

# PARSHAS PARAH

*by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff*

*Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Pahra, 5631*

This week, in addition to our regular Torah portion, we read a special selection (Bemidbar, 19:1-22). The text that we read deals with the process by which a person who is tamei (ritually impure) can become tahor (ritually pure). What is the reason for this Torah reading at this time? Apparently, to set in motion the following sequence:

First, to make us aware that Pesach is coming. Accordingly, we should get ready to celebrate the Yom Tov properly. "Properly" includes being ready to bring the Korban Pesach (the special offering that all of our people would bring on Pesach). Unfortunately, if we do a din vecheshbon (a self-examination) of our state of readiness, we will recognize that we are ritually impure. With this awareness, we are seized by the excitement of undergoing the purification process that HaShem has provided to make the leap from tum'ah (impurity) to tahara (ritual purity). This process has a name; it is called 'Pahra Aduma' (the red heifer). A key feature of the ritual involved sprinkling the person who was tamei with water that contained the ashes obtained from burning the body of a red heifer. We can readily imagine the excitement and joy that came with this experience, actual and anticipated. All of this was triggered by the knowledge brought home by the fact that this was Parshas Pahra!

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As we have come to expect, the Sfas Emes begins his discussion of the topic by drawing on some thoughts of his grandfather. But before we start with the ma'amar itself, here is some background material.

There are various kinds of tum'ah. Which one are we dealing with here? The fact that to shed this tum'ah, we have to use the Pahra Aduma -- the most powerful purification process available -- indicates that we are dealing with the heaviest kind of tum'ah: the tumah that comes from having contact with a meis (a dead person).

The Chidushei HaRim asked: Who is this meis with whom we have had contact -- and whose contact makes us ritually impure and therefore, unable to bring the Korban Pesach? The Chidushei HaRim answered: The dead person is -- ourselves! That is, the Pahra Aduma is metaheir (purifies) a person who has had contact with death. Such a person has lost the internal vibrancy that comes from

feeling the presence of HaShem. And having lost that internal vibrancy, the person must undergo a process of ritual purification.

R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsch (in his commentary on Bemidbar, 19:1-22) can help us understand what is going on here. R. Hirsch explains that HaShem wants us to live our lives as His people as an act of freely willed affirmation, not out of passivity or resignation. However, when a person comes into contact with death, he may be impressed with the apparent overwhelming power of nature. Indeed, he may be so struck by the inevitability and inescapability of death that, in effect, he despairs and loses his free will. Loss of his free will, in turn, means losing his capacity for affirming the autonomy in his relationship with HaShem. A person in that state cannot connect with kedusha -- e.g., by entering the Beis Ha'mikdash and bringing a korban.

(Note: R. Hirsch explains why a person becomes a te'mei meis. The Chiddushei HaRim, on the other hand, explains what a te'mei meis is: A person who is deadened because he has lost contact with HaShem.)

What can a person in that state do to enable himself to regain access to kedusha and tahara? The Torah tells him to undergo the purification process of Pahra Aduma. How does that process work? To address this question, the Chiddushei HaRim -- and the Sfas Emes -- are drawn to an allusion conveyed by the word "eifer" -- ashes. As noted, the purification process includes sprinkling the person who is ta'mei with water mixed together with the ashes -- in lashon hakodesh, the eifer -- of the burnt pahra aduma.

Mention of the word "eifer" calls to mind a posuk in Bereishis (18:27). In that posuk, Avraham Avinu refers to himself as "ahfar vo'eifer" -- i.e., earth and ashes. The allusion is clear. The Pahra Aduma purification process is urging the person who is tamei to view himself with proper perspective, that is, with humility. Cutting back on one's Ego is necessary to renew one's inner vibrancy and relationship with HaShem.

The Sfas Emes moves on, quoting the first Medrash Rabbah of Parshas Chukas (the Torah parsha which presents the laws of the Pahra Aduma). That Medrash, in turn, cites a posuk in Iyov (14:4): "Mi yitein tahor mitamei ... ?" ("Who can transform something tamei into something tahor?") Such a transformation is truly "supernatural" -- i.e., above the laws of nature. For nature (and common sense) would dictate that something that is tamei would stay tamei. Thus, this Medrash is expressing amazement at the whole phenomenon of transforming tum'ah into tahara.

The Medrash continues, applying the posuk just quoted from Iyov -- and the reality that it captures -- to a real-world example. The example cited is the case of Avraham Avinu. For, reflect on it. Is it not amazing that an Avraham could emerge from a father like Terach? The Medrash responds to its question ("Who ... ?"): Only HaShem, Yechido Shel Olam ("The Singular One in the Entire World"), could create a world in which such a transformation is possible. The message is clear. We should regard the whole phenomenon of spiritual and ritual purification with awe and with gratitude.

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