

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



MYSTERY OF MYSTERIES

Chukat

Just like last week, our Torah reading begins with an issue which many commentaries claim is out of chronological order. Last week the assertion was that Korach's rebellion took place when the Mishkan was dedicated and the firstborns were displaced. This week we begin with the laws of the PARA ADUMA, the Red Heifer, which some authorities believe also belongs back at that dedication, when it is believed Moshe Rabbeinu prepared the first PARA ADUMA. I disagree, as I shall discuss presently. The PARA ADUMA rules belong here because of the narrative material which will come next, which is the real issue of our Torah reading.

Before I explain why I believe so strongly that PARA ADUMA belongs right where we find it, I must digress for a very big issue. Jewish tradition goes absolutely bananas over the great mystery of this practice. Even Shlomo HaMelech, wisest of humans, was stymied by its abstruseness. It's

called CHUKAT HaTORAH, the unfathomable decree.

Why is it any more mysterious than other CHUKIM, like KASHRUT or SHAATNEZ? Well, rabbis claim that this enigma is greater because the dissolved ashes make the impure pure, and make the pure kohen impure. Really!?! That what bothers the rabbis? I think prohibition of the liquid from Kosher mammals (milk) to be used with its flesh (meat) is at least as unfathomable. Milk and meat always coexist in cows, why not on my dining room table?

Rashi famously declares that SATAN and the world ridicule the Jews over PARA ADUMA, and, therefore, we must console ourselves with the idea that this is a decree from God, and must be followed without cavil. But, even though there's a Midrashic story about Rebbe Yochanan answering the derision of a pagan over the practice, in the recorded history of Antisemitism there aren't attacks based on this practice. And in more recent times, the idea of oppositional pairs (like pure v. impure) seem normative to anthropologists. So, what's the deal the perplexity of this practice?

Here's where the context becomes crucial. These complicated instructions about purifying those who come

into contact with the dead precede chapter 20 which describes the return to movement in the desert after the long lay over in Kadesh Barnea. All of the travels in the desert (beginning in chapter 11) bring disaster. We resume this leg of the journey with the death of Miriam, and the subsequent loss of the miraculous well. This precipitates the incident with hitting the rock which resulted in the almost immediate death of Aharon, and the death sentence of Moshe Rabbeinu. These last months of travel were, apparently, when the bulk of those who left Egypt died. That's the real conundrum, enigma and riddle: Death!

During the 16 years that I worked in a synagogue, far and away the most common issue for questions about Halacha had to do with death and mourning. People wanted to know about the rituals, even those who weren't strictly observant. But they really wanted to talk about death.

The Sforno understood: I believe the hidden meaning of this regulation is that anyone who has been in too close contact with the vanities (meaninglessness and temporary nature) of the terrestrial universe automatically will confer some of the pollution represented by these vanities to sacred things he comes

into contact with. He will therefore taint the TZELEM ELOKIM, the Divine image in which he has been created. Contact with the dead, results in an awareness of the transience of the lives of all of us, makes us aware of the negative aspects of our lives in this world; this is bound to leave a mark on our psyche, one that may even border on considering life on earth as an exercise in futility (excerpt from his, uncharacteristically, long comment on our verse).

These complex rituals surrounding death crucially provide an opportunity to busy ourselves at this painful and challenging time. We not only mourn the departure of the loved one; we mourn our own mortality.

The words of Rav Yoel bin Nun help me bear the enormity of the difficult dilemma of death: Among us mortals, when there are no words to express the magnitude of a trauma, words begin to flow. In the Torah, when there are no words to express the death of the generation of the wilderness - there truly are no words... (but) A 'PARA ADUMA without a blemish' is also perfectly red on the outside. It is completely red both inside and out! The PARA ADUMA represents a perfect world, in which inside and outside are one, where 'the taste of the tree is exactly the same as that of

the fruit' (Rashi, B'reishit 1:11), a world in which there is no weathering, no destruction, and no death!

Our confusion and consternation over the Red Heifer are just a displacement of our inability to fathom our own mortality. We truly believe in our immortal soul, while we truly observe death. Rav Soloveitchik famously said that Jews must live with paradox. That's also how we must die. 