

Parasha Chukat

Since we last visited our narrative, 38 years have elapsed, without much comment. The remaining veterans of the Exodus are rapidly diminishing in number. Our powerful leaders Miriam and Aaron are both dying. With funerals for the elders becoming commonplace, it is time to examine the practices of burial and mourning.

The book prescribes a cleansing ritual. A rare red heifer is incinerated. Her ashes are dusted into spring water. One sprinkle of this liquid purifies people who have been in close contact with the dead.

This bizarre voodoo has flummoxed commentators for centuries. They have declined to seek any logic in it, and declared it to be an official mystery of the Torah. But fools rush in where sages fear to tread, so please join me as we hammer this custom into shards and then epoxy the fragments into a new mosaic.

The act of rinsing away the taint of death with the a few drops of cattle cremains speaks of attitudes toward death, burial, mourning, and cleanliness.

Hebrews in Biblical times, and Jews throughout time, regard death as universal and inevitable. The sentence of death was passed at the expulsion from the garden: “Dust you are and to dust shall you return.” (Gen 3:19) In Ecclesiastes, “The spirit of man returns to God, who gave it.” (Ecc 3:20-22) The Talmud asserts, “This world is like a portal before the world to come.” (Avot 4:16) “There is a profound pessimism regarding the fate of humanity. Death and birth are viewed as parallel processes; ‘just as a man is born with a cry, tears, and a sigh, so he dies.’” The Talmud remarks on the naturalness of death by pointing out that the angel of death was created on the first day.

The dead do not haunt us as ghosts. They are excused from the obligation to do good deeds. In Psalms, “The dead do not praise God. They are forgotten and cut off from His hand.” (PS 88:6,10-12)

Why do we dread death? Do we hate the thought of losing the sensual pleasures and even the discomfort of this corporeal form? Do we regret the work we leave undone? Do we fear the pain of dying? Do we retreat from imagining ourselves vanishing from existence because we can't truly comprehend what it means to exist? Do we hate the thought of losing status among the living as we are slowly or quickly forgotten? In Samuel we are told that among the unfortunate beings in the next world are the persons with no one to recall their names. (II Sam 18:18)

We often divide our world between Them and Us, and it is often an illusory division. But there is a chasm that no amount of empathy can bridge. We are living; They are dead. We create rituals of burial and mourning to focus our minds on the separation.

The Torah makes no commandment regarding honoring the dead, but it prohibits making offerings to the dead, and it prohibits consulting with them. Yet we do honor the

dead with burial and with prayer. To bury the dead is called “the true kindness”, since one can expect no reciprocation. Burial is a very old and deep-seated custom. There is a midrash that when Abel was killed, Adam and Eve learned the art of burial from a raven, who showed them how to dispose of the body by scratching at a spot of earth where it had interred its own kin.

If burial is the practical act of separating ourselves from the dead, mourning is the set of spiritual acts of separation. In bygone days it was customary to pour out water in the home of the deceased, as “there was no water for the congregation” when Miriam died. (Num 20:2) (That reference is from this very parasha.) Mourners rend their garments, though usually just a symbolic ribbon. Mirrors are covered or turned to the wall. The deceased is dressed in a simple shroud, without pockets. The body is attended until burial.

One evocative custom is to wash one's hands upon leaving the cemetery or upon returning home. This is a clear echo of the mysterious mitzvah of the parah adumah, the red heifer. Contact with death feels dirty, and must be washed away.

Contamination and purity are two opposite states of mind, which correlate only inexactly with physical states of dirtiness and cleanliness. A sense of contamination from death is profound and instinctual. That sense makes its home in us because it is healthy for us to seek to scrub death from ourselves. Corpses can carry disease-bearing parasites looking for a new host. People (and for that matter animals) who fail to clean themselves after encounters with corpses reduce their own chances for survival. Even a corpse that is not diseased still gives us that sense of contamination. It is not a rational feeling; it is an instinct, albeit an instinct that often serves us well.

There are other exposures that trigger the instinctive sense of dirtiness. The Torah enumerates several, and as in this case, offers rituals for releasing the sense of dirtiness. All of the rituals involve water. None of the rituals involve antiseptics or detergent. Though these modern aids are effective at removing physical contamination, the time of their invention is much more recent than the time of origin of the instincts for washing. A good ritual touches us where our instincts dwell.

The red heifer is incinerated far beyond the point of recognition. Not only is she dead, she is death itself. This magic ritual transforms her ash-water into the essence of life and death. Dilution only enhances its magical power. The mourner washes away the stink of death with more death. Only life is left behind.

It's been sixteen or seventeen centuries since we used up the last of the original supply of parah adumah ashes. There are no more. We haven't done this ritual since Talmudic times. Quite frankly, we would rather not resume. But is there any value to be derived today from the knowledge of the distant magical ritual of cleansing after contact with the dead?

One benefit derives from a reconsideration of the place of magic in the human spirit. In the days when the Torah was young, people knew that magic addressed the soul in

ways that reason could not. Modern culture is still imbued with magical beliefs and practices. We are immersed in irrationality, but it is invisible to us. Acquire the habit of recognizing magic in your own life. Cultivate that awareness.

Another benefit of remembrance of the red heifer is a consciousness of the whereabouts of our greatest fears. The strangest rituals in the Torah envelop our most profound anxieties. If the red heifer is the strangest, then fear of death and fear of contamination are among the most profound. Search out these odd spiritual bandages, because they cover infected psychic wounds. Rip them off, clean what is underneath, and replace them with fresh.

Finally, remember the red heifer to honor the people who took her ashes seriously. They were not a scientific people, but they were an intelligent people nonetheless. Their thoughts and practices in many ways gave rise to our own. Notice the path of evolving Jewish culture. Marvel at the generations who created it as it is today. Imagine how future generations might remember us.