanctity and protection of the desert camp and braving the dangers of the "outside" world. Why would anyone want to do so? Why give up living in Gan Eden (Garden of Eden) in order to work a land? Why leave the clarity of G-d's engagement in the world with food from heaven, water from rocks, Torah directly from Moshe, and clouds of glory protecting them both physically and spiritually? To do what? Work the land from morning till night and battle the inevitable influences of other ideologies and values? Better at all costs to force G-d to keep them in the desert rather than chance the dangers of "growing up and getting a job." Of course they were wrong. As the verse in Bereishis states, "G-d put man in the garden to work and safe- keep it." Man was born to work and Israel and Torah were given to us to accomplish our missions to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." True, to be holy is easier if we avoid the dangers of the mission, but to be holy and not do the mission is to not do what G-d wants us to do. First G-d mandated that we be a kingdom of priests, and in support of that mission He mandated that we be a holy nation.

Korach's rebellion was the next lesson in understanding who we are, what we are supposed to be, and what the dangers are that we must confront, from without as well as from within. Korach did not want to keep the Jews in the desert - just the opposite! Korach was excited about crossing the Yarden and taking his rightful place among the other nations. In fact, a casual observation about the minutia of his argument with Moshe proves this. The two presenting issues were does the Talis dyed entirely Techeles (blue) still need Tzitzit (fringes); and does a house filled with Torah books require a Mezuzah? Both questions involve mitzvos that were intended to protect us from the attack of assimilation by reminding us where we come from and who we are.

Korach assumed that the Torah was a manual of values and directions intended to be applied by the limits of human intelligence. He challenged the divine imperative of the Oral Law while fully embracing the Written Law. In doing so and failing, Korach revealed that beyond the external protections of community is the internal commitment of living by the Oral Law. The Oral Law defines who we really are and how we are unique. It clarifies in practical and ideological terms how we are to be different from the rest of the nations. Korach felt that G-d's intent was that we be different in our internal reality while being able to do away with the outside differences. In fact, he argued that reducing the external differences would make it easier for the other nations to relate to us and thereby learn from us.

This brings us to this week's Parsha, Balak, and next week's Parsha, Pinchas. Balak is the setting for Bilam's blessings; and Bilam's blessings define the Jews as viewed by the non-Jew. On the one hand we are the G-dly tents of Jacob and the dwelling places of Israel; while on the other hand, "we are a nation that dwells alone and does not judge themselves in contrast to other nations." Bilam is the Torah's response to Korach's rebellion. The greatest influence the Jew can have on the other nations

is to be himself or herself without compromise or modification. Regardless of the times or circumstances, except when it involves those exceptions that are defined by the Halacha (Jewish law), keeping the laws of the Torah as defined by the Oral Law will be our greatest influence.

Furthermore, Bilam himself represented the greatest warning possible to the Jewish people. At no time can a person believe that he or she is protected from the internal or external influences of society. Even a man like Bilam to whom G-d spoke, and who knew with absolute certainty that the G-d of the universe controls all, was still able to deny G-d and defy His intentions. Given the environment of Eretz Yisroel, the gift of Torah, and the knowledge that we owe Him everything, we should "not believe in yourself until the day you die."

As the Jews readied themselves to possess the Promised Land, the Torah prepared them for the job of bringing redemption and the dangers of the mission. As the children of Avraham and Sarah we have no choice. Whether in the land or exiled from it we are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We have no choice. We must engage the other nations and awaken them to G-d's presence in their lives. However, we must never take the job or its dangers for granted. Assimilation can come from without or from within. It can attack the weakest among us as well as the strongest. The only guarantee given is that if we do as we are supposed to do G-d will do as He promised to do.

### **The 3 Weeks & The 17th of Tamuz**

Considering that the Three Weeks begin a week from Sunday, I thought it prudent to send out this short review with enough time to plan accordingly.

The fasts of Gedalia, the 10th of Teves, the 17th of Tamuz, and Tisha B'Av, were ordained to commemorate the destruction of the 1st and 2nd Batei Mikdash (Temples). Beginning with the 17th of Tamuz and culminating the day after Tisha B'Av is a period of mourning. As legislated by the Talmud and amplified by our customs, the degree of mourning becomes more intense as we approach Tisha B'Av.

**The Three Weeks** The laws of the 3 Weeks extend from July 23 @ 8:46 pm (after Shabbos) until August 15 at 1:00 pm. Neither men nor women are to shave or take haircuts during this three-week period. Marriages are not performed and it is forbidden to rejoice with music and dance. The custom is to refrain from listening to any music or to attend any live musical event. Occasions necessitating the Bracha of Shehechyanu, such as buying and wearing new clothes or eating a new fruit should be avoided during the Three Weeks. Five tragedies befell the Jewish People on the 17th of Tamuz (Sunday, July 24). In commemoration of these events Chazal - the Rabbis - ordained a fast day.

- 1.** Moshe returned from Mt. Sinai and witnessed the Golden Calf. Moshe broke the first Luchos.
- 2.** From the day that the Mizbeach (altar) was inaugurated in the desert (2449), offerings were sacrificed every single day for 890 years. During the fall of the first Bais Hamikdash, there were no more sheep to sacrifice due to the hunger, and the daily offerings were stopped.

- 3.** During the fall of the second Bais Hamikdash, the Romans breached the walls of Yerushalayim. At the destruction of the 1st Bais Hamikdash, the walls were breached on the 9th of Tamuz. The fast of the 17th commemorates both occasions.
- 4.** The Talmud in Tanis recounts that in 2610, right before the story of Chanukah, Apustomus, a Syrian governor, publicly burned a Sefer Torah.
- 5.** In 3228, during the 1st Bais Hamikdash, King Menashe placed an idol in the Bais Hamikdash. During the era of the 2nd Bais Hamikdash, Apustomus did the same.

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