

Parshiot Shemini - Parah 5774, 2014:

Thoughts on the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Chazal (our Sages of blessed memory) established the custom of reading four *parshiot*, in addition to the regular weekly Torah portions between Rosh Chodesh Adar and Rosh Chodesh Nisan. The third of these *parshiot*, and the one that we will be reading this week, is Parashat Parah. Fascinatingly, while Shlomo Hamelech (King Solomon) was the wisest man who ever lived and the master of all known *chachmah* (wisdom), the explanation of the *Parah Adumah* forever eluded his phenomenal intellect. This *mitzvah* defied his understanding because of its seemingly paradoxical nature: it ritually purifies the impure while simultaneously rendering the ritually pure impure. Even King Solomon could not solve this conundrum. It is a “riddle” that remains unsolved until our own time.

In addition to the mysterious nature of this *mitzvah*, we can add the following question: “Why did *Chazal* mandate the reading of this *parasha* specifically at this time of the year?” Basing himself upon Talmudic and other Jewish legal sources, the great Chafetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen of Radun, Poland, 1838-1933), suggests the following:

The third [special] portion to be read is Parashat *Parah Adumah*. It is read on the Shabbat prior to Parashat Hachodesh [the *parasha* wherein Rosh Chodesh was first commanded in reference to the month of Nisan]. This is because the ritual burning of the *Parah Adumah* first took place in the desert immediately prior to the month of Nisan. In this way, the Jewish people could be sprinkled with the purifying waters of the *Parah Adumah*

immediately after the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary) was established. [As a result,] they would be halachically pure [from any death-related ritual defilement] and thereby able to bring the Passover offering in its proper time. Therefore we read this *parasha* in order to pray before Him, may He be blessed, that He will also sprinkle the purifying waters upon us, soon [and in our days]. (*Mishnah Berurah* 285:1, subsection 1)

In sum, we read our *parasha* at this time as a reminder of what took place during the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert), and as a statement of yearning for the soon-to-be realized Messianic era when Hashem will, once again, sprinkle the purifying waters of the *Parah Adumah* upon us.

Just as there are special Torah readings between Rosh Chodesh Adar and Rosh Chodesh Nisan, there are also corresponding special *haftorah* readings. Each one of these *haftorot* focuses upon one of the themes presented in the special Torah reading with which it is paired. The *haftorah* portion for Parashat Parah is taken from *Sefer Yechezkel* 36. In this instance, the literary connection between our additional *parasha* and the *haftorah* is manifestly evident (verse 25): “And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; from all your impurities and from all your abominations will I cleanse you.” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) It is important to note, that this verse, like those that follow, refers to the time of *Mashiach*. I find the next two *pasukim* (verses) to be particularly fascinating and somewhat quizzical:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the heart of stone out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.
And I will put My spirit within you and bring it about that you will walk in My statutes and you will keep My ordinances and do [them].

What exactly is meant by the terms a “new heart and “a new spirit?” Then, too, what is this “heart of stone” that will be replaced by a “heart of flesh?” Moreover, what does it mean for Hashem to place His “spirit within” us in order that we should follow His

statutes and ordinances? How does this last notion impact upon the concept of *bechirah chafsheet* (man's free will)? These are just a few of the questions that these fascinating verses lead us to ask.

The Babylonian Talmud, in both *Berachot* 32a and *Succah* 52b, addressed some of these questions. Therein, Rabbi Hama in the name of Rabbi Hanina discussed how we, as a nation and as individuals, can stand before Hashem – even though there is no one who is completely free of sin:

R. Hama said in the name of R. Hanina: But for these three texts, the feet of Israel's enemies would have slipped. One is Whom I have wronged; a second, Behold as the clay in the potter's hand, so are ye in My hand, O house of Israel; the third, **And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.** R. Papa said: We learn it from here: **And I will put My spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.** (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, emphasis my own)

In order to understand this somewhat cryptic passage, it should be noted that “Israel's enemies” is a euphemism for Jewish people who have violated the Torah. Moreover, “The feet of Israel's enemies would have slipped” means that we need these *pasukim* “to come to our aid” when Hashem renders His ultimate judgment. As Rashi (1040-1105), in his commentary on *Talmud Bavli*, *Succah* 52b (s.v. *shalosha mikraot*) notes: “These verses testify that sins and merits are in G-d's control, as is the fundamental makeup of our hearts and minds.” He states this point even more forcefully in his glosses on *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 32a (s.v. *elmaleh shalosh mikraot halalu*): “These verses bear testimony that it is within the Holy One's power, blessed be He, to fix and remove the Evil Inclination (*yatzer harah*) within and from us.” In other words, these *pasukim* “remind” G-d that He built our inclination to sin into the very fabric of human nature. This is evidenced by mankind's descent into sin immediately prior to the Flood (*Sefer Bereishit*

6:5-6): “And the L-rd saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time. And the L-rd regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart.” Our verses in the *haftorah*, therefore, remind G-d that He created us with the capacity and desire to sin. As such, He, too, “must” take a certain amount of responsibility for our actions. If we are guilty for every manner and variety of sin, He, too, so to speak, is culpable, since He created us in this manner. While we surely cannot and must not absolve ourselves from our myriad sins, we none-the-less have a *pitchon peh* (an opening of a defense) for absolution, since Hashem created the *yatzer harah* within us (Rashi, *ibid.*, s.v. *nimotatoo*). As a result, we can legitimately call upon our Creator to mitigate His judgment against us when we stand before Him in judgment.

In addition, Rashi helps us understand some of the specific terms used in our passage from *Sefer Yechezkel*. He explains that a “new heart” refers to “An inclination (*yatzer*) that has been renewed for the better.” In other words, we will no longer be so totally at the mercy of the Evil Inclination. Instead, we will more likely be swayed in the direction of doing good rather than evil. I believe that Rashi’s interpretation can be extrapolated, as well, to include the idea of a “new spirit.” This means that mankind will recognize Hashem as the one and only G-d and be driven to serve Him in purity and truth.

This brings us to one of the major problems of the *haftorah*’s verses, namely, how do they correlate with the concept of *bechirah chafsheet*? At first glance, they seem to be in stark contradistinction to this fundamental principle of our faith. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) formulated this concept in the following fashion:

This matter [of there being a free will] is a very important principle, and is a support of the Torah and meritorious deeds, as it is written, "See, I have set before you on this day life and good, and death and evil." It is also written, "Behold, I set before you on this day a blessing and a curse." This is to say that one has the free will to do what one wants, whether it is good or bad. It is for this reason that it is written, "O that there were such a heart in them," i.e. the Creator does not force or decree upon anybody to do good or bad, but lets them choose. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 5:3*, O'Levy translation)

Maimonides further underscores the absolute nature of *bechirah chafsheet* in the following two laws (*ibid.*, 5:1-2):

One has a free choice to follow either the good ways and to be righteous, or to follow the bad ways and be wicked. The Torah says, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil," i.e. there is only one Mankind in the world and that there is no other type with respect to this matter. One should decide one's opinions and thoughts for oneself, whether they will be good or bad, and to do what one wants. Nobody can influence one to do good or bad...

Do not even consider what the ignorant peoples and most of the unthinking of Israel say, that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, decrees upon each person at the time of birth whether he will be good or bad. This is not so - every person has the potential to be as righteous as Moses our Teacher, or as wicked as Jeroboam, clever or stupid, merciful or cruel, miserly or noble, or indeed to possess any of the other temperaments. Nobody can force one, decree upon one, or lead one into one of the ways, but one should choose a way based upon his one's own free will...

I believe that we can rectify the seeming contradiction between Yechezkel's verses and the essential theological principle of free will in the following fashion: True, Hashem created us with the potential to sin. Yet, at the very dawn of human existence, He gave us the ability to conquer sin and emerge victorious. This is powerfully illustrated by G-d's words to Cain in *Sefer Bereishit* (4:6-7):

And the L-rd said to Cain, "Why are you annoyed, and why has your countenance fallen? Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, **but you can rule over it.**" (Emphasis my own)

Thus, even when G-d will give us a "new heart" and place His spirit within us, this will only diminish our likelihood for sinning. We will still have to "rule over it." In other words, we will continue to be challenged by our desires and longings, and, therefore, will need to exercise our *bechirah chafsheet* in order to fulfill Hashem's commandments.

There will be an important change, however - Hashem will join us in a new and glorious way. He will actively partner with us in perfecting the world in His Divine image, by lessening the impact of the *yetzer hara* upon us. Once again, He "... will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; from all your impurities and from all your abominations..." May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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