

## Heifer-Therapy

No matter how well-prepared we are, mentally and emotionally, for the inevitable loss of a close relative or a dear friend, when death strikes, we experience shock, grief, disbelief, and anger. We don't understand how can the world move on, functioning efficiently as if nothing happened, as if our lives have not been changed irreversibly. Death tears pages and pieces from our mental photo album, and each memory of a wonderful moment with a loved one floods us with pain as we realize that we will never have such a moment again. Some people are afraid to love, lest they suffer the loss of loved ones, and some reject being loved, not wanting to hurt others when they are gone. Most dangerously, long-lasting grief leads to depression and indifference, causing a person to either withdraw from the world or to act carelessly and even violently towards others, as he feels that there is no meaning to one's life and actions.

In biblical times, this problem was addressed by the strange ritual of the red heifer, which was meant to bring back the mourner from depression to hope and from indifference to excitement about new possibilities. The Torah, of course, does not use these terms, but rather speaks of a transition from impurity to purity. Rabbis today attend to mourners, visit and comfort them, and impart words of wisdom to soothe their pain. They try to answer their questions, and reestablish a channel of communication between them and God. In the past, the priest was the person who led the mourner back into normal, communal life, and he lent this emotional and moral support through a deeply symbolic ritual.

The priest takes a young, wholesome red heifer which has never carried a burden. He slaughters it and burns it to ashes, together with cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool. When purifying the impure person, the priest puts some ash in a vessel, pours on it fresh water, and sprinkles the water on the person on the third and seventh day of the purification cycle. At the end of the process that person is declared pure, while the priest is rendered impure for one day.

The ritual of the red heifer was meant to help the mourner cope with the loss, by first vindicating his pain and grief, and then leading him on a path of acceptance and recovery, culminating in a resolution to take on life with renewed positive energy. The priest would not treat patients as numbers nor groups, but would rather take the time to talk to each candidate for purification and assist him with this biblical therapy.

An abstract concept represented by a physical object is brought closer to our senses and is made easier to internalize and retain. For that reason, the elements of the red heifer ritual are deeply symbolic:

*“...a red heifer, without blemish, on which no yoke has been laid”*

The Hebrew word for heifer, פרה, represents vitality, strength, and fertility. The red color represents blood, the liquid of life, as well as beauty, strong emotions and desire. The heifer is young, healthy and wholesome, and it has never carried a yoke. All these elements conjure a picture of a person who died at his prime, without a chance to fulfill his dreams and realize his potential. The priest vindicates the feeling of the mourner that a great injustice has been done, by slaughtering the heifer and burning it to ashes, as a reenactment of the tragedy that befell the one whom the mourner is grieving for.

*“...take cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool, and throw them into the fire consuming the heifer”*

The mighty cedar and the lowly hyssop represent the two extremes of society and the notion that death is the great equalizer. Dyed wool symbolizes our efforts to convey importance by wrapping ourselves with precious garments.

*“...take from the **dust**... and place it in a vessel, and shall then pour on it live water”*

The dust is placed in a bowl and water is poured on it. This symbolizes the need to allow water, the power of life, to overcome the feeling of despair and hopelessness, and to restart a cycle of growth and development. The physical act of sprinkling water on the person serves as a refreshing wakeup call: don't let the sorrow pull you down! For the sake of your loved ones, cling on to life, climb back from the abyss and march on, honoring the memory of the departed by bring goodness to the world. This transformation is gradual and subtle, and it is insinuated by a miniscule change in the name of the therapeutic tonic from אפר to עפר.

### **Ashes to Ashes or to Dust?**

In the beginning of the ritual the Torah refers to ashes, but when the purifying tonic is prepared, it speaks of dust. The message to the newly purified person is that the long process of healing and recovery starts with one small step, as small as the difference in Hebrew between Aleph and Ayin. This minute difference is life-changing, because while nothing can grow in ashes, dust, with the aid of live water, can sprout new life. The phrase which the Torah and the priest would want the mourner to remember is not “ashes to ashes” which speaks of the finality of the physical world, but “from dust you are and to dust you shall return”. There is a cycle, people are born and people die, and while there is nothing we can do to stop death, there is a lot we can do to enhance the quality of life, enjoy it and bring joy to others.

At the end of this process, the mourner is pure and ready to go back to life, while the priest is rendered impure for one day as a result of his encounter with death's aftermath, an encounter which depleted his reserves of spiritual energy.

There is great comfort in knowing that the Torah cared about those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and that it has provided them with a staff to lean on. I find solace in the realization that the green pastures, the still waters and the overflowing cup are ours to draw strength from in this world.

We read the description of the red heifer's ritual – Parashat Parah, before the month of Nissan, with which arrive Passover and the story of the Exodus, to remind us that we want to be redeemed, that the world is imperfect and we can make it better. However, whereas the Exodus was brought about miraculously, this time it is up to us. We should cure ourselves from our spiritual impurity of despair and apathy, and start our journey, our pilgrimage to redemption, by embarking on a path of positive actions, loving ourselves and extending love to others.

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