

# PARSHAS CHUKAS - PARAH ADUMAH DEMYSTIFIED

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## **Parah Adumah Demystified<sup>1</sup>**

Keeping the parah adumah absolutely pure takes years of coordination and planning. Remarkably, just before the climax of the operation, it declines into planned inelegance. Something like ordering the house specialty at a gourmet restaurant, and finding it served to you on a paper plate. Or putting regular gas in a Ferrari. They seem so horribly wrong, so out of character.

The kohen who slaughtered and burned the rare and precious red heifer had to be tahor. Extraordinary precautions were taken to insure this taharah, starting before his birth. A "tumah-free" zone was rigorously engineered. Pregnant women delivered their babies there, and these children remained there for years. Isolated from anything that could render them tameh, they awaited the call to one day perform the parah adumah ritual. When that day came, however, the fortunate kohen selected for the job was deliberately and publicly brought into contact with something tameh. Rather than participate in the state of absolute taharah of which his entire life had become symbolic, he was turned into a tevul yom - someone "recovering" from tumah by waiting, after immersion in a mikvah, the mandatory hours until evening. Until that time, he was not-quite-tahor.

The gemara is quite explicit about why this was done, why Chazal insisted on marring the pristine purity of the kohen. After listening to the explanation, we are as puzzled as before. The Tzadokim (Sadducees), we are told, were horrified by such a practice. They insisted that the kohen be entirely and unmistakably tahor. A tevul yom just didn't make the cut. Chazal knew that this was not halachically true, and that a tevul yom could indeed perform the parah ceremony. To demonstrate the fallacy of the Tzadokim, they turned each officiating kohen into a tevul yom, amidst great public display.

But why did Chazal choose this halachah to take a strong, vocal position against those who rejected the totality of the Oral Law. The platform of the Tzadokim called for much greater impact upon Jewish life than one rather arcane detail in a very infrequently practiced mitzvah. Their Judaism was an altogether different one than that which Hashem gave us and that survives to this day. With so many areas of conflict between the two legal systems, why focus so much attention on the relatively infrequent parah adumah, rather than so many other areas of conflict?

To get to an answer, we need to examine the symbolism of the parah adumah.

Its red color represents health and vigor. It is old enough to be at the prime of its mature energy. It

has never known the yoke, i.e. it has never been brought under the control of Man. Simply put, the parah represents the part of us that is unbridled, unrestrained animal nature. We take that animal-being, and slaughter it.

Ordinarily, a kohen is not needed to slaughter an offering in the mikdosh. The animal that a citizen brings as an offering symbolizes his life. Slaughtering it is not the important message of the korban. The crucial step is bringing the blood, symbolizing the life-force, to Hashem's altar. Slaughtering the animal is nothing but a preparatory act on the part of the owner prepared to teach himself the lesson of dedicating himself to a higher cause.

By way of contrast, the slaughter of the parah, must be done by a kohen, acting as a representative of the nation. (For the occasion, he wears the same white garments that the kohen gadol wears on Yom Kippur!!) The slaughter is the message! We announce thereby that there is no place in our lives for unrefined animal physicality. On a hill facing the mikdosh, aligned with its open doorway, the kohen slaughters the parah, and receives some of its blood in his hand. He sprinkles that blood seven times - a number signifying completion - in the direction of the mikdosh. (Ordinary offerings require receiving the blood in a consecrated vessel, not in the hand of the kohen; here the message is that it is Man who must take the animal life-force within him, and firmly gain control. He must take it in hand, and direct it and channel it according to a higher plan, symbolized by the open passageway into the mikdosh.)

He then burns the rest of the parah. Everything - the flesh, the hide - is reduced to ashes. When the flames subside, nothing remains of the original full-of-life cow, other than the blood that was directed towards the mikdosh.

This is a parable, of sorts, about life itself. (It is universalized by throwing into the flames cedar and hyssop, wool dyed with the extract of a worm, i.e. large and small plants, large and small animals. Between them all, we express the idea that what we do to the parah is really the fate of all life on earth.) The life of all living things comes to an end. Everything reverts to dust. Only the spiritual - that which has been pressed into the service of Hashem's plan - endures.

We then prolong the lesson beyond the dramatic last moments of the parah. We preserve those ashes, to be used again and again. We mix them in an earthen vessel with spring water. The vessel is our bodies; the spring water is our pure, primordial higher self. Life is about the two parts coexisting and working together. We do not slaughter the animal part of ourselves because we disown it. We do not deny that it is natively part of ourselves, put there for good purpose by HKBH. We do not distance ourselves from it, but from its existence outside the limitations of a purposeful existence. The ashes are meant to be part of a dynamic association with the spiritual - but in time, they will settle out, leaving behind the purely spiritual.

We should not forget why we do all of this. The parah adumah concoction is part of the Torah's prescription for tumas meis, for coming into contact with death. It is too easy for a person who

encounters death to come to believe, consciously or subliminally, that he is nothing but fragile, short-lived, earthly substance. Reacting in horror and shock to the helplessness of death, he can come to doubt the reality of free-willed moral striving. Parah adumah is the antidote to death-induced pessimism about the nature of Man. The sprinkling of the parah adumah mixture upon the tameh reminds him that the ephemeral physical part of himself is simply an ingredient in the magical elixir of life, in which the clear and pure waters of spirituality are the most important elements. Only the unrefined physical ever dies; the dominant part remains eternally alive.

Parah adumah is the iconic chok, a law which eludes comprehension. The tameh is purified by its application, but those tahorim who are involved in its preparation become tameh. This seems like a hopeless contradiction.

Perhaps we can claim a modicum of understanding. Medicine can do wonders for an ill patient, but can harm the healthy individual. Reflecting upon the two parts of Man, and how they are divided in death, is necessary medicine for the tameh, who has been sickened by his contact with mortality. Other people, healthy people, however, should remain focused upon the successful partnership between the two parts. They are cautioned not to brood over the divisions within. Ordinary life should know no dissonance between the two voices inside! The Torah personality should experience undifferentiated living, with Hashem's spirit animating every part of him, contributing to all that it is supposed to accomplish. The tension between the immortal soul and mortal body should not be felt. The two act synergistically, according to Hashem's design. They need be separated in a person's mind only to counteract the depressing notions associated with witnessing death and its aftermath.

We are now ready to understand Chazal's strident opposition to the position of the Tzadokim. They, like we, understood parah adumah to be a lesson about Man's mortality and higher purpose. The Tzadokim, however, insisted that only spiritual purity can escape the finiteness of human life. Only a kohen completely tahor could symbolize that purity. Anything less than complete taharah is perforce part of the realm of the physical and transitory.

Such a message is toxic. Complete purity - moral perfection - is simply out of reach to most people. If Man's only shot at immortality is in perfection, then the attempt is not worth the effort.

Chazal understood the Torah's actual intent. Even people on much lower rungs of the ladder of spiritual striving can make good use of their free will to elevate the physical. The tevul yom is not quite tahor - but he has started the journey back from tumah, from spiritual imperfection. He has turned his back upon it, immersed in a mikvah, and awaits the lessons of purity to mature within him. By moving away from tumah and directing himself to a higher goal, he has made himself part of the eternal. He is separated from the highest levels of spiritual achievement only by degree. For similar reasons, perhaps, halachah allows for the use of child-kohanim in the preparation of the parah. The child represents the potential for proper living, of taharah in process, but not yet realized.

By insisting on absolute taharah, the Tzadokim made eternity a rare privilege, which is available to only a special few. The rest of humanity could only contemplated eternal failure - or worse. Other belief systems have followed, that also restricted eternal life to a small minority. When Chazal mandated the use of the tevul yom, they broadcast a very different Jewish message: that eternity and immortality are within the grasp of everyone. Their message indeed calls for celebration.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 19:21

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