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Chukat 5781

For The Love Of Life

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered March 19, 1960)

One of the least understood portions of the entire Torah is that dealing with the laws of tumah and taharah, ritual impurity and the cleansing from that state of impurity. In most cases, these laws no longer apply today. An example might be that of which we read in today's Parshat Parah, concerning the purification of one who had been defiled by coming into contact with a corpse. These laws do not apply, because the principal effect of tumah is that the person who becomes tamei, unclean, may not enter the sanctuary or eat of the flesh of a Korban, a sacrifice, such as the Korban Pesach. Since today we no longer have a temple, nor do we have any sacrifices, hence most forms of tumah are no longer in effect, except for the one kind where the law deals with that sort of tumah which has consequences for domestic life as well.

These laws of tumah are sorely misunderstood. Some people who read the Bible only superficially have come to the conclusion that they are merely guides to hygiene, and that hence they have no deeper spiritual meaning and are totally irrelevant in this age of scientific prophylaxis. Others have imagined that they are a form of Jewish magical taboo.

What does our tradition teach us about the meaning of the laws of tumah and tahara? Generally, Judaism discourages probing too deeply into the meaning or reason for these commandments. Especially with regard to the laws of Parah Adumah which we read of in today's Parshat Parah, our tradition teaches us that this ritual must forever remain a mystery, and the secret of the red heifer must for all eternity remain concealed from the inquisitive eyes of human reason. Nevertheless, while we shall not presume to discover Divine intention, I do want to share with you what I recently heard in the name of a great rabbi of our century, the Kovner Rav, an explanation which makes the laws of tumah and taharah more meaningful and more relevant to

us so that at the very least we might better appreciate the Divine wisdom which inheres in every word of Torah.

Our Torah is a Torah of life. It teaches us to love life, to cherish it, to enhance it. It is called Torat chayyim, the law of life, and is referred to as Etz chayyim hi la-machazikim bah, a tree of life to those who support it. Its purpose is ve'chai ba-hem--that we attain life through the commandments written therein. G-d's greatest gift to man above all is: life.

And in order to ensure this emphasis in life, in order to secure this affirmation of the principle of life, the Torah negatively bids us to keep away from death. Thus while the religions of the ancient world had their priests spend most of their time in ministrations to the dead, our Torah gave our priests, our Kohanim, instructions to do the exact reverse: Le-nefesh lo yitama b'amav, he may not defile himself by contact with any dead, except for certain very close relatives. Thus too, G-d originally forbade man to destroy animal life even for the purpose of food. Few of us may realize that by Divine decree Adam was a vegetarian, for only later, to the children of Noah, did G-d grant the concession allowing them to partake of animal flesh. Thus too, the principle of pikuach nefesh takes precedence over all commandments save three, and whenever there is a danger to life all commandments except these three are ignored.

In order to express powerfully this love of life, this abhorrence of death, we have the laws of tumah. Almost all these laws, in all their various forms and in all their ramifications, remind us of this principle of love of life. Our portion deals with the defilement that comes from direct contact with a dead body or a dead organ. Such a person is declared tamei--unclean. There is the tumat tzaraat, the state of uncleanness of the leper. For the leper is one on whom patches of skin, a part of his body, have died.

Hence--tumah. There is tumat zav and tumat niddah: In certain cases, the one natural and the other pathological, when certain issues flow from the human body, then too, the Torah declares a state of tumah, for here there is a loss by the human body, in one case the female and in one case the male, of the potential for a life, of that physiological substance from which life, under other circumstances, could have been created. When this vital matter is lost, when the potential for life is wasted--there is a state of tumah.

So that the major guiding principle of the laws of tumah is: the love for life, negatively expressed as an abhorrence and detestation of death. When the Jew has contact with death in any of the ways discussed, he is tamei, and as such he may neither enter the temple nor eat of the sacrificial flesh until the state of tumah has been replaced by taharah--a state of purity and ritual cleanliness.

How does one achieve this taharah? There are different details for each case. Thus in the case of tumat met, defilement by direct contact with death as we read of it in today's Parshat Parah, there is required the ritual of the red heifer, the Parah Adumah. In the case of tumat tzaraat, the uncleanness that inheres in leprosy, there is another set of regulations. The other forms of tumah have additional requirements in order to achieve taharah. But common to every one of them, integral in the very heart of the process of taharah is tevillah be'mayim--the immersion of one's self in water. Any man and any woman who is tamei, achieves taharah through water.

Why water? Because water above all is the symbol of life. It is the most universal substance without which life is impossible. An ancient Greek pagan philosopher, Thales, was led by his observations to maintain that water is the primordial substance from which all else was created. Earlier than him, and with greater scientific accuracy, our Torah declared that in the beginning G-d created heaven and earth and the earth was filled with water. Contemporary astronomers gazing through their telescopes at some distant planet or other celestial body, when they want to know if on that planet or body life is possible, will first investigate the content of water in its atmosphere. The greatest part of our own bodies is made up of water. And when we pray for water in our Shemoneh Esrei, we do so in connection with life: the prayer Mashiv ha-ruach u-morid ha-geshem, asking G-d for water from the heavens, or rain, is recited in the middle of the blessing of tehiyat ha-metim, the blessing of life and the

resurgence of life. And after the Jew drinks water he recites the blessing of Boreh Nefashot, in which we praise G-d for creating many souls and for their needs providing a world, le'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai, with which to keep alive the soul of every human being. Water, thus, is the symbol of life.

Tevillah be'mayim, therefore, represents the love of life. It is a rededication to life. The most appropriate way of ridding oneself of tumah, of the state of having been too close to death, is that of immersion in water. Taharah is the process that reverses tumah. We triumph over death by a greater dedication to life. Whether our brush with death came through tumat met or tumat tzaraat or tumat niddah, or tumat zav, the way of taharah is by washing one's self with the very symbol of life itself, with water. Therefore, too, the Gentile who wishes to become a Jew, a Ger, is also required to perform tevillah be'mayim: this symbolizes his rebirth as a Jew, he begins life all over again as he emerges from the waters of proselytization.

It is interesting to point out that in prescribing water as a form of taharah, the Halakhah specify that not all kinds of water are valid for this purpose. Only the waters of a well or naturally gathered pool, a ma'ayan or mikvah, are sufficient for the purpose of the process of taharah. But water that is artificially gathered into one place, called mayim she'uvim, is not valid for taharah. What is the reason for this? When a person is tamei, he or she must achieve purification or taharah only in a natural stream or pool, because that water symbolizes life, and only G-d, the Creator of Nature, is the Author of life. Man, despite his conquest over nature, is not the author of life. When we eschew mayim she'uvim and insist upon ma'ayan or mikvah, we reaffirm not only our love for life, but our belief that only G-d is the master over life, and that man cannot be trusted with control over this most precious gift of G-d to man.

We do not need a Schweitzer, noble a person as he is, to teach us reverence for life. Our Torah taught the love for life 3000 years earlier. And where Jews have practiced these laws in the days of the temple, and those laws which remain which are applicable today, they have known and practiced this love for life.

What a pity that there are those of our fellow Jews whose only connection with the synagogue is: Yizkor or Kaddish, those mitzvot which are related to death and mourning. What a pity that they have such a distorted view of Judaism, that they probably are led to believe that Judaism's face is one of mourning and a somber mask that

reminds one of death. How terrible that they never come to the understanding that Judaism is a religion of life, and that the observant Jew is one filled with the love of life.

For our Torah is based on life, not only in the physical sense as we have outlined above, but also in the ethical sense. Our tradition has declared that the righteous even after they are dead, are called alive. And the wicked even whilst they walk--or better stalk--the earth, are called dead. For life or death is not so much a matter of biology, as a matter of how close or how distant one is from the Source of all life.

And tumah and taharah, purity and impurity are to be understood not only in a physical and ethical sense, but even in the moral and national sense. The prophet Ezekiel in our Haftorah of this morning is the one who sees exile as a state of being enclosed, metaphorically speaking, in a giant tomb. Exile is therefore impurity itself. And redemption is a process of purification. To be redeemed means to emerge from the tomb of purity into the pure

The Thirst

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha begins with the laws of the Parah Adumah, also known as the Red Heifer. Immediately following this section, the Torah records the death of Miriam, shortly before the nation enters the Holy Land. Actually, the laws of the Parah Adumah had been given long before the death of Miriam, during the second year that the nation was in the wilderness, and this prompted the midrash to ask why her death is placed, in the Torah, next to the laws of the Parah Adumah. The juxtaposition, answers the midrash, teaches us that just as the korbanos - the sacrifices in the mishkan - bring atonement, so, too, does the death of the righteous bring atonement. Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, asks, in his Iggeres HaKodesh, chapter 28, why this lesson is taught in regard to the Red Heifer. Granted, he says, that it is called 'chatas' - or a sin offering - still though, it is brought outside of the mishkan. Why don't we learn this lesson in connection with a more standard chatas, which is brought on the altar in the mishkan? This question is also asked by Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in his commentary Ozneyim LeTorah. He answers that each time a Parah Adumah was prepared, some of the ashes produced and used in the purification process were preserved, as prescribed by the Torah, and

sunlight of G-d's favor. Even in this metaphorical sense, Ezekiel pictures the process of purification as one of cleansing by living waters (Ezekiel XXXVI:25-29): "For I will take you from among the nations and gather you out of all the countries and will bring you into your own land. And will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; And I will take away the stony heart of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

And what is to be the result in purity? --The reappearance of that great historic drama of love between G-d and Israel: "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your G-d."

For this, too, Ezekiel taught us: Only when there is love of life, can there be a life of love.

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lasted for many years. The Parah Adumah, thus, had a long-term purifying effect on the Jewish people. In the same way, he writes, the death of a tzadik has a long-term purifying effect on the Jewish nation. This answer, however, does not explain the significance of the Parah Adumah for the specific atoning effect of the death of Miriam, which is something that R. Shneur Zalman does address in his answer.

Although R. Shneur Zalman's answer is suffused with the intricacies of kabbalah, there are some points which can be gleaned from it which can have meaning for us on a more basic level. R. Shneur Zalman refers to the divine effluence, symbolized as water, that comes to the world as a result of the actions of a tzadik - a righteous person, and then refers to a midrash in Yalkut Shimoni in parshas Shemini, which phrases the lesson of the juxtaposition differently from the midrash we quoted previously. The Yalkut there says that just as the waters of the chatas, consisting of a mixture of ashes from the burned Parah Adumah mixed with water drawn specifically for this process, bring atonement, through being sprinkled on the impure person, so too does the death of the righteous bring atonement. Thus, the emphasis in the atonement process of the Parah Adumah that is relevant to the lesson we learn

from its juxtaposition to the death of Miriam is focused on the function of water. As we shall, see, this has special meaning in regard to Miriam and her importance for the Jewish nation.

The rabbis tell us that the water supply - a well - of the Israelite nation during its sojourn in the wilderness came through the merit of Miriam. After her death, this source was gone for a short time, and for this reason the people complained to Moshe about their thirst. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, in his commentary *Keli Yakar*, points out that the reason for the temporary loss of water was due to the fact that the people did not eulogize Miriam properly. Part of the idea behind the atonement effected by the death of the righteous is that through their death, we come to assess their influence on us, and in this way we make their teachings and example more relevant in our lives than they were even during their lifetime. When this assessment is not made, the opposite effect occurs, and we lose whatever residual benefit that remained from them. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, has pointed out that water is one of the everyday things in our lives that we take for granted. When one stops to think, however, he realizes that life would not be possible without water, and we need to be cognizant of our debt to God for constantly supplying us with the water we need. It was through Miriam's righteousness that the people merited receiving their water supply from God during their time in the wilderness, and they needed to reflect on this fact upon her death. Their failure to do so led to their loss of that supply. Why, however, was it Miriam who had this merit?

A sensitivity to the importance of everyday things, as we have shown from Rabbi Soloveitchik, reminds us of God's constant providence. Rav Aharon Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, often pointed out that it is a characteristic feminine trait to be able to find a deeper meaning in all that occurs in one's life. The Torah tells us, in parshas Chayei Sarah, that God blessed Avrohom 'bakol' - with everything (Bereishis 20:1). A number of explanations are given by the rabbis for this expression, some of which are cited by the Ramban in his commentary. One of these opinions is that Avrohom had a daughter whose name was 'ba-kol.' The Ramban explains this to mean that the word 'ba-kol' refers to the eighth of God's midos, or traits. Although kabbalistic commentators on the Ramban say that he is referring to one of the sefiros, or divine emanations, Rav Aharon said he was referring to the eighth of God's thirteen attributes of

mercy, the attribute of truth. This attribute, the Ramban is saying, is called 'bakol', and it is referred to by the rabbis as Avrohom's daughter because it is a feminine trait. Women, said Rav Aharon, are able to find truth and meaning in everything that happens in life, even in seemingly trivial things. The Torah is telling us that Avrohom was blessed with this trait, as well. We can perhaps speculate that he learned this trait from Sarah.

Miriam, too, had a sense for the importance of everyday things, as we can see from the way in which she cared for her younger brother Moshe in his infancy. *Keli Yakar* points out that she was constantly doing acts of chesed - kindness - for people, and that is why water - which in kabbalah is referred to as chesed, as elaborated upon by R. Shneur Zalman in his exposition - was given through her merit. Perhaps we can add that her understanding of the importance of small, seemingly insignificant details in life kept her attuned to needs that would otherwise be neglected, and led her to do the acts of chesed she was known for. This constant awareness of the small, everyday things in life should, ultimately, direct our attention to God, Who is the ultimate supplier of our needs. When Miriam died, the people should have eulogized her, and learned from this important trait that she exemplified, and thus drawn closer to God. In this way, her death would have brought atonement. We still need to understand, however, the connection between the Parah Adumah, specifically, and the lesson we learn from Miriam. I believe that we can understand this connection by referring to another teaching of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik.

The mitzvah of Parah Adumah is classified by the rabbis as the ultimate example of a chok, a law whose reason is not readily understood by the human mind. What is the mystery of the Parah Adumah, that has perplexed even the wisest of people over the generations? Usually, this mystery is explained as coming from the paradoxical law that on the one hand the Red Heifer purifies those people upon whom its watery ashes are sprinkled, while on the other hand it causes those involved in its preparation to become impure. Alternatively, some see the mystery in the fact that this korban is brought outside of the Temple, even though such a practice is forbidden in regard to other korbanos. Rav Soloveitchik, however, (see *Man of Faith in the Modern World : Reflections of the Rav, Volume Two*, pps. 100-116), thought that the mystery lay elsewhere. The Parah Adumah, he explained, purifies people who had

become impure through contact with a human corpse. Thus, it was the mystery of death itself, as symbolized by the procedure of the Parah Adumah, that so mystified people over the generations. Man cannot make peace with the fact that he eventually has to die, and he needs divine help in order to function with this awareness. This need for divine assistance is symbolized by the fact that whereas in all other purification processes one need merely enter into a mikvah to become pure, when it comes to the Parah Adumah, there is, in addition, a need for a sprinkling process. The difference here is that while a person is able to enter the mikvah on his own, he needs another entity to sprinkle water upon him. While man must make his own effort to grapple with death, as symbolized by the need to immerse himself in the mikvah, says Rav Soloveitchik, it is God Who sprinkles the purification waters upon him - as the prophet tells us. "And I will sprinkle pure waters upon you" (Yechezkel 36:25) - helping us deal with our own mortality. An awareness of God's presence, which gives us

a sense of the immortality of the soul and a meaning to our existence, despite the fact that we all, ultimately, must die, is what helps purify man after contact with a corpse, or, in a wider sense, a sense of his own mortality.

Based on Rav Soloveitchik's analysis, we can now understand the juxtaposition of the death of Miriam to the mitzvah of Parah Adumah. Just as the mitzvah of Parah Adumah directs our attention to God, in our attempt to find meaning in life despite the reality of our mortality, so too, did Miriam, as the one through whom we merited to have water in the wilderness, direct our thoughts to God, Who supplies us with all our everyday needs. An assessment of Miriam's role in teaching us to have a constant awareness of God in our lives, on a more mundane level, then, would have an effect similar to that of the Red Heifer, which forces us to rely upon God on a more spiritual level, assuring us that our lives have ultimate meaning.

The True Purpose of Suffering

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim)

At the end of this week's Parsha, we have a story where Hashem sent a plague of snakes—*ha-nechashim ha-serafim*. It was an *eis tzara*, until Moshe davened. Hashem responded to Moshe's *tefilah* by telling him to make a copper snake, put it up on a pole, and display it in front of the people. And whoever was suffering from a snake bite would look at it and be healed. So, the obvious question here is: Why did Hashem make the very same thing that caused the problem in the first place to be the source of healing? Rav Chaim Shmuelewitz sees a philosophical *yesod* here. He suggests that the reason for this similarity between the problem and the solution is to show that there are not two gods in the world—the opposing forces of the god of good and the god of evil. No. Everything is from Hashem! Everything is for a purpose! Everything is to accomplish something. Even the seemingly bad things that are difficult for us to understand are also for the ultimate good. And that's what Hashem is telling Moshe: Make the snake of the healing that looks like the snakes of the plague to show that even though it seems to us right now that there's good and there's evil, there's *din*, and there's *rachamim*, ultimately, everything is purposeful. Everything is good in the end, and both sides are exactly

the same from an ultimate, divine perspective. And it's a big challenge. It's not so hard to say this when you read this in the Torah. However, when people find themselves in difficult situations that are very challenging, very hard to handle and understand—it is tough for them to see that it's all just two sides of the same coin. It's all from Hashem and intended for the ultimate good. It's not an easy thing. But if you can figure out how to take every situation and seek out its positive intent—the *toeles* of this difficulty hidden within the Divine plan—and hopefully realize, as the *Nefesh Ha-Chayim* says (and this is a really *pashut* idea), that if someone is in *eis tzara* and they properly use their *tzara*—to improve and bring out the positive that Hashem intended—that is the best strategy. Since their *tzara* has accomplished its purpose, it will no longer have a reason to continue. And if we do that, *be'ezras Hashem*, we will be *zoche* to see in the end only the *yeshuos* and everything going smoothly.

Two Types of Anger

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Many are familiar with the “golden mean” or the middle path of the Rambam. Regrettably, some misunderstand this as a prescription for religious mediocrity. Under no conditions did the Rambam endorse lukewarm religious adherence or “middle of the road” religious passion. Lethargic or middling religious experience is anathema to the Rambam. What the Rambam does advocate is balanced and well-adjusted character development. As we sculpt our personalities, there is a tendency to develop our traits in “extreme” degrees; the easiest way to build a quality is to radicalize it. Opposed to radical or extreme character traits, the Rambam encouraged a more temperate calibration: no trait should be radicalized but, instead, should be moderated or adjusted to the middle “mean”. For example, a person should not act too solemnly, but also, should not behave too exuberantly; instead, he should strike to a healthy balance between jubilation and seriousness. Likewise, a person shouldn’t be too frugal but, just the same, shouldn’t recklessly squander funds. A third example pertains to our interface with our physical world. Too much indulgence can lead to hedonism or decadence and too little can invite ascetism or extreme self-deprivation. Religious passion and religious experience must be extreme and intense. Alternatively, personality traits should be balanced.

Having proposed the middle road and having warned against radical character traits, the Rambam does support radical extremes in two areas of human character. A person should labor toward extreme humility, eliminating even traces of arrogance and haughtiness. Humility enables integrity, honesty and selflessness and thereby serves as gateway to moral behavior and healthy relationships. Secondly, the Rambam cautions against any trace of anger or temper. Anger is a temporary insanity which overwhelms our ration and clouds our moral conscience. It is, literally, a foreign force which invades our sanity and even manifests in physical changes: our palms begin to sweat, our heads become dizzy, and we feel overheated. Interestingly, the emotion of anger is portrayed in Mishlei (14:29) by the term *kozer ruach* which describes the shortening of breath which accompanies anger. Amidst anger-induced hysteria, all moral restraints vanish, and

we become capable of unthinkable crimes. Realizing the unrestrained danger of anger, the Rambam urged “elimination” not moderation.

Anger is so menacing precisely because it threatens everyman. It also afflicted the greatest moral human being to ever walk our planet- Moshe Rabeinu. He had waited forty years, watching as the older rebellious generation faded into history. A new generation ascended, arousing great expectations for more faith and less confrontation. When those expectations were dashed at the “Rock”, Moshe’s anger flashed. It certainly wasn’t the type of rage or fury we sometimes experience; judging Moshe by our own conventional standards is both morally inappropriate and intellectually dishonest. The anger Moshe expressed would be common for most people, however for a person of Moshe’s stature it was unacceptable. Aside for the anger itself, Moshe’s tone at the rock set a poor example for this younger generation who looked to him for guidance and for moral example. Unable to fully repress his anger – even for a passing moment- Moshe was replaced with a new leader.

In general, we experience two very different types of anger. Typically, our anger is felt toward our adversaries, rivals, or just strangers who happen to inconvenience us or harm us. We become angry at the situation, or we express our anger toward people we believe have slighted us or compromised our interests. Road rage is an example of this type of anger: one motorist has little or no relationship with another motorist. The belief that aggressive or inconsiderate driving has victimized someone, can bring that victim to verbal or even physical violence. In this instance anger is directed at a “stranger”.

The second type of anger is directed to people we are close with or share a relationship with. We care about the people we are close with, and that care and concern often generates expectations. When these expectations aren’t met, we are addended, frustrated, or both, precisely because we care so deeply. Sadly, our frustration sometimes bleeds into anger.

Obviously, Moshe, the consummate leader, cares deeply about the people who he constantly defends. When the nation fails to live up to his expectations, he is understandably frustrated, and, ultimately, allows his

frustration to vent as anger. This occurs at the “Rock”, but his irritation was discernable during two episodes before this incident and during one episode afterwards. Forty years before the rock incident, Moshe had descended Sinai, bracing the luchot in his arms, only to witness the religious depravity of the golden calf. Angrily, he shattered the luchot. A few months later, during the inaugural celebration of the mishkan, tragedy struck, as the two sons of Aharon were incinerated by a Heavenly fire. Presuming that various sacrifices were improperly suspended, Moshe angrily expressed his disagreement. Finally, after a crucial war with Midyan, Moshe greeted the victorious soldiers returning from battle, but notices that his specific instructions were ignored. Facing these careless soldiers, Moshe is angered.

In each of these instances Moshe’s anger was a product of his deep concern for his people and the heavy consequences of their flawed behavior. Additionally, in each instance, Moshe faced a fragile situation or an emergency. He confronted the egl rebellion, the tragedy of death on a celebratory day of inauguration and a critical war with a sworn enemy. It is one thing to remain composed when we are otherwise in a state of clam. Under normal circumstances we possess enough inner tranquility to bear our anger and bear our frustration. Living through a crisis, it becomes more difficult to maintain our calm.

The Tragic Distance Between Moshe and Moshiach

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Parshas Chukas, the Torah abruptly shifts from year two of desert wanderings (machlokes Korach) to year forty of desert wandering (Ch.20 of Parshas Chukas). With Miriam’s death, the miraculous well of water that sustained the people through all the years dried up. After the nation complained to Moshe, Hashem instructed Moshe to take his staff in his hand and speak to the rock, and it would give forth water. And Moshe took his staff and gathered the people before the face of the rock: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הַמְּרִים--הַמֵּן-הַסֵּלַע: הֲזֹה, נֹדְעִיא לָכֶם מֵימַי וַיִּרְם מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ, וַיִּדָּ אֶת-הַסֵּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ--פַּעַמַּיִם; וַיִּצְאוּ מִיַּם רַבִּים, וַתִּשְׁתְּ אֶת-הָעֵדָה וּבָעִירָם, and Moshe lifted his hand and he struck the rock with his staff two times, and much water came out and the assembly and their flocks drank (Bamidbar 20:1-11). The

Sadly, Moshe was unable to completely transcend these moments, and his relationship with the Jewish people was damaged.

The midrash narrates a scene toward the end of Moshe’s life. He apologizes to the nation for the pain he has caused them while trying to prod them toward greater religious experience. They forgive him and beg Moshe to forgive their own truculence. Moshe grants them forgiveness and all the anger subsides. It is a sad and poignant scene to cap Moshe’s career of extraordinary dedication, care and emotional investment.

Afterword:

My Rebbe, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, urged us to navigate moral challenges by considering how our “role model” would behave in a similar situation. Simply distinguishing between “right” and “wrong” is less helpful. Though we often can identify proper behavior, frequently, our conviction fails in the heat-of-the-moment. Imaging the behavior of our role models produces more compelling moral guidance. Personally, I have found this strategy very helpful in many areas of self-improvement. Particularly in battling anger, this approach has proven extremely effective. We are all familiar with people who manage anger skillfully. Thinking about their response may help us steady or own behavior.

punishment and consequences were immediate: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, יֵשֶׁן לֹא-הָאֲמַנְתָּם בִּי, לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל-- and -לִכְוֹן, לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת-הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתִּי לָהֶם, and G-d said to Moshe and to Aharon: because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore, you will not bring this assembly into the Land that which I have given them (ibid, v.12).

Moshe, our master, our teacher, our leader, and our rebbe, was banned forever from the Holy Land. Despite heartfelt pleas on his own behalf (Deut.3:23-25), Hashem did not permit Moshe to cross the Jordan - not in life, and not in death. This painful reality remains an enigma, a gezeirah (decree) from the One Above. Moshe, who faithfully dedicated his entire career to leading and caring for the flock of Hashem is denied his greatest desire. The shockwaves of this decree extended well past the lifetime of

Moshe and his generation ... In fact, they are still felt by us today, as we trudge through our long and painful galus.

While Moshe's sin is an enigma, with the commentators offering interpretations into what his sin actually was at Mei Merivah (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Ramban for various opinions), the fact remains that Moshe was barred from Eretz Yisrael.

In a novel interpretation, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l teaches that the fault lies not only with Moshe and his sin, but with the people that he loved, and led. The Rav teaches, "Moshe's failure to cross the Jordan complicated matters and caused a tragic change in our historical destiny. Had Moshe entered the Land, the whole history of our people would have taken another turn. It would have been less tragic, less sad and less mysterious, but at the same time, less heroic - and consequently, less great.

"If Bnei Yisrael had proven themselves worthy of communing with Moshe, of being his disciples, if they had displayed the intellectual and emotional capacity to receive and absorb Torat Moshe, then Moshe would have entered and conquered the Promised Land, and he would have been anointed as the King Messiah. Jewish history would have found its realization and fulfillment immediately upon entering the Land.

"There was no reason to deny the messianic role to Moshe; he was the greatest of all men. His personality as adon ha'neviim, the master of prophets, is far superior to that of the King Messiah. Maimonides writes that the Messiah's prophetic capacity will be 'close to that of Moshe' (Hilchos Teshuva 9:2); however, Moshe will nevertheless retain his superiority. If so, the question arises, why did the Almighty not ordain Moshe as the King Messiah? No one else will ever be as qualified as Moshe. Had Moshe entered and hallowed the land, the kedusha would have been eternal; the Babylonian legions could never have annulled it.

"The answer is obvious. The messianic era would have commenced if the entire generation, the entire nation, had accepted Moshe's message fully. If his teachings had made a genuine impact upon his contemporaries, if these people had indeed become his disciples, if they had treated him with reverence and love the way the talmid is supposed to treat his rebbi, then Moshe would have been ordained as the Messiah.

"Unfortunately, they did not rise to the great and

singular occasion. Torat Moshe was the possession of a few; the crowd acted like liberated bondmen who could not forget the pots of flesh. After the passage of forty years, the opportunity was missed. The era of the Messiah was postponed for a long period of time; the distance between Moshe's redemption and the Messiah's redemption grew almost ad infinitum. Moshe had to die in the sand-hills of Moav. His teachings were entrusted to Yehoshua, to the people, to countless future generations.

"Only when the entire congregation has committed itself to this teaching, when Moshe is accepted as the master, and when we all demonstrate our capability and readiness to become inquisitive disciples of our master and teacher, only then will the hour of redemption strike. In the interim, we must travel a tortuous, long road toward a far destination. Moshe did not cross the Jordan; he did not receive the crown of the Messiah. The congregation of Israel was assigned the task of waiting for the Messiah, who could have led us across the Jordan into the Promised Land 3,500 years ago.

"... Moshe died because his contemporaries did not recognize his greatness and moral perfection. Because of his untimely death, Jewish history became longer, more complex, unintelligible and tragic. Moshe and the King Messiah, who were supposed to join, separated and turned into two identities, and the Jew learned how to believe and to wait. *זאת התורה אדם כי-ימות באהל...* (Bamidbar 19:14)" (*Vision and Leadership*, p.214-216).

As we find ourselves in the month of Tammuz, with aveilus (mourning) for the churban upon us once again, we would do well to contemplate the powerful teachings of Rav Soloveitchik. Moshe was not the Messiah because the people were not ready, and so, the distance between the two is very, very long indeed. We must sincerely ask ourselves if we are ready for the arrival of Moshiach, if we anticipate his coming, if we are prepared to accept his kingship (and His Kingship) in our day and our time. Perhaps when we can answer 'yes, we are ready,' the Messiah will finally arrive.

Torah, Nature, and a Whole Different Set of Rules

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

Often, the mitzvah of Parah Adumah is described as the prototypical חוק — a Torah law that seems to defy any rational analysis or understanding. Indeed, the Torah introduces the laws of Parah Adumah by describing them as זאת חוקת התורה — these are [among the] חוקים of the Torah. In his Gur Aryeh, Maharal points out that the Torah uses the phrase חוק in other contexts as well, but this instance is unique in that it's described as חוקת התורה — seemingly indicating the חוק with a capital ח.

Hazal are replete with stories highlighting this aspect of the mitzvah. The Midrash Rabbah tells a story in which a certain person taunted Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai that the mitzvot seem like sorcery or witchcraft. We take a red cow, burn its carcass, collect and crush the ash, and sprinkle a few drops on a person who became tamei and declare him pure! Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai responded that ostensibly, this procedure is similar to what was commonly done to treat all sorts of mental disturbances — collecting some herbs, heating them, and then mixing with water. Just like this medical concoction “chases away” mental disturbances, so too the Parah Adumah ashes “chase away” tum'ah (ritual impurity).

This particular line of Midrash seems to go in the opposite direction of most of what we are familiar with, as it provides a naturalistic understanding for how Parah Adumah works. But the Midrash actually continues that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai's students approached him and chided him that he easily dismissed the questioner with a simple parable and asked him for a deeper answer.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai responds, לא המת, חייכם, ולא המים מטהרים, אלא אמר הקב"ה חקה חקקתי, גזירה מטמא, (a dead body does not cause impurity and the Parah Adumah waters don't purify — rather Hashem made certain rules [חוקים] and we are to follow them).

Maharal explains (Tiferet Yisrael, ch. 8) that originally, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai amused the questioner by pretending that the Torah's mitzvot are for our benefit. Certain activities harm and others heal; some actions induce positive attributes and others bring out negative traits. The Torah commands mitzvot to assist in meeting these larger, positive goals (such as tzedakah to develop a sense of mercy and caring) and others to avoid bad

consequences (such as non-kosher foods which may have negative bodily effects). But as his students understood, this approach is completely wrong.

There is nothing natural about the Torah's mitzvot. Maharal explains that the Torah is not a health guide or physiology textbook. Mitzvot are indeed beneficial for us, but not because they induce, cause, or treat anything natural or physical. Instead, there is a certain סדר שכלי (intellectual or spiritual order) to the world and the mitzvot operate within that framework. Mitzvot are beneficial because they operate according to particular spiritual laws and postulates. Just like the physical world has natural laws, such as gravity and thermodynamics, so too, the spiritual world has laws that govern how it operates. The benefit is simply an outcome of the mitzvah; it simply works on a realm that we are less familiar with.

This is what Hazal mean when they say that the Torah is the blueprint for the world. The Torah contains a certain spiritual order to the world of laws and rules and it is based on those very principles that Hashem created the world.

In his Derekh Hayyim, Maharal uses this idea to explain the notion of הפוך בה והפוך בה דכולה בה (learn more and more Torah, as all wisdom is found in it), since ostensibly, there is a lot of wisdom that simply isn't contained in the Torah. Rather, it means that the more Torah we learn, the more we come to a richer understanding of how the world operates according to the סדר השכלי that Hashem put into place and is reflected in the Torah.

This is part of the secret of Parah Adumah. Sometimes, we may perform mitzvot and not feel a strong connection to them since they may seem somewhat foreign and unnatural. Maharal is teaching us that when we think deeply about mitzvot, they aren't intended to be natural. In fact, if it just so happens that some conform to some natural or logical idea or notion, it's merely coincidental. Instead they operate on a completely different level — and are our direct connection to the spiritual world. This means that even while we cannot see it and even while we can't always understand or appreciate the richness of it, when we perform mitzvot, we are tapping into a complete world order that brings benefit to ourselves and to our souls.

The Paradox of the Red Heifer

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Chukat, we learn of the inscrutable law of the פָּרָה אֲדֻמָּה —Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer. The Red Heifer was a completely unblemished, red-haired calf, that had never worked. The calf was slaughtered and burnt, its ashes mixed with holy water. When sprinkled on a ritually impure Jew, this mixture served to cleanse that person from impurity.

As we have often stated, because human life is the ultimate and most sanctified Jewish value, Judaism considers death to be the ultimate defiler. The bottom line of all the mitzvot of the Torah is the affirmation of human life. Hence, when any person comes in actual physical contact with a dead body, they are rendered ritually impure for seven days. The impure person must come to the Temple to be sprinkled with the holy water of the Red Heifer by the priests on the third and seventh day of impurity. After being sprinkled on the seventh day, the impure person would go to the mikveh, and become pure again after nightfall. Through this process, Judaism makes certain that Jews not become indifferent to death. When they become defiled, they reaffirm life, by going to the ultimate source of life—water.

The preparation of the Red Heifer was quite complex. The body of the heifer is burnt together with a branch of cedar wood, a branch of hyssop, and a woolen thread colored with the blood of a worm. The rabbis say that the powerful cedar represent hubris and strength. The hyssop represents humility. Together with the blood of the worm, these elements come to teach the human being not to be too self-centered nor overly self-effacing.

The rabbis state that the Red Heifer ritual is a “paradox.” It is מְטַהֵר טְמֵאִים, ומְטַמֵּא טְהוֹרִים, it renders those who are impure, pure, and those who are pure, impure. Thus, anyone who comes in contact with the waters of the Red Heifer, or is involved in the preparation of the Red Heifer, is rendered impure. However, an impure person who comes in contact with the waters of the Red Heifer, is rendered pure.

According to Jewish tradition, every human being is born with a pure soul. As we say in our morning prayers, אֵלֶיךָ יְשָׁמָה שְׁנַתָּה בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא, Oh L-rd, the soul that You have given me is pure. Yet, we know from our Torah texts (Genesis 8:21), כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעֻרָיו, that the propensity of the heart of the human being is evil from his youth.

While Jews do not accept the concept of “Original Sin,” we realize that sin is almost natural and much easier to commit. Good, can only be achieved through an active effort, whereas evil can be accomplished even passively. The famous 18th century British political philosopher, Edmund Burke stated, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing.” It is for this reason that the psalmist says (Psalm 34:15), סוּר מִרָע, depart from evil, וְעֲשֵׂה טוֹב, and do good. The first step to doing good, is to earnestly avoid doing evil.

There is a profound lesson to be learned from the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer. We learn that there's a price we pay even for deeds that seem meritorious, like cleansing others. The question we need to ask however—is it worth the price? Dare we expose our children to what might prove to be negative influences by having non-religious guests at our homes on Shabbat? How do we set limits on these exposures? In effect, we must ask: Is there benefit in falling, in stubbing our toe? Do we get to use new muscles, and do we ultimately wind up stronger?

Regarding the well-known story of Purim and Queen Esther, our rabbis say about Mordechai, אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן, (Esther 2:5) there was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital. Clearly, he was physically located in Shushan, the capital. What then is the verse implying? The verse stresses the fact that he was in Shushan, to underscore that Mordechai was involved in all the affairs of life in the capital, not only in Jewish affairs, but general concerns, working to improve the quality of life for all citizens. It is said that Mordechai was a member of the Great Sanhedrin, and of the Anshei Knesset Haggdollah. Because of his preoccupation with Jewish life, as well as his concern for secular life in Shushan, his mastery of Torah suffered. He was no longer able to maintain the status of being the top contemporary Torah scholar. Perhaps he declined and became the fifth greatest scholar of his era. And, yet, he is known in rabbinic literature as “Mordechai the Tzaddik,” because, despite his diminution in Torah scholarship—G-d approved of what he did—since his activities were always directed to benefit the greater good.

Yes, the Red Heifer is מְטַמֵּא טְהוֹרִים, it renders those who are pure, impure. But, that's a price we must be prepared to pay for improving the greater good. It is, after all, the way to achieve ultimate perfection.