

RED HEIFER AND THE DEATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Chukas-Balak

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #379, The Jewish "Shabbos Goy". Good Shabbos!

The Link Between Para Adumah And The Death Of The Righteous

Immediately after discussing the use of Para Adumah [Red Heifer] ashes to purify a person who came into contact with the dead, the Torah tells us of the death of Miriam [Bamidbar 20:1]. The Talmud says [Moed Katan 28a] that the juxtaposition of these two parshios teaches that "Just as the Para Adumah atones, so too the death of a righteous person atones".

What common denominator between Para Adumah and the death of the righteous provides atonement for the world? We must note that the Gemarah, in making the comparison between the two, is not relating to the purification dimension (Tahara) of Para Adumah. Rather, the Gemarah is relating to the atonement (Kapara) that Para Adumah provides.

We must first examine the aspect of Para Adumah from which its atonement emerges. The Kapara of Para Adumah emerges from the fact that Para Adumah is a challenge to our faith (Emunah). Our Sages tell us that the Para Adumah was a cause for our being mocked by the gentiles. They used it to challenge our beliefs. They taunted us that it was a form of magic and witchcraft. How does it work? Why does it work? It is very strange. The whole set of laws associated with it are so paradoxical that it tests our very faith in the Divinity of the commandments. [The one upon whom the ashes are sprinkled is purified, but the one who sprinkles the ashes is rendered impure! This is so unfathomable that even the wisest of men, King Solomon, could not perceive its reasoning.]

Therefore, when the Jews observe the ritual of Para Adumah, they are in effect saying, "We trust G-

d". It might not make any sense to us, but we are going to do it anyway. [N.B. Judaism does not demand belief without reason in the fundamentals, e.g. G-d and the Giving of the Torah -- on the contrary. But once a person accepts that G-d gave the Torah, it becomes incumbent upon the person to follow its Laws whether or not he or she understands each individual detail.] There are many things in life that do not add up and do not make any sense. We earn atonement as a result of the very fact that we are nonetheless prepared to follow G-d's teaching.

In this week's parsha, klal yisroel [the Congregation of Israel] had reached the end of the 40 years of sojourn in the wilderness. For the last 40 years they had the Well because of Miriam. As far as we know, Miriam only did one thing wrong in her life. She once spoke Lashon Hara [gossip] about her brother. She was immediately punished for that act.

Therefore, they could have wondered why Miriam had to die in the wilderness without being able to enter Eretz Yisroel. After all, she committed only one sin, and had already been punished for it. And yet... "And Miriam died there and she was buried there".

"But it's not fair!" Why wasn't she allowed to go into Eretz Yisroel? It does not make any sense. However, the death of the righteous atones. If a righteous person dies, we may ask ourselves why it happened. We wonder "this does not make any sense - he was such a good person!" However, ultimately, we accept the death of the righteous with the same simple faith with which we accept the laws of Para Adumah. We are prepared to continue our lives with the same dedication to G-d and His Torah, despite our unanswered questions as to why things are the way that they are. This is the source of atonement that comes from the death of the righteous.

The recital of "Tziduk HaDin" [accepting upon ourselves the righteousness of G-d's Judgement], by saying "Hatzur Tummim Pu'u'lo -- The Rock, his actions are perfect", despite all our questions and latent doubts, is a tremendous atonement for us. And that is the linkage between the Red Heifer and the death of the righteous.

Taking Note of Even Small A Measure of Progress

Moshe Rabbeinu was denied entrance into the Land of Israel as a result of the incident that is known as the "Waters of Merivah". All of the Torah commentaries try to discover what Moshe did wrong. Rashi's well-known interpretation is that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. The Rambam in his "Eight Chapters" explains that Moshe sinned when he publicly lost his temper and said "Listen here you rebels (shimu nah ha'morim), shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" [Bamidbar 20:10]. It is as if Moshe lost his patience with his flock and addressed them in too sharp a manner.

We need to analyze the Rambam's explanation. Moshe Rabbeinu had a very legitimate reason to be angry. From a historical perspective, it certainly must have been frustrating. This was the second incident regarding this "Well". The same thing happened forty years earlier.

Moshe Rabbeinu could justifiably say, "I have had it with these people! They have not come an iota

closer to belief in G-d after forty years under my tutelage." Was it not understandable that Moshe needed to "let off a little steam" at them under such frustrating circumstances? And yet, the Rambam says that this was held against him. He should not have lost his patience.

In order to gain a better understanding of the Rambam's interpretation, it helps to note a subtle contrast between the two incidents in which the Children of Israel complained about lack of water.

Regarding the first incident in Parshas B'Shalach [Shemos 17:3], the complaint was phrased as follows: "The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moshe and said 'Why is this that you have brought us up from Egypt to kill me and my children and my livestock through thirst?'"

Here in Parshas Chukas [Bamidbar 20:4] the complaint was "And why have you brought the congregation of Hashem to this wilderness to die there, we and our animals?" The texts are almost identical - except for one word. In Parshas B'Shalach the charge was that Moshe brought them into the wilderness to KILL them. In Chukas, they only charged that he brought them there to DIE. In other words, in Parshas B'Shalach they were charging Moshe with murder. Here they are only charging him with negligence -- they would die in the wilderness because they had no water. However, they did not complain that Moshe was trying to KILL them.

This is a subtle but very significant difference. This does represent "progress" on their part. If forty years earlier they accused their leader of being a murderer and now they were somewhat more respectful in how they talked to him, that is a step forward. According to the Rambam, Moshe was punished for failing to take note of this subtle, miniscule difference. Moshe should have appreciated that difference. He should not have spoken down to them as "rebellious ones".

There is a great lesson here. These are tremendous words of encouragement for anyone who is in the teaching profession -- or anyone who is in the 'parenting business'. Sometimes we may tell something to our child at age 10 and then need to repeat it to them when they are 15. They appear to be at the exact same level that they were at five years ago. We can give instructions to students at the beginning of the year and we do not necessarily notice progress. At the end of the school year, the students will still sometimes act incorrectly without constant correcting. However, this is a misperception on our part. We sometimes need to be on the lookout for such a small thing as the way something is articulated, and even for the body language of the way something is said. Even a subtle change in attitude can be called progress. That is a level of progress that should be appreciated, not summarily dismissed.

This is difficult. It is frustrating. We want to see major progress. We want to see overnight dramatic change. But it does not always happen like that. Progress comes in incremental steps. This is something that Moshe Rabbeinu had to recognize and his failure to recognize it by losing his temper with the words "Shimu nah ha'Morim" is perhaps the reason that -- for all his greatness -- he was held accountable.

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