

## Solving the Mystery

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### Parashat Hukkat 5779

Parashat Hukkat opens with the ritual of the *parah adumah*, the red heifer. When a person has had contact with the dead,<sup>1</sup> they are considered impure—*tamei meit*. This designated animal is burnt and its ashes are mixed with water which is then used to purify anyone who was affected by this impurity. This ritual is considered to be one of the most mystifying of the Torah and one of the most challenging *mitzvot* to understand. This is in large part because any person who is part of the process of producing these purifying waters themselves become impure, though the water itself is a purifying agent. Why is this so? Solving this “mystery” of how a pure person becomes impure in the process of removing someone else’s impurity will teach us about what it means to truly invest in, and sacrifice for, someone else. It will also encourage us to recognize and appreciate the invisible investments and sacrifices that we benefit from.

Midrash Tanhuma articulates what makes the *parah adumah* procedure so confusing:

#### מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ז

רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר, ארבעה דברים יצר הרע משיב עליהם, וקתיב בהן חקה. ואלו הן, אשת אח, וכלאים, שעיר המשתלח, ופרה אדמה. אשת אח, דקתיב: ערות אשת אחיך וגו' (ויקרא יא:טז). מת בלא בנים, יבמה יבא עליה (דברים כה:ה). וקתיב בעריות, ושמתם את חקותי ואת משפטי (ויקרא יח:ה). וכלאים, דקתיב: לא תלבש שעטנז (דברים כב:יא). סדין בציצית, מתר. וקתיב בה חקה, את חקותי תשמרו בהמתך לא תרביע כלאים וגו' (ויקרא יט:ט). שעיר המשתלח, דקתיב: והמשלח את השעיר לעזאזל יכבס בגדיו (ויקרא טז:כז), והוא עצמו מכפר על אחרים. וקתיב בה, והיתה זאת לכם לחקת עולם (שם פסוק לד). פרה אדמה מנין? דתנן: כל העוסקין בפרה מתחלה ועד סוף, מטמאין בגדים. והיא גופה מטהרת בגדים, וקתיב בה חקה, זאת חקת התורה.

<sup>1</sup> A person does not need to actually touch a corpse in order to contract impurity, there are more indirect ways to become *tamei* such as being in the same enclosed structure with the dead, *tum'at ohel*.



### Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukkat 7

R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin said in the name of R. Levi: There are four things that the evil inclination<sup>2</sup> challenges [as being contrary to logic] and regarding each of them the term *hukkah* (law) is written. These are: (1) the wife of one's brother, (2) mixed materials, (3) the scapegoat, and (4) the red heifer. (1) The wife of one's brother, as it is written: **The nakedness of your brother's wife [you may not uncover]** (VaYikra 11:16),<sup>3</sup> but if [the brother] dies without children [then] **her brother-in-law shall come to her** (Devarim 25:5).<sup>4</sup> And about improper sexual encounters it says, **you shall observe My laws (*hukkotai*) and statutes** (VaYikra 18:5). (2) Mixed materials, as it is written: **Do not wear *sha'atnez* [wool and linen together]** (Devarim 22:11), but a [linen] garment with [wool] fringes is permitted! And about it is written, **you shall observe My laws (*hukkotai*) do not mate mixed species of animals** (VaYikra 19:19). (3) The scapegoat, as it is written: **The one who sends the goat to Azazel should wash his clothes** (VaYikra 16:26), but it itself atones for others. And about it is written, **this shall be for you a permanent law (*hukkat*)** (VaYikra 16:34). How do we know that this is the case regarding the red heifer? As it is taught:<sup>5</sup> *All who engage with the heifer, from the beginning to the end, are impure to the level where it affects their clothing.* But [the cow] itself purifies clothing. And about it *hukkah* is written, **this is the law (*hukkat*) of the Torah** (BeMidbar 19:2).

R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin presents four *mitzvot* that seem to defy logic. In the first two examples, levirate marriage and wearing *sha'atnez*, he points out that a mixture or lison which is usually explicitly forbidden can in some cases become permitted or even commanded!<sup>6</sup> How can something be both a core violation and an essential *mitzvah*?! In the second two examples, the scapegoat and the *parah adumah*, the item which is supposed to bring expiation, cleansing, and purification ends up having the opposite effect for anyone who engages with it too closely. What R. Yehoshua is looking for and not finding in these *hukkim* is consistency—is this act considered harmful or is it considered beneficial? Is this material purifying or putrefying?

Although R. Yehoshua does not distinguish between the four examples that he brings, the

<sup>2</sup> In other parallel sources, the term "*satan*" is used. Though the term *yetzer hara* often refers to a person's impulse to follow their own desires and transgress, here it appears to be the element of a person's psyche or soul which encourages a person to separate themselves from God.

<sup>3</sup> That is, be intimate with her.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to the laws of *yibbum*, levirate marriage. According to the Torah, if a man dies without an heir, his brother must marry the widow of the deceased. Her first child with the surviving brother is considered the child of the deceased and his rightful heir. If one does not want to or cannot do *yibbum*, then one does *halitzah*, the ceremony of release. Nowadays only *halitzah* is practiced.

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah Parah 4:4.

<sup>6</sup> Though R. Yehoshua of Sakhnin does not cite this, it is also the case that *sha'atnez* can be commanded, not just permitted, as the clothing of the *kohanim* was made out of wool and linen. See Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Kelei Mikdash 8:13.



latter two examples—the purifying object which itself renders things impure—has a readily available explanation. Purity and impurity are not absolute categories like forbidden and permitted; they are states that people and objects can enter into and escape from. When a human being contracts impurity, it is a temporary state that needs to be remedied, a stain that needs to be cleansed. Death touches us all and we all come in contact with the impurity it imparts. But unlike death, impurity is a state which is impermanent. The exceptions to otherwise ironclad prohibitions in the cases of *tzitzit* or levirate marriage are baffling because, when something is forbidden, we assume that it is “bad” or “wrong,” and therefore should be forbidden in all circumstances. Ritual impurity, on the other hand, is more dynamic—it travels; it comes and goes; it is absorbed and it is removed.

When we pay attention to this quality of impurity we are able to understand the “mystery,” the *hok*, of the *parah adumah* and reveal that it is actually quite intelligible. To illustrate: If I have a dirty floor that I would like to clean, I take a mop and a pail full of clean soapy water. After I am done mopping, the floor is clean and the pail of water is now dingy and disgusting. But I do not ask R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin’s question: “How could it be that soapy water which cleans has now itself become unclean?!” because I understand that the water in the pail has absorbed the dirt from the floor. When something is cleaned or purified, the defilement doesn’t disappear—it is transferred. The person who leads the scapegoat absorbs some of the impurity that is associated with bearing sin. The *kohanim* who prepare the ashes and the sanctifying water of the red heifer are absorbing the *tum’ah* (impurity) that is being taken away from the people they are purifying.

This awareness is subtly reflected by a different passage in Midrash Tanhuma:

#### מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ח

ומפני מה כל הקרבנות זכרים ונקבות, וזו נקבה? אמר רבי איבו: משל למה הדבר דומה? לכן שפחה שטנף פלטרין של מלך. אמר המלך, תבוא אמו ותקנח את הצואה. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, תבוא פרה ותכפר על מעשה העגל.

#### Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukat 8

Why is it that all of the sacrifices can be male or female [animals] but [the red heifer] must be a female? R. Ibbo said: A parable—to what is this similar? To the son of a maid who dirtied the palace of the king. The king said: Let his mother come and clean the excrement. So said the Holy Blessed One: Let the heifer come and atone for the action of the calf.

The calf that is referred to in the *midrash* is the Golden Calf which was worshipped by the



people and is considered to be the primary and paradigmatic sin that *Benei Yisrael* committed. This sin has a putrefying effect on the people, inhering in them and needing to be purged.<sup>7</sup> According to this *midrash*, purification is analogous to, or perhaps even synonymous with, the cleaning of filth. The mess that was made by the child—the calf—is cleaned up by the mother—the fully grown cow. Although the mother is not at fault, she does the cleaning. Similarly, though the Kohen is not at fault, the Kohen does the cleaning.<sup>8</sup>

We often translate the word *het* חטא as sin, which obscures an aspect of its meaning which is connected to defilement. Some Hebrew verbs take on a specific meaning and that meaning's exact opposite. For example the root ש,ר,ש when conjugated in the simple form, *lishrosh*, לשרוש means to plant. However, when it is conjugated in the intensive case, *leshareish*, לשרש it means to uproot.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, we see from the description of the *parah adumah* ritual that the root א,ט,ח when written in the intensive case means to cleanse, so it follows that when it is written in the simple form, it signifies becoming sullied:

#### במדבר י"ט

וְהָזָה הַטְּמֵא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְחָטָא בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָהַר בְּעֶרְבֵי:

#### BeMidbar 19:19

And the pure [person] should sprinkle on the impure [person] on the third day and on the seventh day, and he will cleanse him (*hit'to*) on the seventh day. And he will launder his clothes, and wash his body in water, and be pure in the evening.

In this verse, it is clear that we have three types of cleaning: the sprinkling of the cleaning agent, the *mei hat'at*, which offers spiritual cleansing, then the laundering of the clothes, and lastly bathing of the body, which provides a physical cleanse. The Torah's narration of the ritual itself emphasizes water, laundering, and cleaning and calls our attention to the fact that the purification mechanism is a type of washing away sin, death, and their effects. When we insist that the cleansing is an incomprehensible ritual, we deny this sacrifice on the part of the

<sup>7</sup> See Zohar II, 237a.

<sup>8</sup> And, perhaps one of the reasons why the Kohen does the cleaning is not only because he is an atonement and cleaning professional, like the mother in the story is a maid, but because he is from the tribe of Levi. On the one hand, Aharon was uniquely responsible in constructing the Golden Calf, so the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) does not wear gold in the inner sanctum of the Temple because of the principle that “a prosecutor cannot serve as a defense attorney” the presence of gold is condemnatory and can't be involved in atoning for this sin. See Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 26a. However, the rest of the tribe of Levi are singled out by the Torah as being uniquely uninvolved with the worshipping of the calf. See Shemot 32:26.

<sup>9</sup> There is a similar phenomenon in English where there are some words that contain opposite meanings, e.g. to cleave.



servants of God who are cleaning up the mess that we have made.

The mechanism of the *parah adumah* is not hard to understand because we have all seen rags, sponges, and mops become dirty in the process of making our counters, dishes, and floors clean. It is dangerous to insist that this ritual is mystifying because, the more we say that we don't understand how the purifier can become impure, the more we obscure the hard work of the cleaner and the person who themselves absorbs the dirt. The *kohanim* are generally not allowed to become impure,<sup>10</sup> and if they do, they cannot perform their duties in the sanctuary, the *mikdash*, and cannot eat their holy food. When the *kohanim* purify the people, they are giving up the purity that they have worked so hard to maintain so that regular people, whose needs for purity are less, can become clean and have access to the *mikdash*. And we consistently ignore, or even deny, this great sacrifice in our interpretation of this procedure.

It is no coincidence, then, that the laws of the *parah adumah* are followed by the death of our prophetess, Miriam, who was underappreciated in her lifetime:

#### במדבר כ:א-ב, ה

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר צִן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁבֶת הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמַת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקְבֹּר שָׁם: וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן: ... וְלִמָּחָר הָעֵלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַבְיֵא אֶתֵּנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַרְעָה הַזֶּה לֹא מָקוֹם זֵרַע וַתֵּאָנֶה וְגִפְן וְרִמּוֹן וּמִיִּם אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת:

#### BeMidbar 20:1-2, 5

*Benei Yisrael* and all of the people came to the desert of Zin in the first month and the people dwelled in Kadeish. Miriam died there and was buried there. And there was no water for the people and they gathered against Moshe and against Aharon... [The people said], "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to bring us to this bad place. It is not a place of plantings<sup>11</sup> or fig trees or grape-vines or pomegranate trees and there is no water to drink.

When Moshe and Aharon died, the people mourned them;<sup>12</sup> when Miriam died, there was a quick and efficient burial with no mourning period attached. According to Rabbinic tradition, the juxtaposition of Miriam's death and the absence of water signifies that Miriam was the source of the water:

<sup>10</sup> VaYikra 21:1.

<sup>11</sup> This probably refers to grain.

<sup>12</sup> See BeMidbar 20:29, Devarim 34:8.



### תוספתא סוטה (ליברמן) יא:א

כל זמן שהיתה מרים קיימת היתה באר מספקת את ישראל. משמתה מרים מהו אומר? **ותמת שם מרים ולא היה מים לעדה** (במדבר כ:א-ב), שנסתלקה הבאר...

#### Tosefta Sotah (Lieberman) 11:1

All of the time that Miriam was alive, a well supplied Israel [with water]. When Miriam died, what does it say? **Miriam died there and there was no water** (BeMidbar 20:1-2) because the well departed.

Miriam supplied water to the people, but they didn't appreciate her hidden efforts. Water in this *parashah* symbolizes this blindness on the part of the people, not noticing what others are providing for them, not understanding that their comfort and ease comes through the efforts and the merits of other people whom they should, but more often do not, recognize.

Miriam was underappreciated and Moshe's sacrifice and hard work was so invisible to the people that they complained to him, and about him, incessantly. When the water disappeared, the people immediately turned to Moshe and Aharon, blaming them for bringing them into the desert. The people had the nerve to say to their redeemers: We wish that you had never brought us out of Egypt.<sup>13</sup> This attitude of the people towards their loving shepherds helps to explain a strange moment in the *midrash* which highlights Moshe's connection to the *parah adumah's* unexplainable quality:

#### מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ח

**ויקחו אליך** (במדבר יט:ב). רבי יוסי בר חנינא אמר: אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה, אני מגלה לך טעם פרה, אבל לאחרים, חקה...

#### Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukkat 8

**And they will take to you** (BeMidbar 19:2). R. Yosi bar Hanina said: The Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, "I will reveal the reason of the *parah* to you, but to others it will be a *hukkah*."

Perhaps the reason why only Moshe understands the *parah adumah*, but everyone else is mystified by it, is that Moshe is the least appreciated. Moshe prayed and suffered for the people. He starved himself of food and drink, he starved himself of rest, and he prayed for the people time and time again. The people never say thank you, the people never tell Moshe that they love him and see his efforts. The people complain. They don't see that Moshe is caring for them, cleaning up after them, carrying around their filth, trading on his own merits

<sup>13</sup> See BeMidbar 14:2.



to ask God to grant them forgiveness and expiation.<sup>14</sup>

This insight explains another oddity of the *parah adumah*, which is not addressed by the *midrash*:

#### במדבר יט:ב

זאת חקת התורה אשר צוה ה' לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל ויקחו אליך פרה אדמה תמימה אשר אין בה מום אשר לא עלה עליה על.

#### BeMidbar 19:2

This is the law (*hukkat*) of the instruction that God commanded saying: Speak to *Benei Yisrael* and they will bring to you a perfectly red heifer, that has no blemish and has never borne a yoke.

A straightforward reading of the verse yields that the term *hukkah* actually applies to the taking of the cow, not to the process of preparing its ashes. What might seem unexplainable is that the cow has to be completely red, flawless, and unworked. Rabbeinu Bahya<sup>15</sup> provides an explanation for these qualities:

#### רבינו בחיי על במדבר יט

אדומה, על שם שהחטא קרוי אדום, שנאמר (ישעיה א:יח) אם יהיו חטאיכם כשנים כשלג ילבינו. תמימה, על שהיו ישראל תמימים ונעשו בו בעלי מומין תבא זו ותכפר עליהם ויחזרו לתמימות. לא עלה עליה עול, כשם שפרקו מעליהם עול מלכות שמים.

#### Rabbeinu Bahya to BeMidbar 19:2

**Red** because sin is called red, as it is said, **if your sins are as red as scarlet, they will be whitened as snow** (Yeshayahu 1:18). **Perfect** because Israel was perfect and they became blemished, so let this come and atone for them and they will return to perfection. **Has never borne a yoke** just as they have removed from themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

The red heifer is us, and the *hok* is that we don't understand this. We don't know what it means to bear a yoke. We think that the mystery is that the pure become impure, but what is truly mystifying is how intentionally blind we are to the fact that other people are purifying us, taking our responsibility onto themselves. We remove the yoke from ourselves and burden other people who are serving us, providing for us, cleaning up the messes that we make. We never truly see all of the effort that goes into the services that we use and everything that we

<sup>14</sup> See Shemot 32:32.

<sup>15</sup> Bahya ben Asher, 1255–1340, Spain.



consume. Not because the people or the work are invisible, but because we are not committing to seeing them.

Our insistence that the things we benefit from magically appear, that the process of our purification is a mystery that can't be solved, reflects our unwillingness to encounter and really appreciate the people in our lives who make the way we live possible. But, we need to pull back the curtain and pay loving and appreciative attention to who is cleaning us, who is providing us with spiritual and physical sustenance, who is enabling us to take them for granted.

The *hukkat haTorah* is that there is no *hukkat haTorah*.

Wishing you a Shabbat of solved mysteries.

