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ב"ס

Parashat Hukkat Part I The Red Cow

1. Overview

Numbers 19 contains the Torah's basic statement regarding defilement that results from contact with a human corpse – the severest of the ritual impurities – together with the laws of the relevant purification process.

Consistent with the style of presentation of priestly law, details for preparation of the purificatory materials and associated regulations are specified first (vv. 1-10) followed by delineation of the cases that require such purification (vv. 11-19). A three-verse conclusion and summary (vv. 20-22) closes the chapter.

The only cases in which the Torah specifically prohibits an individual to become defiled through contact with a human corpse – aside from when one was at the sanctuary or encountering sancta – are those of a priest (Lev. 21) and a Nazirite (Num. 6:6). However, the peshat reading of our chapter appears to imply that the laws of such defilement and the undergoing of the rituals of purification are urgent imperatives incumbent upon all Israelites and resident aliens and applicable at all times.

This may be based on a subtle aspect of reality posited in the Torah, that on some level every Israelite (and non-Israelite living in Israel) is connected to the *mishkan* (Tabernacle), Israel's spiritual center that represents G-d's dwelling within the nation. When an individual becomes defiled by contact with a corpse and persists in his impure state – not merely happening to have become defiled, which may have been inadvertent, but when he chooses to remain so – he exudes impurity that defiles the Tabernacle. Israel's calling is to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). Each of its members should

be focused at all times on being connected with its spiritual center and as closely as possible with G-d. One who lingers in a state in which he cannot directly relate to the sanctuary is, to some degree, estranged from the holy. Eventually, we may assume, extended impurity will weaken his commitment to holy living. Thus, not endeavoring to become purified contravenes the spirit of an Israelite's relationship with G-d (also see Lev. 15:31). For this, the individual would be subject to the *karet* penalty, being “cut off” from Israel (Num. 19:13, 20).

The sages, however, sharply qualified these verses of our *parasha* that imply violation and penalty and interpreted them to refer only to one who intentionally entered the sanctuary precinct or came into contact with sancta while in a defiled state. The obligation to undergo purification was applied only to those times when the defiled individual was required to enter the sanctuary or eat of sanctified flesh. The standard talmudic view is well summarized in Maimonides' formulation:

All that is written in the Torah concerning laws of ritual impurity and purity refers only to the sanctuary, its hallowed items, priestly gifts and tithes; all that it cautioned people who were in a state of impurity about was entering the sanctuary and the eating of hallowed items, priestly gifts and tithes...In addition, it is permitted for a man to touch impure items and become defiled, for Scripture only forbade priests and Nazirites from becoming defiled by a corpse, which indicates that all the rest of the people are permitted. And even priests and Nazirites are permitted to defile themselves in all the other categories of impurities besides that of a corpse. All Israelites must purify themselves for each festival so that they may enter the sanctuary and eat from the hallowed food. The

verse (regarding animals that lack one of the two signs of “kosher” animals whose flesh it was forbidden to eat), “and their carcasses you shall not touch, they are impure to you” (Lev. 11:8), refers only to festival time. (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Food Defilement* 16:8-10)

Nevertheless, אֵין מִקְרָא יוֹצֵא מִדִּי פְּשׁוּטוֹ (“a verse never completely leaves its straightforward meaning”). Although the halakha may not reflect the unqualified peshat of the text, the Torah’s formulation transmits an important spiritual message, even if theoretical and based on a utopian view of the nation. Israelites are to be attentive to G-d’s presence among them at all times and to as great a degree as possible.

In addition to direct contact with a dead body the Torah declares defiled and in need of purification all who were in or entered an *ohel* (a tent or roofed enclosure) while the corpse was present in it. This law also declares defiled vessels and their contents that were in such a tent, except contents that were in a tightly covered vessel; the latter exclusion is understood by the sages to only refer to earthenware. Impurity is also contracted by contact with a bone (Talmud: or flesh) that had been detached from a human corpse or with a grave. Further, touching a living person who is in a state of such impurity also defiles, albeit to a much lesser degree.

The purification process is most elaborate. The Israelites bring forth an unblemished red cow (*adummah* is probably reddish-brown), upon which a yoke had never been placed (a cow that had never been put to work). The priest takes it to a pure place outside the camp, where it is slaughtered in his presence. He sprinkles from its blood seven times in the direction of the Tent of Meeting, the cow is burnt in its entirety לְעֵינָיו (“before his eyes”) and he casts cedar wood, hyssop and crimson [stuff] onto the burning cow. The crimson – שָׁנִי תוֹלַעַת – refers to a worm that was then a major source of red dye and here perhaps served to ensure that the resulting ashes would be reddish. The ashes are collected and maintained in a pure place outside the camp. As needed, some are mixed with “living” water and sprinkled on the defiled person on the third and seventh days of his impurity. Upon cleansing his garments and washing his body (ablution) he may complete the process by nightfall of that seventh day. Thus, he is pure on the eighth day.

The Torah mandates that those who perform the various steps of the purification process are themselves defiled by their involvement and must undergo a basic purification. They must launder their garments and wash their bodies. Their defilement concludes by nightfall of the day of their involvement.

In the laws of purification from the other major human defilements, those concerning the parturient, the individual with *sara‘at*, the male with abnormal genital flow and the female with abnormal uterine flow, there is a common feature that was not prescribed here. In those four cases, after the passage of the required number of days, the individual must bring a *hattat* sacrifice on the following day (in the latter three cases, it is on the eighth day). Here there is no sacrificial requirement and no sanctuary connection. We will touch on this detail in the coming section.

2. On Textual Location within the Torah

Why were these laws not included in Leviticus? In particular, why were they not part of the section dealing with the other types of impurity (Lev. 11–18) where they appear to naturally belong, and where their absence is most conspicuous? Consider the following: The Leviticus purity section begins with the dietary laws and cases of contact with nonhuman carcasses, providing an affirmation of basic reverence for all living creatures (Lev. 11). After the laws of the parturient (Lev. 12), which address the fear of death, come the laws of *sara‘at* (skin diseases, etc.) and genital discharges (Lev. 13–15), which emphasize the physical dimension of man and symbolize a wasting away or consumption of life’s vitality, removing one’s focus from the spiritual. Laws concerning contact with human dead fit right in at that point. Leviticus 16, in a conclusion of sorts to the bodily impurity section, provides for the annual Yom Kippur cleansing of the sanctuary from all the “pollution” brought upon it: “Thus he [the priest] shall purge the holy from the impurity and transgressions of the Israelites” (Lev. 16:16a). The Torah thus enumerates the impurities and provides for sanctuary cleansing from them, but omits the chief case of the category!

The long delay in prescribing these laws is all the more surprising given that the Torah referred to defilement by contact with the dead several times before Numbers 19. It articulated laws prohibiting a priest (Lev. 21) and a Nazirite (Num. 6:6) from

becoming so defiled. In commanding the sending of defiled individuals outside the camp it explicitly included those defiled by contact with the dead (Num. 5:2); in that context it states that the Israelites fulfilled that law and sent those so defiled outside the camp (v. 4). Of course it was understood that there was to be provision for purification available; perhaps it was taught orally in conjunction with those instructions, but no details were mentioned in the text. The purification process of the Levites included sprinkling מַי הַטָּהָרָה (“water of purification”) upon them (Num. 8:7), a water mixture whose preparation was not provided at that point but which probably was identical with the מַי בְּדָה הַטָּהָרָה הָרֹא, the water with red cow ashes mixed into it that is prescribed for the purification sprinkling in our chapter (Num. 19:9). Finally, some individuals who were defiled from contact with the dead at the time that the Passover sacrifice was to be offered and therefore unfit to participate, were given the opportunity to bring the sacrifice in the second month (*pesah sheni*) (Num. 9:6-13), but again the ritual purification procedure was not mentioned.

There are a number of distinctive features in the rites of Numbers 19 that seem to point to an answer. There is no altar procedure involved nor is there any direct contact with the sanctuary as in the other cases of major defilements, each of which requires a *hattat* sacrifice at the conclusion of their purification process. Here, all rites are required to be performed outside the camp, including storage of the ashes. Tellingly, our passage seems to make a defining statement of sorts on the lack of the *hattat* sacrifice: the “water of sprinkling” is termed מַי בְּדָה הַטָּהָרָה הָרֹא, that is, this water is the replacement of the *hattat* sacrifice, highlighting that distinctive feature. Although the priest is present and plays a role in the purification, he is excluded from, or not required to participate in, most of the critical procedures; others slaughter the cow, incinerate it, gather its ashes, mix it with water and finally sprinkle it upon the person being purified. The priestly involvement is mostly limited to a supervisory role and to procedures designed to establish connectedness to the values of the sanctuary and to what it represents. To totally relegate these procedures to non-priests would probably have made the ritual susceptible to pagan influences. The priest, as the others, although fulfilling his mandated responsibility becomes defiled by his involvement.

It surely appears that the Torah intentionally reduced the involvement of priest and sanctuary in the red cow procedures; it is a continuation of disengaging the priesthood from dealing with the dead, which was explicitly legislated in Leviticus 21. Leviticus is the book of sanctuary and priests. Even the laws of the relevant details concerning defilement by contact with the dead and purification therefrom are distanced from it. The responsibility for performing the rites of the red cow was left to the discretion of Israelite society, however it chooses to organize it. This is a protest against the cults of the dead that then flourished in Near Eastern societies under priestly aegis and with extensive priestly involvement. Those proceedings were connected to mythological beliefs and replete with pagan prayers and rituals. Often, eminent departed individuals were given the status of divine beings – offerings were brought to them and prayers directed to them. All this is incompatible with the standards of pure monotheism. Contact with the dead, rather than being seen as an elevating experience, was declared contaminating.

In the context of prohibiting various magical practices the Torah specifically banned דַּרְשׁ אֶל הַמֵּתִים (“inquir[ing] of the dead” [Deut. 18:11]). In addition, the triennial tithe declaration included the formula, “I did not give of it to one who is dead” (Deut. 26:14). These laws seem to indicate that these practices popular in neighboring societies were then a threat to the Israelites, if not actually being performed in Israel. Uprooting the cult of the dead required that priesthood and sanctuary be distanced from the dead.

By prohibiting the most prominent religious functionaries of the nation to participate in funeral processions or to be present at burials, the Torah downgraded and simplified the ceremonies attached to these procedures. The priesthood’s focus, as well as that of the nation, was directed toward the future and to life. It may very well also be that it was part of the divine intention to downplay emphasis on the afterlife.* In addition, the exclusion of the priesthood from funerary rites lessened the opportunities for exploitation of the vulnerable and for corruption. From Israel’s national history we learn that the full benefit of such major innovations requires an extended evolutionary process.

In the textual structure of the Torah these rites of the red cow are distanced as far as possible from

Leviticus: they comprise the very last subject in that portion of the Pentateuch whose setting is prior to the fortieth year. The verse that follows (Num. 20:1) turns to the fortieth year and resumes the narrative thread from the Korah rebellions, a matter we will discuss in our next study.

3. Symbolism

What do these unusual rituals of burning a red cow and sprinkling its ashes on the impure individual symbolize? Why do the participants in the purification process become defiled? Why was this section introduced with a most extraordinary phrase – זאת הקת – הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' "this is the statute of the teaching that Hashem commanded" – assigning unique significance to this ritual? There is only one other attestation of this locution in the Torah. Eleazar the high priest employed it when addressing the soldiers returning from battle in introducing the continuation of the purity instructions that Moses had begun informing them of (Num. 31:21). As Ibn Ezra points out, it there is referring to the soldiers having had contact with the dead and hence to regulations associated with the purification procedures of the red cow.

Understandably, ashes have universally been used to symbolize death. Accordingly, some modern commentators have understood the sprinkling of ashes upon one who came into contact with death to be a case of substitution. This is related to the belief in homeopathic therapy, wherein the likeness or representation of an item is considered to have influence on that item or its effects (see Levine, AB, Num. p. 471). An example of such a technique is found in chapter 21 of our *parasha* when the people were being bitten by fiery serpents and dying. To counteract their effect, G-d had Moses fashion a copper serpent, place it on a pole, and “when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover” (Num. 21:9, NJPS). Of course the homeopathic dimension is a surface feature of the procedure, as rendered in *Targum Jonathan*: “When a bitten individual looked at the serpent and directed his heart toward G-d’s word, he would live.” The Mishnah makes a similar statement (*m. Rosh. Hash. 3:8*).

When the ashes were applied to one who had recently had contact with the dead, the symbolic death they

represent was widely considered efficacious to prevent or rid the community of the spread of death, particularly death that was premature or unnatural. Consistent with the Torah’s values, the procedure may have been associated with a prayer beseeching G-d to accept the symbolic death in place of real death, an idea similar to what many consider an underlying theme at work in some sacrifices. The Torah’s insistence on mixing the ashes with “living” water, as opposed to using stagnant, cistern water, readily fits in with such an explanation. It was probably understood as sprinkling life upon the individual while performing a death-riddance rite.

Such an explanation is based on assuming a deeply set superstitious fear among the populace that contact with the dead in and of itself may cause further death, a belief totally inconsistent with the Torah’s values but one not easily eradicated. By attributing the purification procedures to G-d’s law, the Torah established a sanitized, ambiguous ritual to help wean people away from idolatrous beliefs and practices.

4. Rabbi Sassoon’s Approach

Alternatively, the purpose of the ashes may be related to a totally different but also widespread symbolic meaning that ashes possess, namely, insignificance or nothingness. Abraham, upon entreating G-d to spare the inhabitants of Sodom and sensing the audacity of his request, refers to himself as עֶפֶר וְאֵפֶר (“dust and ashes” [Gen. 18:27]). Job, upon contemplating the greatness of G-d and appreciating his own insignificance, repents in his final words, and says that it is “regarding [one who is but] dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). It should be noted that in verse 17 of our passage the ashes, generally termed *efer*, are referred to as ‘*afar*, hinting at the hendiadys.

Most of what follows derives from lectures of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon. Some of it appears in *Natan Hochmah Lishlomo* (Heb. section p. 61).

Contact with death often brings people to evaluate the life of the deceased that may have been full of affliction and suffering. It prompts contemplation on the most profound issues concerning life. This sometimes leads to the greatest questions a human being may ask of G-d and of His governance of the world, including the following: Why do the righteous sometimes suffer while the wicked prosper? Is G-d

watching over the world? After all is said and done, what is the meaning of everything? Stirrings of such questions are natural and universal to thinking people. They are especially common when confronted with tragic occurrences, for example the death of a young person or the carnage of war. On occasion we encounter the prophets asking such questions. The book of Job is replete with such reflections. Habakkuk asked, “Until when, Hashem, shall I cry out and You not listen, shout to You of violence and You not save?” (Hab. 1:2). Jeremiah asked, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper, [why] are they secure, those that deal treacherously?” (Jer. 12:1b).

Left unchecked, such thoughts may estrange a person from G-d to a degree far greater than any other types of impurities. Upon confronting such issues the psalmist cried out: “It was for nothing that I purified my heart and washed my hands in innocence, such that I was afflicted the whole day long and my chastisements came anew each morning. Had I decided to speak of this I would have undermined the generation of your children. When I struggled to understand it, it was [hopeless] toil in my eyes. Until I entered G-d’s sanctuary and understood their end ” (Ps. 73:13-17).

Purification from contact with death requires that the impure individual be prompted to recognize the most potent antidotes to such negative thinking. This involves serious contemplation of the transient nature of materialism, indeed, of the most fundamental of facts, that all withers away and ultimately one can take nothing with him. In this way the individual may focus on the true meaning and purpose of life, which is to abide by G-d’s will. It is to these objectives that the red cow rites are addressed.

The priest – a spiritual leader of the nation – sprinkles from the red cow’s blood seven times (a full measure) toward the Tent of Meeting. He thus gives direction to the ritual and foreshadows its ultimate purpose, that it is to bring the individual into a closer relationship with the sanctuary and the values it represents. The cow is incinerated לְעֵינָיו of the priest, “before his eyes,” meaning that he is required to fix his thoughts on the symbolism of the ritual, to concentrate on the meaning of what is being represented.

In ritual symbolism, an animal represents a human being. The unblemished red cow is a beautiful, appealing and healthy specimen of being. This cow never carried a yoke, it was not subject to pressure but had always been free of burden and worry. Nevertheless, it ends up in the fire in its entirety – the beauty, the health, the luxury. “Small and great alike are there” (Job 3:19); together in the fire are the proud and mighty cedar, the humble hyssop and the crimson material, whose name *tola’at shani* recalls the worm from which it is derived.

The priest is called upon to focus on the utter vanity of physical achievements and possessions, pleasures and desires. He must internalize the lesson that life is transient and has ultimate meaning only when lived with the consciousness of the presence of G-d and in attachment to His will. Arrogance, haughtiness and all antisocial dispositions are folly. His sprinkling of the slaughtered cow’s blood toward the sanctuary provides the foundational principle to the ritual of the fire, that its meaning must not lead to nihilism but must be placed in perspective. In the final analysis meaning stems from G-d, for He has interest in man and is “A faithful G-d, never false, true and upright is He” (Deut. 32:4b, NJPS). It is the priest’s responsibility to radiate this definition of true reality and the spirit of holiness into the nation, specifically to those who require purification.

All who participate in the procedures of the red cow require purification. This teaches that whoever contends with the profound questions of theodicy that are often triggered by death and suffering, perhaps an inevitable occurrence for serious people, regardless of intentions, runs the risk of being influenced negatively. It is important that such people engage in the spiritual invigoration symbolized by the red cow purification rites.

This is indeed a unique law justifying the distinctive term זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה (“This is the statute of the teaching”).

Endnote

* See our study on *Parashat Emor Part II* for an elaboration on this view.

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