YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Vayakhel-para**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Morris Ray and Amelia Ray

On the occasion of their *yahrzeits*

By their children Patti and Allen Ray

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**The Role of the Red Heifer**

Translated by David Strauss

Who needs a *para aduma*, a red heifer, when the Temple is not standing? We seem to be managing quite well without it, despite the fact that we are all ritually impure as a result of having come into contact with a corpse. Do we have need of a *para aduma* today?

The truth is that this question can be raised not only regarding our own times, but even regarding the days of the Temple, when the sacrificial service was still in place. It is possible to envision an alternative reality in which not all of Israel would be pure, and yet the Temple would continue to function. A directive could be issued to sequester all the priests, and thus keep them from coming into contact with a corpse. As long as the priests refrain from touching a human corpse or an animal carcass, we could manage quite well with the rest of Israel remaining in a state of impurity. The priests would operate the Temple systems, offering sacrifices and taking full responsibility for the Divine service.

In fact, such a commandment exists for the High Priest, with a similar purpose:

He shall not go in upon [i.e., where there is] any dead body; he shall not defile himself for his father or for his mother. (*Vayikra* 21:11)

There are cases where we take extra precautions in order to maintain continuity of the Divine service. We keep the High Priest away from the dead so he can function without interruption, and we could have proposed a similar prohibition for all priests, allowing the rest of the people to contract ritual impurity and simply remain in that state. There would then have been no need for the complicated mechanism of the *para aduma*. Some of the priests would occasionally become ritually impure despite precautions, but for the most part, their fellow priests would be able to replace them in their duties. Of course, such an approach would require us to be particularly meticulous with the priests and maintain careful policies, such as exempting all priests from the laws of a *mitzva-*corpse, so that they could continue serving in the Temple.

In fact, already in *Parashat Ki-Tisa*, we find hints of a similar idea. God proposes that He will reconstitute the Jewish people as the seed of Moshe, from the tribe of Levi. It would not be necessary for all of us to serve God; rather, we would have representatives to act on our behalf in the religious sphere. We would not have three patriarchs, but four – Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Levi. The Rambam says in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* that even in Egypt, the Levites did not worship idols, unlike the rest of the Israelites.

What would be wrong with establishing a select group to conduct the worship of the entire nation?

There is an interesting anomaly in the law of the *para aduma*, to which *Chazal* connected (*Yoma* 14a) Shlomo’s words: "I said: ‘I will get wisdom’ – but it was far from me" (*Kohelet* 7:23). The *para aduma* does indeed purify the impure, but it also defiles the pure – the person who sprinkles its ashes. Although this is a weaker impurity that lapses in the evening, it seems we have a mysterious paradox here, aggravated by the verses in *Yechezkel* that describe the redemption:

And I will sprinkle pure water upon you, and you shall be pure; from all your impurities, and from all your idols, I will purify you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit will I place within you; and I will take away the stony heart from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will place My spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My ordinances, and do them. And you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and you shall be My people, and I will be your God. (*Yechezkel* 36:25-28)

Had it not been for an explicit verse, it would have been impossible to say this – but it seems that, in a manner of speaking, God becomes defiled when He purifies Israel: if God sprinkles purifying water upon Israel, the inevitable result will be His own defilement!

The Torah comes to convey the message that for every problem and crisis there is a solution. Sometimes that solution requires sacrifice or effort, but it is always possible to find it. One might have thought that impurity would be an irreversible status, for an encounter with the dead is not easily forgotten. Nonetheless, the Torah teaches that any impurity can be purified – though it may come at the cost of the defilement of those handling the heifer.

The prophecy of Yechezkel comes to convey a similar message from a different angle: even the shame of exile and the destruction of the Temple can ultimately be rectified. It is true that the effort and the difficulty will be great, but the *para aduma* teaches us that anything is possible. Of course, such an approach would necessitate a foregoing of the attribute of justice to some extent. According to the standards of strict justice, the Jewish people have already incurred the penalty of exile, and by rights, they should suffer forever. Nevertheless, God is willing to forego His right and return Israel to their land, if they repent.

It would be interesting to examine the sin of Adam in light of our discussion. Is it possible that in the end, the death penalty that was imposed on mankind will also be mitigated? We say every day, and the Rambam defines it as one of the fundamental tenets of faith, that ultimately there will be a resurrection of the dead; we can find references to this resurrection in *Yechezkel*. It may eventually be possible, after much repentance and effort, that even the sin of Adan will be rectified.

For man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. (I *Shmuel* 16:7)

It is difficult to understand how God runs the world. Shmuel taught us that it is impossible for human eyes to see the reality from God's perspective. The Gemara in *Yoma* asks why Shaul lost his kingship after one sin, while David sinned twice yet still did not lose his kingship – and even received a promise that his dynasty would be eternal. It seems the answer is that one must distinguish between the human perspective and the Divine perspective. This is precisely the novelty of the red heifer: while on the human level, the impurity cannot be rectified, God can rectify any error and forgive any sin.

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)