



KUNTRES

HAVINEINI



**פרשת
צו**

תשפ"ד

YEAR 2
ISSUE 69



SHIURIM OF

HARAV SHIMON
SPITZER SHLIT" A



לעילוי נשמת

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The Power of Parshas Parah

Purity Opens Gates of Wisdom

This year, along with *Parshas Tzav*, we will read *Parshas Parah*, the third of the four special readings that Chazal instituted as preparation for Purim and Pesach.

While we can read and learn *Parshas Parah*, unfortunately we cannot actually purify ourselves from *tum'as meis* with the *mayim chaim* that are mixed with the ashes of the *parah adumah*. This purification we're missing is not a trivial transformation. *Taharah* gives us the ability to understand and absorb the wisdom of Torah far more effectively than we can in our current state of *tum'ah*.

The Ramban writes in *Parshas Chukas* (19:17),

Because of our sins, we are *'temei'im*, contaminated by *galus*, and we have no concept of *taharas hakodesh*, purity of holiness... until He will shower us with a spirit from above, "*And Hashem will splash upon us the pure waters, and we will become pure.*"

My Heart Tells Me

It was obvious to the Ramban that without the purifying waters, it is not possible to understand the Torah in truth. The Chida (*Midbar Kedeimos* vol. 1, 26) writes something similar in his description of the Arizal.

My heart tells me that Eliyahu Hanavi purified the Arizal with the ashes of the *parah*, and this allowed him to acquire his understanding of Torah.

...If these tzaddikim needed the ashes of the *parah*, what can we, who are thousands and thousands of levels distant from them, answer?

However, the reading of *Parshas Parah* has the power to purify us to a certain extent. The *sefer Beis Aharon (Likutim)* states,

We believe with total *emunah* that by reading *Parshas Parah* we are purified so that each of us becomes able to receive the illumination and *kedushah* of Pesach, each in his own way.

Let us therefore try to delve into some aspects of *Parshas Parah*.

What Color Was the Parah Adumah?

This may sound like a silly question, but the answer is not as simple as you may imagine. Everybody knows *adumah* means red. Little schoolchildren are instructed to color the *parah adumah* in bright red.

In fact, *adumah* refers to the color brown.

Throughout the Torah, only four colors are mentioned: *shachor*, *lavan*, *adom*, and *yarok* – black, white, red, and green. All other colors fall into these four categories. The color we call brown is included in the color *adom*. Let's look at some of the examples that illustrate this.

In Zechariah we find the *pasuk* (1:8), רָאִיתִי הַלַּיְלָה וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ רֹכֵב עַל סוּס אָדָם – *I saw, tonight, and behold, a man was riding on a 'red' horse*. Is Zechariah describing a red horse? A comment of Rashi in *Maseches Bechoros* (6a) indicates otherwise. Rashi writes, "Most horses are *adumim*." Red is not a standard color for horses; on the other hand, brown is.

In *Maseches Sukkah* (35b) the Gemara speaks about an אתרוג דהגליד *אתרוג דהגליד* – *an esrog* whose outer skin was removed and it looks like a red date. Rashi explains, "Like a red date - After the *esrog* is peeled, it takes on an *admumis* color, like all peeled fruits." We all know that peeled fruits don't turn red, but brown. Ripe dates also are not red, but brown. Once again, we see that *adom* means brown.

The *Beis Yosef* writes (*Orach Chaim* 645), "In our regions a *davar adom* is often found on the inner side of the lulav. It joins the two halves of

the lulav, so that the top of the lulav looks like one branch with no separation.” Clearly, the *davar adom* described by the Beis Yosef is the substance we call *kora*. It is found on many *lulavim* and is always brown.

This leads us to the surprising conclusion that the *parah adumah* was not an unusual creature miraculously born with red hair. It was a type of reddish brown. In Texas, there is an entire breed of cattle with that coloring.

Why, then, did Chazal say that because of its rarity, the *parah adumah* was very expensive? You might recall the story of Dama ben Nesinah, the non-Jew who fulfilled the mitzvah of *kibbud av* and was rewarded by having a *parah adumah* born in his herd. The story tells us that the cow was worth a fortune. If it was simply a brown cow, why was it so valuable?

The answer is that there were many other requirements that made it difficult to find a true *parah adumah*. For example, if it had even two black hairs, or if it had been put to work at any time in its life, it would be disqualified.

Why This Shabbos?

Why do we read *Parshas Parah* on the Shabbos after Purim? The *sefer Chok Yaakov* quotes many Rishonim who explain that by reading *Parshas Parah*, we fulfill Chazal’s instruction, “We study the *halachos* of the upcoming *yom tov* thirty days beforehand.” Since it was necessary to be *tahor* in order to bring the *Korban Pesach*, we read the source of those *halachos* on the Shabbos that is within thirty days of Pesach.

Similarly, the *Sefer Hachinuch* (mitzvah 397) writes,

Parah adumah is very significant for our nation, for it purifies us from severe *tum’ah*, and without it, someone who is *tamei mes* would not be able to fulfill the very great mitzvah of *Korban Pesach*. (Therefore) the custom in all Jewish communities is to read this *parshah* every year on the Shabbos before *Parshas Hachodesh*.

D'Oraisa or D'Rabbanan

There is a well-known *machlokes* as to whether the obligation to read *Parshas Parah* is from the Torah or from Chazal. In the *Shulchan Aruch* (685:7) the *Beis Yosef* writes that it is a Torah obligation. However, many *poskim* disagree with him and say that it is *d'Rabbanan*.

The source of the *Beis Yosef* is a statement of Tosafos in *Maseches Megillah* (17b), "Reading the Torah is not *d'Oraisa* but *d'Rabbanan*; except for *Parshas Zachor* and *Parshas Parah*, which are *d'Oraisa*." This source is quoted by a variety of Rishonim. However, it presents us with a mystery. Where in the Torah did Tosafos and those Rishonim find the obligation to read *Parshas Parah*?

The *Aruch Hashulchan* writes,

In my humble opinion, there is a hint to this in the Torah, for in the middle of *Parshas Parah* (19:10) the *pasuk* says, וְהִיְתָה לְכִנִּי וְהִיְתָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם – *It will be for Bnei Yisrael and for the ger who dwells among them for an eternal law.*

The *Sifri* learns from the words לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם that the ashes of the *Parah Adumah* would make a person *tahor* even after the time of the *Beis Hamikdash*. In fact, we know that the *Amoraim* had such ashes. However, a few *pesukim* later (19:21), the Torah repeats the words לחוקת עולם. They seem to be extra. These words refer to the reading of *Parshas Parah* even in the future when we will no longer have the ashes of the *parah adumah*.

Words Instead of Korbanos

The Kozhnutzer Maggid, in his *sefer Avodas Yisrael*, finds another source for the *d'Oraisa* obligation of reading *Parshas Parah*. The *parshah* opens with the following two *pesukim*.

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֶהֱרֹן לֵאמֹר.
זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לֵאמֹר.

The word לאמר (*to say*) in the second *pasuk* seems to be

superfluous, since **לֵאמֹר** already appears in the first *pasuk*. This hints to the obligation to read *Parshas Parah mid'Oraisa*.

Even in our times, when we don't have the Beis Hamikdash and cannot prepare the *parah adumah* according to halachah, we must read the *parshah* ... **לֵאמֹר** – *to say*: the reading of the *parshiyos* will be in place of preparing the actual *parah adumah*.

With these words the Kozhnutzer Maggid is saying something new and surprising. Chazal explained the words of Hoshea, **וְנִשְׁלַמָּה פְּרִים שְׂפִתֵינוּ** – *Our lips will take the place of cattle* – Even when we can't actually bring *korbanos*, we can fill that gap by reciting (and studying) the *seder korbanos*. However, the *parah adumah* was not brought as a *korban*! It was a procedure for attaining *taharah* from the most serious forms of *tum'ah*. Yet, the Kozhnutzer Maggid teaches us that here as well, the reading of the *parshah* is in some ways equivalent to being purified by the waters of the *parah adumah*.

Hearts of Stone – Hearts of Flesh

Above, we quoted Ramban's statement that the *taharah* of the *parah adumah* enables the person to access and absorb more of the Torah's wisdom. The simple explanation is that *taharah* transforms a person into a pure vessel that is fit to receive Torah. However, there are also many sources teaching us that the ashes of the *parah* remove *orlas halev*, the covering of the heart. The spiritual "circumcision of the heart" removes the blockages, allowing us to internalize Torah in truth.

The *navi* Yechezkel describes this in the *haftarah* of *Parshas Parah* (Yechezkel 36:25-26).

וְזָרַקְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם מֵיִם טְהוֹרִים וְטָהַרְתֶּם מִכָּל טְמֵאוֹתֵיכֶם וּמִכָּל גִּלּוּלֵיכֶם אֲטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם.
וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חָדָשׁ אֶתֶּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִסְרֵתִי אֶת לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׂרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי
לָכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר.

I will sprinkle clean waters on you and you will be clean from all your impurities and from all your abominations I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh.

In the end of *Maseches Yoma*, while discussing the subject of atonement for sins, R. Akiva quotes this *pasuk*.

R. Akiva said, “Fortunate are you, Yisrael. Before Whom do you become pure? Who purifies you? Your Father in heaven; as it says in Yechezkel, וְזָרְקָתִי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיַּם טְהוֹרִים וְטָהַרְתֶּם.

And it says in Yirmiyahu (17:13), מְקוּהַ יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' - *Hashem is the mikvah of Yisrael*. Just as a *mikvah* purifies those who are *tamei*, so too, Hakadosh Baruch Hu purifies Yisrael.

These sources teach us that the pure waters cleanse us of our sins and remove the obstacles that prevent us from drawing close to Hashem and understanding His Torah. Sin contaminates us and *tum'ah* contaminates us, and the process of *taharah* cleanses us of both.

Rashi quotes Rabbi Moshe *HaDarshan*, who provides a parable to illustrate the power of the *parah adumah*.

This can be compared to the child of a maidservant who dirtied the king's palace. They said, “Let his mother come and wipe away the filth.” So too, let the *parah* (cow) come, and atone for the *eigel* (calf).

Once again, we see that the *parah adumah* brought about not only purity from *tum'ah* but also *kapparah* – atonement for sin.

Isn't It a Chok?

This parable leads many commentators to point out an apparent contradiction. On the *pasuk* in the beginning of *Parshas Parah*, זאת חוקת התורה, Rashi writes,

Because the *Satan* and the nations of the world harass Yisrael, demanding, “What is this mitzvah and what is its reason?” This is why the Torah calls it a חוקה – to say, “This is a decree from before Me, and you have no authority to question it.”

How can we reconcile this rule that we don't know the rationale behind the mitzvah of *parah*, with the parable of Rabbi Moshe *HaDarshan* that

describes the *parah's* purpose as cleansing Am Yisrael from the contamination of *cheit ha'eigel*? That seems to be a reason that we can all understand.

The *sefer Noam Elimelech* explains:

In the body, there are 248 limbs and 365 sinews. They correspond to the 248 positive mitzvos (*mitzvos asei*) and the 365 prohibitions (*mitzvos lo-saaseh*).

The *Satan* and the nations of the world constantly prosecute Am Yisrael, casting doubt on their fulfillment of all the mitzvos. They count the limbs and sinews of Am Yisrael and find none that correspond to this mitzvah. Therefore, they question its reason.

The answer is based on the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 4b),

“Yisrael were not on the level of such a sin (*cheit ha'eigel*); it was in order to teach people that *teshuvah* is always possible.”

The process of the *parah adumah* was established to teach us that *teshuvah* is effective even for wrongdoings of the nation as a whole. Chazal reveal that the sin itself only occurred so as to teach us about *teshuvah*, which is itself a *chok*.

Our very ability to do *teshuvah* for our *aveiros* is a *chok* that we cannot comprehend or explain. How can someone who wreaked destruction receive *kapparah* simply by regretting his transgressions? Indeed, Chazal teach us that “*Teshuvah* preceded the world.” That is why there is no limb or sinew that corresponds to *teshuvah*. The nations can't understand how *teshuvah* allows us to receive *kapparah* for our sins.

Rashi's two statements complement each other. The nations question the rationale behind the mitzvah of *Parah* and we respond that it comes to atone for the *cheit ha'eigel*. Then they ask us to explain how that can possibly work. It doesn't make sense. We can only answer: “את חוקת התורה – It is a decree of Hashem that we have no authority to question.” We simply benefit from the great gift of *taharah* and *teshuvah* that is contained in *Parshas Parah*.



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