YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat CHUKAT**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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Dedicated in memory of Elisa bat Tsirelé *z”l*  
whose *yahrzeit* is 1 Tammuz  
By Family Rueff

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***Parashat Para* and the Greatness of Man**

Summarized by Aviad Brestel

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Chukat* opens with an entire section dedicated to the purification process, using the ashes of a red heifer, that a person must undergo after contracting ritual impurity through contact with a corpse*.* In the framework of this section, known as *Parashat Para*, the Torah also spells out the laws governing this type of impurity, with an emphasis on "tent impurity" – impurity contracted by a person who is under the same roof as a corpse.

On the face of it, this is a rather sad section, highlighting the weakness of man. Death is man's ultimate defeat, and it is not for nothing that *Kohelet* said: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (*Kohelet* 1:2). That same human powerlessness is expressed not only in death itself, but even in the purification from impurity contracted from the dead. *Chazal* (*Bamidbar Rabba* 19, 3) applied the statement of Shlomo, wisest of all men, "I said: 'I will get wisdom'; but it was far from me" (*Kohelet* 7:23), to the red heifer.

**Tent Impurity**

However, upon further consideration, it seems that precisely here lies a very optimistic message, which we can uncover through another question: On the face of it, the location of *Parashat Para* is a little surprising. After all, the other impurities that issue from the human body were discussed at great length in the book of *Vayikra* (in *Parashot Tazria-Metzora*). Why does impurity that is contracted through contact with a corpse appear here, so far from the other impurities?

It stands to reason that this separation is not accidental. The impurity contracted through contact with a dead person (and only that impurity) expresses the terrible tragedy of the termination of the relationship between God and the deceased, the cessation of standing before God. Therefore, a dead person transmits impurity not only through actual physical contact, like other impurities, but also in a "tent," that is, in the human and unnatural concept of "space." For the same reason, tent impurity applies only to Jews and not to Gentiles: only when there is a significant connection with God does its termination cause such consequences. Thus, although this impurity applies only in the tragic situation of death, the tragedy stems precisely from the power of man in his lifetime, when he stands before God.

**The Red Heifer**

A similar optimistic message also emerges from the purification process using the ashes of the red heifer. While *Chazal* do state that Shlomo said about it: "I said: 'I will get wisdom'; but it was far from me" (*Kohelet* 7:23), the *midrash* then continues:

Rabbi Acha said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: When Moshe ascended on high, he heard the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, who was sitting and dealing with the section of a red heifer, saying a *halakha* in the name of its author: "Rabbi Eliezer says a heifer is one year old, and a cow is two years old." He said before Him: Master of the universe, may it be Your will that he be of my offspring. He said to him: By your life, he will be of your offspring. This is what is stated: "And the name of the one [*ha-echad*] was Eliezer" (*Shemot* 18:4) – the name of that special one [*ha-meyuchad*]. (*Bamidbar Rabba Chukat* 19:7)

God "says a *halakha* in the name of its author" when "He deals with the section of the red heifer." Indeed, the meaning of the mitzva is not understood, and even the wisest of all men failed to understand its essence – but nevertheless, God Himself studies not tractate *Para* of "the heavenly academy" (see *Bava Metzia* 86a), but rather tractate *Para* of the *Tannaim*, found on earth.

**"Scant Scriptural Basis and Many Laws"**

The human strength that finds expression specifically in regard to tent impurity emerges in another context as well:

A *Tanna* taught: [The laws concerning defilement through] leprosy-signs and tent-covering have scant Scriptural basis and many laws. [You say] leprosy-signs have scant Scriptural basis? [On the contrary] leprosy-signs have considerable Scriptural basis! Rav Papa said: It means as follows: Leprosy-signs have considerable Scriptural basis and few laws; [defilement through] tent-covering has scant Scriptural basis and many laws. But what practical difference does it make? If you are in doubt about anything concerning leprosy-signs, search the Bible, but if you are in doubt about anything concerning [defilement through] tent-covering, search the Mishna. (*Chagiga* 11a)

Rav Papa explains that tractate *Nega'im* – which deals with the impurities that emerge from the human body – has considerable Scriptural basis but few laws, whereas tractate *Ohalot* has scant Scriptural basis but many laws. In other words, if leprosy expresses man's weakness, the impurity that is contracted from contact with a corpse expresses his strength, both with respect to the meaning of the impurity – the fact that man is connected to God during his lifetime, as explained above – and with respect to the fact that it is precisely with regard to that impurity that the Oral Law left him space in which to distinguish himself. What we have here is not only human strength and connection to God, but also partnership with God in the development of the Torah.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on *Shabbat Parashat Chukat* 5778.]