

The Mystery of Faith

According to tradition essence of the mysterious Red Heifer (Num. 19) can be summed up in one phrase: 'It cleans the soiled, while soiling the clean.'

Studying the chapter concerning the Red Heifer is difficult without understanding the Hebrew concepts of *TUMA* and *TAHARA*. Unfortunately there are no English translations of either word. The King James Version of the Bible treats *TUMA* and *TAHARA* as uncleanness and cleanness respectively. However, there is no known measure of dirt, pollution, or smell associated with *TUMA*, so the KJV translation is inaccurate. Nor does any detectable level of hygiene, spotlessness or wholesomeness exist for the state of *TAHARA*. Others translate the two words as 'impurity' and 'purity', while some add the word 'ritually' in an attempt to paint them with meaning or context. Neither the corpse, the murder weapon, nor the person in a tent with a corpse or weapon are 'ritually impure' – they are simply *TUMA*, as is the tent.

Basically the Red Heifer ritual goes like this: first we find a completely red heifer, one that does not have two non-red hairs on its entire body, from head to toe. We slaughter it and burn it on a huge pyre. When the stomach bursts open from the heat, we throw in some cedar wood, hyssop and a skein of red dyed wool, and then, once it has all burned down to ashes, the ashes are gathered for safe-keeping. When someone or something comes in contact with a human corpse they become *TUMA*, and that *TUMA* can only be removed by first waiting three days and then traveling to wherever the red-heifer's ashes are kept. There, someone takes some of the ash, mixes it with spring water and dipping a sprig of hyssop into the mixture, sprinkles it onto the *TUMA* person, vessel or tent. This ritual is performed again on the seventh day, whereupon *TUMA* is considered to have been removed. All that remains is for the person, vessel or tent to be immersed in a Mikve and to wait for nightfall, when all becomes Kosher again and not the slightest residue of *TUMA* remains. At that time the person or object(s) is said to be in a state of *TAHARA*.

The paradox is this: Anyone who touches the ashes, gathers, carries or sprinkles them becomes *TUMA* and cannot enter the Temple precinct until they have immersed in a Mikve. Some become so *TUMA* they even make their own clothing *TUMA*, and have to immerse everything they wore in the Mikve as well. Hence the phrase 'cleans the soiled, while soiling the clean.'

Let us set aside the fact that *TUMA* and *TAHARA* have no practical application in this day and age, since we live in the absence of the Holy Temple and its precincts, and the ash of the red-heifer is not available for us to be sprinkled with.

The Torah is eternal! Everything in it applies to everyone, all the time - or else none of it does.

According to the Izbicy rebbe, death as a metaphor applies to anything for which we have ceased praying and hoping. We don't pray for someone who has died to recover their health - it's pointless. The same applies to a thousand things in our past. We did them and they are done. Some things are undoable, and some cannot be undone. Anything for which we no longer carry any hope in our heart, is considered dead to us.

But what if it were possible to change the past? What if the present is nothing but an illusion?

Everyone knows the story of Joseph and his brothers, of how they kidnapped and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph spent years in prison before eventually becoming viceroy, second in power only to Pharaoh after he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, predicting seven years of glut

followed by seven of famine. We know how his brothers eventually came down to Egypt from Canaan to purchase food for their families, and that fateful morning when they stood in front of Joseph, unaware of his identity and terrified that he would take Benjamin the youngest brother as his slave. If ever a biblical family slogged its way to the highest possible level of anguish, bitterness, pain and terror, this is the family and this its apogee.

Twenty two years, earlier in a fit of cruelty and dispassionate condemnation, Joseph's brothers decided he was not really fit to live. They believed he was a sociopath trying to force a wedge between them and their father Jacob, and they thought his attempts to split the family warranted a death sentence.

Judah, an older brother, intervened and persuaded them to commute this death sentence; so they sold Joseph to some passing traders as a slave. Joseph descended into Egypt. His brothers stripped Joseph of the beautiful coat Jacob had given him, and after dipping it in kid's blood, brought it to their father as evidence of Joseph's violent death. Jacob was inconsolable and subsequently mourned Joseph for the next twenty two years. Judah never forgave himself for being the cause of Jacob's ruin and Joseph's perdition.

Now, after many years have passed, the brothers are trying to convince the Egyptian viceroy that they are not spies come from Canaan to look for the vulnerabilities of Egypt. He had demanded they bring Benjamin the youngest brother down with them to prove their innocence. Judah persuaded their father to trust Benjamin's safety to him, and the brothers made their way back to Egypt. Joseph pretended to be satisfied, but had his agents plant evidence of a theft in Benjamin's kit, and had soldiers drag them all back from their hotel to stand before the viceroy to face his wrath and judgment.

Let us try to imagine, if we can, their feelings at that moment. Jacob told them in no uncertain terms that he would die of heartbreak if they failed to bring Benjamin safely. However they look at their situation, they seem to have brought the family to ruins. Judah blames himself the most, but they all accept their shared role in the savage tragedy, and realize they are being punished for the unforgivable sin of fratricide. As men of conscience with a sense of destiny they writhe in the excruciating pain of guilt and remorse. Not only is their personal situation bleak in the extreme, but the future of the Jewish People hangs in the balance. Examined in that light, it could be said that their lives were all a waste, a shameful calamity, that they should never have been born. So great was the sin, that not even their deaths could atone or rectify the damage they had done to Jacob, Joseph and the world. They may even have thought that God would need to destroy the world and start over from scratch.

Suddenly Joseph peels the mask from his face and reveals himself to them. Instantly, their situation changes from being a dire emergency to a celebration of divine providence and reconciliation.

What changed?

Nothing had *factually* changed, except their perceptions of the situation they were in. They had been in an illusion of danger and pain, and suddenly, in a split second, it was no more than a horrible nightmare from which they'd awakened to safety and relief.

It is said that whoever controls the narrative controls the universe. The ritual of the Red Heifer presents us with a clear narrative: we start with a healthy, young and perfectly red cow, one that has never been yoked or worked. We reduce it to ashes and mix the ashes with pure and

unadulterated water. What could be more dead and irreducible than the clinker and slag of the Red Heifer?

Taste it on the tip of your tongue and what do you get? The taste of minerals, dust, ashes and clear water – dead!

In the Midrash we read, ‘God said to Moses, “This is the statute of the Torah. Let them bring you a perfectly Red Heifer... Why to you? Because you are different. To you I reveal the *TAAM* - Reason behind the Red Heifer, while for everyone else it remains a statute.”’

The Hebrew word for ‘reason’ is *TAAM*. But the word *TAAM* has two other meanings: Taste and Musical Notes.

When you bite into an apple, you hear the crisp crunching sounds of teeth cutting through skin. Suddenly your nose is filled with the fragrance of the apple, and your mouth with the feeling of its juices flooding over your tongue and its tangy sweetness overwhelming every taste-bud. The apple is full of life and tastes alive; eating a healthy apple is practically a whole body experience!

Leave the apple a few weeks and it turns to brown mush. Now biting into it is just dull and sour. Leave it another few months and the taste of the apple is completely dead, it has turned to dust.

But what if that were an illusion? What if there’s a part of us that can still taste the life force in the dusty remains of an apple, and in the gritty ashes of a Red Heifer?

What are we made of? We are many billions of atoms of dust, the clinker and slag of long dead, exploded stars. Every atom inside us dances to God’s tune, the *TAAM* of the universe. Anyone who resonates to Life can taste life in every atom.

The reason we cannot taste life in stardust of which we are made and in the dust and ashes of the burned red heifer is because our tastes are discordant, our reasoning is bitter and our music tasteless rhythms full of sadness and despair. Once a person has had the polluting and destructive taste of idolatry in his mouth, nothing tastes fully alive anymore. Moses, who wasn’t even in this world when we worshipped the Golden Calf, never had his taste for Life corrupted or adulterated by idolatry. He could still taste all the life in the ashes of the Red Heifer; he heard the music of its redness and understood the reason for it.

Inside every Jew there remains a portion of Moses, unsullied and untouched by idolatry and death. We call that part of us *Chokhma* – Wisdom. ‘God said to Moses, “Let them bring you.”’ We need to bring our consciousness to that part of us which is Moses and can taste the life even in the ashes of the dead.

The narrative of the Red Heifer is a parable wrapped in a metaphor inside an allegory, which, if we take it to its logical conclusion, leads us into an ineluctable paradox – Death is just another illusion. But if death is nothing but an illusion what is the meaning of *TUMA* and *TAHARA* and why do we need the Red Heifer to cleanse and remove any *TUMA*?

In the Torah this chapter dealing with the Red Heifer comes immediately before the death of Miriam, and is followed a short time later by that of Aaron, and some months after that by the death of Moses himself; it happens at the end of their forty year wandering through the wilderness. In actual fact, the chapter of the Red Heifer was taught to the Israelites the second week after the Exodus from Egypt, even before their arrival at Mount Sinai, and its placement here is no coincidence.

What does it mean to be touched by death – to touch Death? It means when something happens to shake our faith in God. When we look inside ourselves and find we are feeling resentment at God for something He did or failed to do.

The greatest possible source of resentment at God comes from looking at one's self and seeing someone irredeemable and incurable. Resentment and anger at God lead to fear. Fear and faith cannot co-exist. Only self acceptance and love allow faith to blossom.

Miriam, Aaron and Moses each had unique gifts. Together they had the ability to release us from our self-imposed internal exile, to move us beyond the rejection of Self, to achieve prophecy. The chief prerequisite of prophecy, the one component it cannot do without, is joy. In the presence of Miriam we became thirsty for God. In the presence of Aaron we began to comprehend the depths of our own motives. In the presence of Moses each of us understood why we count to the Jewish People, why the Nation cannot do without our unique talents and gifts. With their deaths, we were once again susceptible to depression and self-rejection, becoming vulnerable to our doubts, fears, resentments and rage at God.

So we are given the Statute of the Red Heifer, the ashes of cow, cedar-wood, hyssop and red wool as a permanent reminder that joy never dies. We are untouched by evil or death, and are filled with divine wisdom, and have been governed since the beginning by nothing and no one, but God.

Now this idea, that we are untouched by evil, folly or anything other than divine guidance and providence can lead to some very strange notions. It could even be read as a blanket license to do whatever we want.

That's why the Red Heifer is said to clean the soiled while soiling the clean. If you don't need to be reminded of the fact that death is an illusion, that you are untouched by evil, that your every act is divinely inspired, then forget about it and get on with your life!

But if you are feeling a touch of despair, this knowledge might just restore your faith and save your life.