

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Ki Tisa/Shabbat Parah 21 “Life from Death”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. Parshat Parah oftentimes falls on the same week as Parshat Ki Tisa, and for good reason. The midrash teaches that the Parah Aduma, the red heifer, brought atonement for the sin of the golden calf. In the words of the midrash, *The mother cleans up the mess of the child*. In that analogy, the red heifer is the mother, since it's older – it's a full grown cow, as opposed to the younger golden calf, the child. But how exactly does the red heifer atone for the golden calf transgression?

Another question the commentators grapple with is why Parshat Parah is among the 4 special readings we chant on Shabbatot, mostly during the month of Adar, and more specifically, why is it one of the 2 portions leading up to Pesach? The traditional explanation is that Parshat Parah serves to remind us that Pesach is approaching. But this explanation is based on the ancient requirement that we use the ashes of the Parah Aduma to purify ourselves prior to engaging in the korban pesach, the pascal lamb, which was the main course at the seder. In modern times of course, we don't eat the korban pesach at our seders, so we must wonder how the parah aduma remains relevant today.

In the introduction to my January class on the Coronavirus vaccine and halacha, I referred to a video class taught by Rabbi Asher Weiss shlit'a, a renowned posek in Israel, who sought to explain the words of our sages in the famous verse in Parshat Parah, *adam ki yamut baohel a person who dies in a tent*. The message they teach from this verse in meschet brachot 63b is: *ain divrei torah mitakymim ela bimi shemeimit atzmo aleha -- a person cannot really retain words of Torah unless he kills himself over them*. Some yeshiva students derived from these words that one must attend Yeshiva despite the danger of catching or transmitting the coronavirus, because of the injunction that one must kill oneself to study Torah. Of course, this is ridiculous. The sages teach that these words contain an **allegorical** lesson: Torah does not remain with us unless we **figuratively** kill ourselves over it, meaning we must work extremely hard in our studies.

But why do we learn this Torah lesson in Parshat Parah? What's the connection between Torah study and a corpse in a tent? I think this can be explained with the words of the Maharal Miprague, who teaches that impurity/tuma does not result from a physical encounter, like catching "cooties". It refers instead to the loss of our enormous potential in life. When you die, the potential that dies with you is such a powerful force, that it could spread throughout a building.

Similarly, if you want to be successful in Torah study, you must consider yourself like the corpse in the tent and understand the tremendous potential for life that Torah gives you. That is why Torah is known as Etz Chaim, the Tree of Life.

Sometimes, though, we are only struck by how much potential we all have when someone dies, and we realize what has been lost. Similarly, when we devote ourselves to the study of Torah, we don't always see results right away, but we need to remember that the potential is there. I think this is another message of Pesach found in this section. When I visited Egypt over 30 years ago, I couldn't help but notice the ubiquitous reminders of death – they mummified everything. The kabbalistic sources teach that the word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, begins and ends with the boxed letter *mem*, and the word means *narrow straits*, because when we were slaves in Egypt, there was no way out. Egypt idolized death – there was no exit strategy. That experience was necessary before the Jewish people could win genuine freedom and appreciate the life we found in the Torah we received after the Exodus. And that is another reason why the Parah Aduma reminds us of Pesach. The impurity of death which pervaded Egypt became the path toward freedom we were given on Pesach.

And that's how the Para Aduma is able to figuratively clean up the mess of the golden calf. Even a sin as monumental as the golden calf can be purified and thereby release the potential for life that emerges from the Parah Aduma of death.

During this entire year, living with Covid has meant facing the specter of death. Let us pray that along with the preparation and celebration of Pesach this year, we will emerge from the ashes of impurity of death into the purity of life. Shabbat shalom.