

Torah Insights

The High Priest on Yom Kippur and the Red Heifer – Is There a Connection?

On the Day of Atonement, Jews in the Temple were very concerned that the high priest perform the ritual service properly and obtain forgiveness on behalf of the nation. Our rabbis wanted to ensure his spiritual purity on this special day. During this holy of holy days, he had to immerse himself in a *mikveh* five times as well as wash his hands and feet in the laver five times - *WHY?* (Some people suggest that the high priest needed to attain ever higher levels of holiness. But, in reality the *mikveh* can only distinguish between defilement and purity – not different degrees of holiness.)

Simply put, we want the high priest to remain spiritually pure for each of the services he was performing on this day. Certainly at the start of the holy day he would immerse himself in a *mikveh*; but why did he have to do so repeatedly? An ordinary priest performing the rituals on any other day need not use a *mikveh* repeatedly, even when he is covered with blood. (Blood from the sacrifices does not contaminate in the Temple.)

Before addressing this question, one must remember the nature of the Temple service - *avodah*. It was unique! When a Jew performs a ritual, he/she may or may not have the proper mental intention - *kavanah*. But, when the priests brought sacrifices in the Temple, intent was critical. We find that in the Temple service *מחשבה פוסלת* – an improper thought can spoil the situation. So, too, on Yom Kippur, the high priest's a sacrifice that was placed on the altar for the wrong reason, individual, time, or place, would totally cancel the act, i.e., contaminating thoughts could cancel his desire to obtain absolution for us.

On this holiest of days we wanted the high priest to be on the highest moral and ethical level possible. The Jewish people wanted him to be pure and holy. We could not chance his sinking to a spiritual level where he would be unworthy of approaching God! There may yet be an even deeper meaning.

The high priest encountered holiness, throughout this day. As such, he became acutely aware of his own inadequacy as a human; how can a mere mortal, the finite, approach God - the Infinite? He is asking God to forgive all the Jewish people. What an awesome responsibility!

To move from "defilement" to purity, required that the high priest to become ritually pure - by bathing in the *mikveh*. This was the chief means of elevating himself to the level of holiness, in a concrete way (to pull himself up by his own bootstraps). Whenever the high priest encountered God he became aware of his own inadequacy. That contaminating thought of inadequacy, "knocking himself out of the box," required that he again purify himself. He had to raise his level of holiness (with the *mikveh* or the laver), so that he could once more approach the Divine. Purifying himself, 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. It reminded the high priest that, yes, I can plead with the Infinite on behalf of the

Jewish people.

Perhaps a comparison can be made to the ritual of the red heifer - *parah adumah*. it is a *chok*, a law with no explanation. When an individual became defiled by coming into contact with death, God ordained that to become ritually pure again, a priest would sprinkle the individual with water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer. The red heifer is the concrete way of representing holiness. It is a *chok*: that these ashes purify when mixed with water.

According to the simple understanding, it would seem to be very rational. After all, death is the opposite of life; death is the negation of life. It would appear reasonable to assume that death defiles. Any religious ceremony decreed by God to eliminate defilement would be acceptable - be it the sprinkling of the ashes of the red heifer or of a red herring mixed with mustard seed and water.

Our rabbis, therefore, explained the *chok*, the enigma, to be something else. The ashes of the red heifer somehow, miraculously, purify the contaminated and at the same time, these same ashes contaminate the pure - that appears to be the ultimate contradiction!

As with the high priest on the Day of Atonement, the priest who prepared the ashes and was involved with holiness, realized his own shortcomings, his own human status of frailty and finiteness. How could he effectuate the purification process of another Jew? He realized how unworthy he was to deal with holiness. He "knocked himself out of the box" with his thoughts of inadequacy! As such, he became "defiled" in the performance of any of the rituals, just like the high priest when he encountered the Infinite, and he had to immerse himself in a mikveh to once again realize the holy role he played and so that he could once again become pure.

from *UPDATE*, September 2005 revised September, 2008
by Rabbi Bennett M. Rackman

[Rosedale Weather Forecast, NY](#)

%s

HTTrack Website Copier - Open Source offline browser

Oops!...

This page has **not** been retrieved by HTTrack Website Copier.

Click to the link below to go to the online location!

[Donate](#)



[Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [History](#) | [Gallery](#) | [Torah Insights](#) | [Resources](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Contact Us](#)

International Synagogue

JFK International Airport

Terminal 4 - 4th Floor

Jamaica, NY 11430

International Synagogue © 2011

All rights reserved

Site by [Weblines Designs](#)