

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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HaShem's Inscrutable Ways & the Para Aduma

There is a strange confluence of themes between our Parsha and this special Shabbat of Parah. Parshat Para is read in the weeks preceding Pesach to remind us that to participate in the redemptive blessing of the Exodus festival, we must first engage in an act of purgation; we must purify ourselves from those contaminating influences that alienate us from HaShem. However, when we examine the details of the Para Aduma (Bamidbar 19:1-22), the only impurity of which the Torah speaks is the uncleanness a human corpse transmits (TUM'AT MEIT). Other than the halachic requirement - in the Temple era - to be cleansed from this defilement in order to partake of the Korban Pesach, what significance does this chapter have for us?

In our Parsha, in the wake of the Golden Calf sin, Moshe pleads with Gd to forgive the People. In the course of Moshe's entreaties, he petitions HaShem, "... Pray, let me know Your ways, so that I may know You ..." (33:13). The Talmud (B'rachot 7a) explains exactly what Moshe was

requesting: "Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?" To this impenetrable question of theodicy, Gd responds, "... You will not be able to see My face, for man shall not see Me and live" (33:20). Rav Soloveitchik attempts to unravel the unspoken meaning behind this puzzling dialogue. The People had just experienced the dizzying events of the Exodus and Revelation at Sinai. They beheld unimaginable miracles and felt the warm fatherly Presence of the Shechina caring for their every need in the desert. And then, they plummet into the sin of the Golden Calf with its debauchery and rebelliousness. The sheer cacophony of events baffled and frightened Moshe. How to make sense of it all? How could he be an effective leader under these bewildering circumstances?

HaShem responds by disclosing to Moshe a fundamental religious perspective on life. Gd's involvement in the affairs of man is not always discernable during the unfolding of present events. It is only after HaShem passes and we see His back (33:22-23), as it were, that His inscrutable wisdom begins to become clear. The "crucible of afflictions" (Yeshayahu 48:10) and the "iron furnace of Egypt" (D'varim 4:20) were necessary to purge the Nation and enable them to receive the Torah. And the subsequent sin of the EIGEL HAZAHAV - its punishment and Gd's

forgiveness - would all provide powerful lessons for imperfect man's struggle against his demons and the amazing efficacy of t'shuva - repentance. All this, we gratefully perceive, but only with a backward glance as we ponder the lessons of Gd in history. (See Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sh'mot pp. 301-305)

The chapter of the Para Aduma deals with the mind-defying and enigmatic reality of death. As the Rav put it: "Death is the mocking fate which awaits us all, a trauma of human helplessness which disturbs our existential serenity... We wonder, why should the foremost of Gd's creations have an awareness of his mortality and, therefore, live in constant dread and distress in face of its inevitability?" (Man of Faith, p.102). The mystifying water/ashes of the Para Aduma ritual reveal to man that the real cleanser of the morbid state induced by threatening death is Gd Himself! It is only our indomitable belief in the immortality of the soul that consoles man with the knowledge that death is a transition, not a termination. And while death cannot be defeated - only the Almighty is the ultimate conqueror of death - Gd commands and insists that we ourselves be engaged in the day-to-day struggle with death to deflate its boldness and aggressiveness (ibid, pp. 107-09). Paradoxically, it is our very mindfulness of death that can

catapult us to heights of undreamt accomplishment and greatness even within the limits of our own mortal existence.

Do we understand this absurdity of death? Can we fathom the inscrutability of Gd's ways? Moshe understood - as we must - that only with time, patience and faith do the often-painful imponderables of life slowly give way to sympathetic understanding and deep appreciation. Believing that HaShem has and will never abandon us, and that in the eternity of time, the beautiful tapestry of all of existence will be revealed - this truth can give us the courage to confront our many challenges and prevail. And when the profound meaning in this great and sacred adventure is ultimately apprehended, our steadfast trust in HaShem's omniscience will be wonderfully vindicated!

And so, we push forward, driven by the conviction that, "In the end, to fear Gd and obey His commandments is the very essence of man's mission" (Kohelet 12:13). Within that religious/ethical mandate, the "world can be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty" (the Aleinu prayer). And it is this eschatological belief that can embolden and strengthen us to surmount and defeat come what may, and in that great struggle, rightly redeem the many years of life that HaShem has granted us. 🙌