

Torah Insights

The Enigma Explained? פרה אדומה

In פרשת חקת, we read about the פרה אדומה. Our sages found this to be an enigma, a חוק, a law with no explanation.

According to the simple understanding, this would seem to be very rational. After all, death is the opposite of life; death is the negation of life. In מצרים the focus of their religion was usually on death. Judaism emphasized life! As such, it would seem reasonable to assume that death defiles. Any religious ceremony decreed by god to eliminate the defilement would be acceptable, be it the sprinkling of the ashes of a red heifer or a red herring mixed with mustard seed and water.

Our rabbis, therefore, explained the חוק to be the enigma that miraculously the ashes of the פרה אדומה are מטמא טמאים. At the same time, however, these same ashes are מטמא טהורים - that appears to be the ultimate contradiction.

מאיך גיסא, it appears quite understandable. Let us look at a similar scenario - one in which our rabbis were very much concerned with ritual purity: the status of the כהן גדול on יום הכיפורים in the בית המקדש. During this holy of holy days, he had to immerse himself in a מקוה five times during the day as well as wash his hands and feet in the כיוור five times (רחיצת ידים ורגלים) why?

The simple explanation is that we are concerned that the כהן גדול be ritually pure for each of the services he was performing on this day. When he woke up that morning, he was surely pure. Nevertheless, at the start of the holy day he would immerse himself in a מקוה; but why did he have to do so repeatedly? (Indeed, when he first immerses in the מקוה, he must have prepared for the highest level of קדושה.) An ordinary כהן performing the rituals on any other day need not use a מקוה repeatedly, even when he is covered with blood. Here may a deeper meaning here.

The answer could possibly be found in the psychology of the human being. Indeed, the כהן גדול encountered קדושה - holiness, throughout this day. He became keenly aware of his own inadequacy as a human; how can a mere mortal, the finite, approach God - the infinite, the אין סוף? He is asking God to forgive all the Jewish people. What an awesome responsibility! By immersing himself in the מקוה, by washing his hands and feet several times, he elevated himself after his thoughts of inadequacy invalidated his ability to represent the nation, similar to an ordinary כהן having thoughts of פיגול - extended time to eat a קרבן - particular sacrifice. Only in the area of temple worship can a foreign thought invalidate the action. Only with regard to temple service do we have a concept of מחשבה פוסלת - that a wrong thought invalidates and negates the worship service.

The מקוה especially, was the chief means of elevating himself to the level of קדושה - holiness, in a concrete way. This way of purifying himself, of elevating himself, throughout this holy day, allowed him to continue the special service of the day, to bring the various sacrifices and perform the rituals whenever he as an אין סוף would have thoughts of inadequacy as he encountered the אין סוף.

The opposite of קדושה is secular and mundane. The opposite of טהרה is טומאה - to move from one state to another required the water and פרה אדומה. עפר פרה אדומה is our concrete way of representing טהרה - holiness. Similarly with the פרה אדומה!

Yes, it is a חוק, that these ashes purify when mixed with מים חיים. But the כהן who prepares the ashes and is involved with קדושה - holiness, realizes his own shortcomings; his own human status of frailty and finiteness. He realizes he is unworthy of dealing With קדושה - holiness. Again, we encounter the concept פוסלת מחשבה - that a wrong thought can invalidate and negate a worship service. We acknowledge that it is God who purifies one who is contaminated - ה' מקוה ישראל - Each כהן knocks himself out of the box, as he deals with the red heifer or its ashes, with his thoughts of inadequacy! How can he effectuate the טהרה of another Jew? Only god can purify, not a mere mortal!

As such, he becomes "defiled" in the performance of each of the rituals, מטמא טהורים just like the כהן גדול when he encounters the infinite. He becomes טמא for the day - he also had a מחשבה פוסלת. Therefore, he has must immerse himself in a מקוה to once again realize the holy role he plays and so that he can once again become pure for tomorrow.

But one may ask, why did משה understand the enigma, and yet המלך שלמה could not? (According to the midrash, כ"ג קהלת - Ecclesiastes vii, 23, אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני - I said: "I will get wisdom, but it was far from me.")

משה was an משה האדם משה עניו מאד מכל האדם משה understands his place in the universe because he speaks to God face to face, he does not compare himself to other mortals, rather his yardstick is God Himself. Therefore he realizes how puny he is. By contrast, שלמה was raised from the time of his birth (maybe even from the time of his conception) as a prince in the Davidic dynasty. He built upon and expands his father's kingdom. He is the precursor of משיח צדקנו. Inadequacy is not in his lexicon. He could not grasp the concept, how a כהן might feel unworthy or inadequate, inadequate for the task. Surely he should be able to do God's bidding. Yes, even the wisest of men might not grasp everything.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov cites a midrash, based upon a verse in Zechariah, that in future when God purifies the nation of Israel with holy water, that the full understanding of the פרה אדומה will be understood. Maybe in our day of ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו, or אקבתא דמשיחא, or at least, an era when more Jews reside in the holy land than ever before, a time when there is more Torah learning than at any other time in our history, a time which so many צדיקים were not זוכה to see, it is a time that God has already purified us with מי הטאת and directed us to be a light unto the nations.

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