

# United We Stand

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Parshas Chukas

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## The Parsha's Path

*And one who sprinkles shall wash his garments (19:21).*

This week's Parsha opens with the laws of the *Parah Adumah*, the Red Heifer. The *Parah Adumah* is burned and a mixture of its ashes and water are used to help purify those who have been contaminated by a corpse (*tamei meis*). The *tamei meis* must be sprinkled on the third and seventh days of their impurity and then immerse in a mikvah, the latter of which is always required to achieve purity.

The *Parah Adumah* is described as the quintessential "*chok*" of the Torah, meaning that something about it is so paradoxical it defies human understanding. Chazal explain that this is because the Torah describes all those who are involved in preparing and handling the *parah adumah* ashes are rendered *tamei*, even though the ashes help a person become *tahor*. How could a substance that impurifies also be the source of purity?

In previous years we've explored this paradox on a deeper level; how the *parah adumah* represents *Midas HaDin*, the Majesty and Strict-Justice of G-d, and in order to purify a person who feels distant, removed, and unworthy from this conception, we burn this image to show him that G-d is close to him even amidst his impurity; G-d "descends", as it were, to cling even to the lowly. While this enables the *tamei* person to renew his relationship with G-d and ennoble him to ultimately once again encounter Him from the perspective of *Midas HaDin*, on another level, it can also be an impurifying experience. For a person who is able to relate to G-d's Majesty in a healthy manner, to see it so desecrated can be disillusioning and desensitizing - imagine seeing a king in his pajamas. Thus, we can understand how the ashes of the *parah adumah* cause impurity to those that handle it, even as it purifies. We suggested that the *chok* of the *parah adumah* is that G-d would allow the image of His grandeur to be defiled and "descend", as it were, to uplift people who have become distant. The ability to find G-d amidst defilement and return to Him indeed defies all logic.

However, the picture we painted, according to Chazal, isn't 100% accurate. Chazal understand that there is one person who handles the *parah adumah* ashes who does not become impure - the sprinkler (Yoma 14a). They understand verse 19:19 to mean that the person who sprinkles the ashes on the impure person, thereby enabling him to become pure, remains pure himself. While a simple reading of verse 21 implies that the sprinkler also becomes *tamei*, Chazal reinterpret it to refer to someone who carries the ashes for the time it takes to sprinkle. Several commentators took note of the discrepancy between Chazal's reading and the *p'shat*, perhaps most notably the Chizkuni, who argues that even the Mishnah in Parah implies that the sprinkler becomes *tamei*. How can we understand the

discrepancy between the most straightforward reading and Chazal's?

Perhaps the answer is that really, the sprinkler should become *tamei*, just like everyone else who handles the *parah adumah* ashes. There is no logical reason he should be immune to the detrimental effects of encountering the destroyed image of Divine Majesty. However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, it also wouldn't make sense for the person who directly enables another to become pure to become impure in the process. The purity which the sprinkler helps confer on his fellow Jew effectively purifies the sprinkler, as well. While an object that renders purity can sometimes render impurity, the act of purifying cannot possibly be impurifying.

The laws of the *parah adumah* and impurity from contamination with a corpse are followed by a jump of thirty-eight years to the last year the Jewish people are in the desert. These thirty-eight years were filled with death, as the entire generation involved in the Sin of The Spies perished. The Netziv explains that the message of the *parah adumah* ashes was that rather than dwell on death, we can focus on hope and that through time and through *teshuvah*, new life can emerge. No matter how closely we've come in contact with death or its spiritual equivalents, G-d can come amidst our defilement and give us new life. The midrash says that the reason the laws of *parah adumah* are placed following the laws of the gifts to *kohanim* is to teach us that our leaders, the *kohanim*, can be our *parah adumah*, representing the Majesty of G-d while also descending to be with us when we're most vulnerable, ennobling and uplifting us in the process.

I believe that all of these ideas are extremely pertinent to dealing with these difficult times. We have all experienced, to one degree or another, a confrontation with the terrible reality of death and human vulnerability. We have also experienced the defilement of divisiveness. There are many reasons to feel small and far removed from the rapture of G-d's revealed Majesty and the wondrous embrace of His Splendor. It is vital not to overexpose ourselves to these bitter happenings, which can be contaminating realities, even as they can be vital and even purifying in the right quantities. It is also vital to seek out spiritual mentors and leaders who can guide us out from impurifying negative thoughts and mentalities. But sometimes we also must be those leaders. When we see others who are downtrodden and contaminated by all that is going on around us, we have an opportunity to be there for them, to be a representative of G-d amidst the contamination. People generally have a tendency to avoid those who are sad, sour, or afflicted in any way; they understandably do not want to be negatively affected by such an encounter, which can often be depressing and frustrating. Yet the message of the sprinkler is that if we go out of our way to uplift others, that act itself will uplift us in addition to the person with the 'impurity' that we encounter. Let the *parah adumah* ennoble us to not only see G-d and allow Him to uplift us amidst our ups and downs, amidst

our impurity, but be the representative of G-d and uplift others amidst theirs.

## Deeper Meanings

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And the spirit of the people grew short with the road (21:4).

This week's Parsha recounts the deaths of Moshe's two siblings, Miriam and Aharon, and how, subsequent to Aharon's death, a group of Canaanites (Rashi identifies them as Amalekites) attack the Jewish people. They fail, but, according to Rashi, they leave the Jews feeling vulnerable enough to journey back the way they came, on the same route which they took when they were originally banished to the desert for the sin of the Spies.

The people then complain to Moshe, "Why have you brought us up to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul is at its limit with insubstantial food." Rashi explains that the people suspected the food (a.k.a. The manna) was "insubstantial" - "kilokeil") because, instead of causing those that ate it to defecate, it was miraculously absorbed in the body. The people, obviously unable to observe the absorption and concerned over their lack of defecation, were thus worried that the manna would ultimately implode inside them. As punishment for disrespectfully complaining against Moshe and G-d, G-d sent a plague of burning snakes to bite and kill the people. The people begged Moshe for forgiveness and G-d had Moshe create a statue of a snake. By looking at the snake and turning their thoughts towards heaven, the Jews would be saved.

Rashi's explanation for why the Jews complained would seem to be very difficult. The Jews had been eating the manna for thirty-eight years, and nobody ever imploded because of it. Wouldn't it be extremely irrational to suddenly be worried about such a thing?

I think that the answer to this question can be found in a Rashi on the preceding pasuk, "the spirit of the people grew short with the road." Rashi explains that taking the path their fathers had taken when exiled to the desert, away from the Land of Israel, made the Jewish people feel that they might never enter the Land. A feeling of depression and hopelessness set in, one which was too much for them to deal with. This is the connotation of a "shortening of spirit."

Along these lines, we could understand this pasuk as teaching us how when the people came to level complaints against Moshe and G-d. It was not so much about the complaints themselves - in fact, the complaints themselves were completely illogical! Rather, the people were so distraught with overbearing emotions that they let it out in an inappropriate fashion, complaining about entirely irrelevant things. I think we can all say we've been in highly stressful situations where the natural reaction is to let loose a string of negativity at the first thing that comes our way. It was this that led to the plague of snakes that killed so many among our nation.

This episode teaches us that being in an emotionally charged situation is never an excuse for acting inappropriately. Despite the fact that the Jewish people were not in their right mind, they were fully punished for disrespecting G-d and Moshe as if they acted completely deliberately. We are commanded to be servants of G-d 24/7, and that involves controlling our emotions so we can serve Him properly. If we begin feeling like we've lost control and stress out, we must not give in to the temptation to let loose; we must maintain our bearings, allow ourselves to relinquish control, and face whatever comes our way.

Perhaps this was why the cure to the Jewish people's plague- namely, looking at the statue of the snake as a reminder of G-d's control- was uniquely appropriate to the situation. The best way to be calm and able to handle the most impossible conditions is to recognize that ultimately, G-d is in control. By focusing on His Awesomeness and acknowledging that He wants us to act properly, come what may, we can put everything in the perspective of the bigger picture and never lose ourselves (see Mishna, Rosh Hashana 29a). While we may not have a copper snake, let us use the reminders we do have - Davening, Berachos, Mitzvos, etc., to always put things in perspective and keep G-d in the center of the picture.

## Goal of the week

Go out of your way to uplift someone's day.

*This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.*

***Have A Great Shabbos !!***

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