

Parshat Chukat (5781): Bumps in the Road

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וְהִשְׂרִף אֹתָהּ יְכַבֵּס בַּגְּדֵי בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְרָתַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב: וְאָסַף אִישׁ טָהוֹר אֶת אֲפֶר הַפָּרָה וְהִנִּיחַ מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה בַּמָּקוֹם
טָהוֹר וְהִיָּתְהּ לְעֹדֹת בְּיַיִשׁ-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת לְמִי נָתַה חֲטָאת הָיָא: וְכִבֵּס הָאֲסֹף אֶת-אֲפֶר הַפָּרָה אֶת-בְּגָדָיו וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב וְהִיָּתְהּ לְבִגְי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגְר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם (במדבר יט:ח-י)

The one who burns it shall wash his body and clothing in water, and he will be unclean until evening: The ritually clean person shall gather the ashes and place them outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall be as a keepsake for the People of Israel with the water used for cleansing. He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes and be unclean until evening. This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. (Bamidbar 19:8-10)

The first Cohen burns the פרה אדומה into ashes, goes to the mikvah, and remains tamei until evening. The second Cohen then brings the פרה אדומה's ashes to a special place outside the camp where he too remains tamei until the evening. We normally understand that tumah has to be contracted from contact with something "unclean." Here, the Cohanim acted exactly in the manner they were supposed to, so why are they tamei? This is why this type of tumah is called by a different name -- טומאת מהמת קדושה, an impurity that comes about through holiness. The Oznaim LaTorah comments on these posukim to pinpoint a fundamental concept: if Cohen A who prepares the פרה אדומה's ashes does not decide to take on the job of Cohen B, he would gain tamei status immediately after finishing his job preparing the ashes; however, if Cohen A continues on to do the job of Cohen B he would not have to visit the mikvah between the steps due to the continuity.

During the pandemic, especially in Eretz Yisrael, boys who were not able to attend yeshiva stayed home, where they did not engage in active Torah learning or davening with a minyan. When the lockdowns ended, these boys did not find themselves back in the Beit Midrash; there was a difficult bump in the road, and they did not yet find the way to recover. Talmidim that have returned to their homes for the summer, talmidim who have found ways to shteig on incredibly high levels over this past year, are now writing to their rebbeim about how difficult they find it to attend minyan, how hard it can be to keep working on improving their middot and finding time for chavruta learning. In a day or two, a year of intense learning can be lost and it takes another year of learning at that level to begin to maintain it! It needs to be understood that Torah learning happens on a continuum; learning will have bumps and curves, and it might not be easy, but it must have continuity.

Here are guidelines for starting to keep it up:

1. Minyan at least once a day -- if the minyan in your neighborhood is very early and it is hard for you to make it, go for mincha-maariv; don't lose the continuity of davening with a minyan.
2. Have a chavrusa in a shul or yeshiva environment, whether it be one of your chavirim that you were in yeshiva together with or not. For at least one half-hour, if not more a day. Something you have to use your mind for!
3. Attend intellectually challenging shiurim in the shul or closest yeshiva where you are learning something new.
4. Undertake a middah to work on this summer and be consciously aware of it.

It might not be the same davening/learning/middot tovot as you practiced in yeshiva, but it has continuity. The kedusha continues, and when you come to yeshiva in Elul, you will be much happier for it. Kol Tuv!