

Death-Impurity and the Pursuit of Life

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The first chapter of Parashat Hukat deals with death and the struggle with its potentially paralyzing dimensions. The chapter has two parts. In the first part, we hear about the process for preparing the ashes of the red heifer that serves as the vehicle for purification in cases of corpse impurity. The second part describes the ways in which people and objects contract this type of impurity. Read together, they call us to see that life must continue moving forward even as it does and must encounter and engage with death.

A. How does one become impure?

The chapter begins by describing the process of preparing the ashes of the red heifer:

במדבר יט, א' – ב'

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ²זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה ה' לֵאמֹר דַּבְּרוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אַדְמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל:

BeMidbar 19:1-2

¹God spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: ²This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.

After a lengthy description of the process, we hear about its purpose:

במדבר יט, י' – י"ב

¹⁰וְהָיְתָה לְכַנִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְךָ לְחַקֵּת עִוְלָם: ¹¹הַגִּגַּע בְּמַת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שְׁבַע יָמִים: ¹²הוא יתחטא-בוֹ בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִטְהַר...

BeMidbar 19:10-12

¹⁰This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. ¹¹He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days.

¹²He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean...

These verses clarify that, on the one hand, those who come in contact with the dead are impure, but, on the other hand, they have the opportunity to purify themselves.

The second part of the chapter deals with the question of how exactly one is defiled by a corpse. We hear about three basic modes for contracting this impurity.

First, one can be located in a shared space with the dead, a space referred to as a “tent.” In this scenario, one can be defiled without even touching the corpse; the very fact of shared presence with the dead causes the living to become impure. The dead body’s presence affects not only people but objects as well: “This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever [*lit.* whatsoever] enters the tent and whoever [*lit.* whatsoever] is in the tent shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:14). We see from this that death has a broader social significance, even when it plays out in a private space. The impurity of the surrounding objects demonstrates that the very fact of the presence of a dead body in a community affects all of the individuals within it and limits their behaviors. Death has wider significance than personal experience alone.

The second mode comes through contact with bodies or bones found out in the field. Even if death happens or persists beyond the bounds of society, there are communal consequences: “And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone...shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:16).

Third, graves defile: “anyone who touches... a grave, shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:16). Even when individuals or societies try to take control of and organize death and its consequences, it is not possible to create an entirely neutral reality. Even the most controlled experience of death remains significant and an enduring source of impurity.

Contact with death, then, defiles in the private sphere, beyond the bounds of society (in the “field”) and even when this contact has been organized and controlled. Contact with death in any of these contexts demands a response. Moreover, our *parashah* suggests that a dead body is a defiling entity under a wide range of conditions: immediately after death as well as after a long time (as in the case of a bone); the corpse defiles but so does the grave. In practice, our *parashah* clarifies that a dead person, anywhere, anyhow, any time, continues to defile. Nature, culture, private and public spaces: they are all affected by and involved with the presence of death.

B. Responding to Death

With all of this in mind, our *parashah* demands a process of purification after contact with the dead. This demand implicitly reveals that the effects of life’s contact with death are reversible. Even though a person touched a corpse, was in the same room or shared space with the dead and is now impure, there is a pathway to purification. Put more directly: what it means to be alive is to be capable of becoming pure after contact with death. Yes, the dead defile forever, no matter how much time has passed, but a living person can toggle between states of impurity and purity and can be renewed after contact with the dead.

Our *parashah* does not present this possibility for purification as a neutral option, a mere description of a difference between the living and the dead. It is rather a normative demand: those who come in contact with or proximity to death must respond to it; they may not remain indifferent, neutral and unaffected. The encounter with death must trigger action, not paralysis. One cannot hide from the encounter with death nor may one sink into it for a prolonged period of time. This demand comes across loud and clear when the Torah describes the consequences of not dealing with the reality of death.

We hear twice:

במדבר יט, י"ג; כ'

¹³כִּלְ-הַנִּגָּע בְּמַת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת-מִשְׁכַּן ה' טָמֵא וְנִכְרְתָה הַגִּפְשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מִי נִגְדָה לֹא-זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא יִהְיֶה עוֹד טָמֵאֲתוּ בּוֹ:
²⁰וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-טָמֵא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְרְתָה הַגִּפְשׁ הַהוּא מִתּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל כִּי אֶת-מִקְדָּשׁ ה' טָמֵא מִי נִגְדָה לֹא-זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא:

BeMidbar 19:13, 20

¹³Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles God's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him...

²⁰If anyone who has become unclean fails to cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled God's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him: he is unclean.

According to these two verses, corpse impurity is connected to the realm of the sacred. The existence of a dead body and a living person defiled by it both affect the sacred domain. Put another way: The relationship between death and the sacred is mediated through the

impurity of death. Whenever the impurity of death is found for a prolonged period of time in the camp, in the midst of the community served by the sacred, that impurity defiles the sacred as well.

The verses are thus clear that there are two consequences to the decision not to purify oneself and to remain in a state of impurity, two different ramifications when people stubbornly cling to death. First, there is a fundamental contradiction between the community's sacred spaces and the prolonged presence of one defiled by a corpse: "defiles God's Tabernacle... he has defiled God's sanctuary." This defiling of the sanctuary does not require direct contact between the impure person and the sanctuary. The very fact of the prolonged impurity in the community is sufficient to defile the sacred. Furthermore, those who cling to the experience of the impurity of death not only affect the sacred but are socially distanced. If you choose to remain with death, you cannot remain long within the community of Israel: "That person shall be cut off from Israel... that person shall be cut off from the congregation." Corpse impurity that is not addressed through purification has enduring meaning, both in the realm of the sacred as well as in society at large.

These consequences attest to a key distinction between the living and the dead. Not only are the dead always impure, whereas the living can be pure or impure, but this characteristic of the living demonstrates a fundamental fluidity and dynamism. And the Torah demands that the living embrace and embody this characteristic. The demand to move on from death and to purify oneself transforms the encounter with death into one that affirms life through a dynamic commitment to act, to move forward, to become pure again.