



Solving the Mystery

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Parashat Hukat 5779

Parashat Hukat opens with the ritual of the *parah adumah*, the red heifer. When a person has had contact with the dead,¹ they are considered impure—*tamei meit*. This designated animal is burnt and its ashes are mixed with water which is then used to purify anyone who was affected by this impurity. This ritual is considered to be one of the most mystifying of the Torah and one of the most challenging *mitzvot* to understand. This is in large part because any person who is part of the process of producing these purifying waters themselves become impure, though the water itself is a purifying agent. Why is this so? Solving this “mystery” of how a pure person becomes impure in the process of removing someone else’s impurity will teach us about what it means to truly invest in, and sacrifice for, someone else. It will also encourage us to recognize and appreciate the invisible investments and sacrifices that we benefit from.

Midrash Tanhuma articulates what makes the *parah adumah* procedure so confusing:

מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ז

רבי יהושע דסכנין בשם רבי לוי אמר, ארבעה דברים יצר הרע משיב עליהם, וקתיב בהן חקה. ואלו הן, אשת אח, וכלאים, שער המשתלח, ופרה אדמה. אשת אח, דקתיב: **ערוֹת אשת אחיך וגו'** (ויקרא יא:טז). מת בלא בנים, **יבמה יבא עליה** (דברים כה:ה). וקתיב בעריות, **ושמרתם את חקותי ואת משפטי** (ויקרא יח:ה). וכלאים, דקתיב: **לא תלבש שעטנז** (דברים כב:יא). סדין בציצית, מתר. וקתיב בה חקה, **את חקתי תשמרו בהמתך לא תרביע כלאים וגו'** (ויקרא יט:ט). שער המשתלח, דקתיב: **והמשלח את השעיר לעזאזל יכבס בגדיו** (ויקרא טז:כז), והוא עצמו מכפר על אחרים. וקתיב בה, **והיתה זאת לכם לחקת עולם** (שם פסוק לד). פרה אדמה מנין? דתנן: **כל העוסקין בפרה מתחלה ועד סוף, מטמאין בגדים**. והיא גופה מטהרת בגדים, וקתיב בה חקה, **זאת חקת התורה**.

¹ A person does not need to actually touch a corpse in order to contract impurity, there are more indirect ways to become *tamei* such as being in the same enclosed structure with the dead, *tum'at ohel*.



Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukkat 7

R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin said in the name of R. Levi: There are four things that the evil inclination² challenges [as being contrary to logic] and regarding each of them the term hukkah (law) is written. These are: (1) the wife of one's brother, (2) mixed materials, (3) the scapegoat, and (4) the red heifer. (1) The wife of one's brother, as it is written: **The nakedness of your brother's wife [you may not uncover]** (VaYikra 11:16),³ but if [the brother] dies without children [then] **her brother-in-law shall come to her** (Devarim 25:5).⁴ And about improper sexual encounters it says, **you shall observe My laws (hukkotai) and statutes** (VaYikra 18:5). (2) Mixed materials, as it is written: **Do not wear sha'atnez [wool and linen together]** (Devarim 22:11), but a [linen] garment with [wool] fringes is permitted! And about it is written, **you shall observe My laws (hukkotai) do not mate mixed species of animals** (VaYikra 19:19). (3) The scapegoat, as it is written: **The one who sends the goat to Azazel should wash his clothes** (VaYikra 16:26), but it itself atones for others. And about it is written, **this shall be for you a permanent law (hukkat)** (VaYikra 16:34). How do we know that this is the case regarding the red heifer? As it is taught:⁵ *All who engage with the heifer, from the beginning to the end, are impure to the level where it affects their clothing.* But [the cow] itself purifies clothing. And about it hukkah is written, **this is the law (hukkat) of the Torah** (BeMidbar 19:2).

R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin presents four *mitzvot* that seem to defy logic. In the first two examples, levirate marriage and wearing *sha'atnez*, he points out that a mixture or liason which is usually explicitly forbidden can in some cases become permitted or even commanded!⁶ How can something be both a core violation and an essential *mitzvah*?! In the second two examples, the scapegoat and the *parah adumah*, the item which is supposed to bring expiation, cleansing, and purification ends up having the opposite effect for anyone who engages with it too closely. What R. Yehoshua is looking for and not finding in these hukkim is consistency—is this act considered harmful or is it considered beneficial? Is this material purifying or putrefying?

Although R. Yehoshua does not distinguish between the four examples that he brings, the

² In other parallel sources, the term "*satan*" is used. Though the term *yetzer hara* often refers to a person's impulse to follow their own desires and transgress, here it appears to be the element of a person's psyche or soul which encourages a person to separate themselves from God.

³ That is, be intimate with her.

⁴ This refers to the laws of *yibbum*, levirate marriage. According to the Torah, if a man dies without an heir, his brother must marry the widow of the deceased. Her first child with the surviving brother is considered the child of the deceased and his rightful heir. If one does not want to or cannot do *yibbum*, then one does *halitzah*, the ceremony of release. Nowadays only *halitzah* is practiced.

⁵ Mishnah Parah 4:4.

⁶ Though R. Yehoshua of Sakhnin does not cite this, it is also the case that *sha'atnez* can be commanded, not just permitted, as the clothing of the *kohanim* was made out of wool and linen. See Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Kelei Mikdash 8:13.



latter two examples—the purifying object which itself renders things impure—has a readily available explanation. Purity and impurity are not absolute categories like forbidden and permitted; they are states that people and objects can enter into and escape from. When a human being contracts impurity, it is a temporary state that needs to be remedied, a stain that needs to be cleansed. Death touches us all and we all come in contact with the impurity it imparts. But unlike death, impurity is a state which is impermanent. The exceptions to otherwise ironclad prohibitions in the cases of *tzitzit* or levirate marriage are baffling because, when something is forbidden, we assume that it is “bad” or “wrong,” and therefore should be forbidden in all circumstances. Ritual impurity, on the other hand, is more dynamic—it travels; it comes and goes; it is absorbed and it is removed.

When we pay attention to this quality of impurity we are able to understand the “mystery,” the *hok*, of the *parah adumah* and reveal that it is actually quite intelligible. To illustrate: If I have a dirty floor that I would like to clean, I take a mop and a pail full of clean soapy water. After I am done mopping, the floor is clean and the pail of water is now dingy and disgusting. But I do not ask R. Yehoshua from Sakhnin’s question: “How could it be that soapy water which cleans has now itself become unclean?!” because I understand that the water in the pail has absorbed the dirt from the floor. When something is cleaned or purified, the defilement doesn’t disappear—it is transferred. The person who leads the scapegoat absorbs some of the impurity that is associated with bearing sin. The *kohanim* who prepare the ashes and the sanctifying water of the red heifer are absorbing the *tum’ah* (impurity) that is being taken away from the people they are purifying.

This awareness is subtly reflected by a different passage in Midrash Tanhuma:

מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ח

ומפני מה כל הקרבנות זכרים ונקבות, וזו נקבה? אמר רבי איבו: משל למה הדבר דומה? לכן שפחה שטנף פלטרין של מלך. אמר המלך, תבוא אמו ותקנח את הצואה. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, תבא פרה ותכפר על מעשה העגל.

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukat 8

Why is it that all of the sacrifices can be male or female [animals] but [the red heifer] must be a female? R. Ibbo said: A parable—to what is this similar? To the son of a maid who dirtied the palace of the king. The king said: Let his mother come and clean the excrement. So said the Holy Blessed One: Let the heifer come and atone for the action of the calf.

The calf that is referred to in the *midrash* is the Golden Calf which was worshipped by the

people and is considered to be the primary and paradigmatic sin that *Benei Yisrael* committed. This sin has a putrefying effect on the people, inhering in them and needing to be purged.⁷ According to this *midrash*, purification is analogous to, or perhaps even synonymous with, the cleaning of filth. The mess that was made by the child—the calf—is cleaned up by the mother—the fully grown cow. Although the mother is not at fault, she does the cleaning. Similarly, though the Kohen is not at fault, the Kohen does the cleaning.⁸

We often translate the word *het* חטא as sin, which obscures an aspect of its meaning which is connected to defilement. Some Hebrew verbs take on a specific meaning and that meaning's exact opposite. For example the root ש,ר,ש when conjugated in the simple form, *lishrosh*, לשרש means to plant. However, when it is conjugated in the intensive case, *leshareish*, לשרש it means to uproot.⁹ Similarly, we see from the description of the *parah adumah* ritual that the root ט,ט,ח when written in the intensive case means to cleanse, so it follows that when it is written in the simple form, it signifies becoming sullied:

במדבר יט:יט

וזהו הטמא על הטמא ביום השלישי וביום השביעי וְחָטְאוּ בַיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי וְכַבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָהַר בְּעֶרְבֵי:

BeMidbar 19:19

And the pure [person] should sprinkle on the impure [person] on the third day and on the seventh day, and he will cleanse him (*hit'to*) on the seventh day. And he will launder his clothes, and wash his body in water, and be pure in the evening.

In this verse, it is clear that we have three types of cleaning: the sprinkling of the cleaning agent, the *mei hat'at*, which offers spiritual cleansing, then the laundering of the clothes, and lastly bathing of the body, which provides a physical cleanse. The Torah's narration of the ritual itself emphasizes water, laundering, and cleaning and calls our attention to the fact that the purification mechanism is a type of washing away sin, death, and their effects. When we insist that the cleansing is an incomprehensible ritual, we deny this sacrifice on the part of the

⁷ See Zohar II, 237a.

⁸ And, perhaps one of the reasons why the Kohen does the cleaning is not only because he is an atonement and cleaning professional, like the mother in the story is a maid, but because he is from the tribe of Levi. On the one hand, Aharon was uniquely responsible in constructing the Golden Calf, so the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) does not wear gold in the inner sanctum of the Temple because of the principle that “a prosecutor cannot serve as a defense attorney” the presence of gold is condemnatory and can't be involved in atoning for this sin. See Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 26a. However, the rest of the tribe of Levi are singled out by the Torah as being uniquely uninvolved with the worshipping of the calf. See Shemot 32:26.

⁹ There is a similar phenomenon in English where there are some words that contain opposite meanings, e.g. to cleave.

servants of God who are cleaning up the mess that we have made.

The mechanism of the *parah adumah* is not hard to understand because we have all seen rags, sponges, and mops become dirty in the process of making our counters, dishes, and floors clean. It is dangerous to insist that this ritual is mystifying because, the more we say that we don't understand how the purifier can become impure, the more we obscure the hard work of the cleaner and the person who themselves absorbs the dirt. The *kohanim* are generally not allowed to become impure,¹⁰ and if they do, they cannot perform their duties in the sanctuary, the *mikdash*, and cannot eat their holy food. When the *kohanim* purify the people, they are giving up the purity that they have worked so hard to maintain so that regular people, whose needs for purity are less, can become clean and have access to the *mikdash*. And we consistently ignore, or even deny, this great sacrifice in our interpretation of this procedure.

It is no coincidence, then, that the laws of the *parah adumah* are followed by the death of our prophetess, Miriam, who was underappreciated in her lifetime:

במדבר כ:א-ב, ה

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר צֵן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמֶת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם: וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהְלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן: ... וְלָמָּה הָעֲלִיתֶנּוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַבְיִיא אֶתֵּנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה הָרָע הַזֶּה לֹא מָקוֹם זֶרַע וַתֵּאָנֶה וְגִפְן וְרִמּוֹן וּמִיָּם אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת:

BeMidbar 20:1-2, 5

Benei Yisrael and all of the people came to the desert of Zin in the first month and the people dwelled in Kadeish. Miriam died there and was buried there. And there was no water for the people and they gathered against Moshe and against Aharon... [The people said], "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to bring us to this bad place. It is not a place of plantings¹¹ or fig trees or grape-vines or pomegranate trees and there is no water to drink.

When Moshe and Aharon died, the people mourned them;¹² when Miriam died, there was a quick and efficient burial with no mourning period attached. According to Rabbinic tradition, the juxtaposition of Miriam's death and the absence of water signifies that Miriam was the source of the water:

¹⁰ VaYikra 21:1.

¹¹ This probably refers to grain.

¹² See BeMidbar 20:29, Devarim 34:8.

תוספתא סוטה (ליברמן) יא:א

כל זמן שהיתה מרים קיימת היתה באר מספקת את ישראל. משמתה מרים מהו אומר? **ותמת שם מרים ולא היה מים לעדה** (במדבר כ:א-ב), שנסתלקה הבאר...

Tosefta Sotah (Lieberman) 11:1

All of the time that Miriam was alive, a well supplied Israel [with water]. When Miriam died, what does it say? **Miriam died there and there was no water** (BeMidbar 20:1-2) because the well departed.

Miriam supplied water to the people, but they didn't appreciate her hidden efforts. Water in this *parashah* symbolizes this blindness on the part of the people, not noticing what others are providing for them, not understanding that their comfort and ease comes through the efforts and the merits of other people whom they should, but more often do not, recognize.

Miriam was underappreciated and Moshe's sacrifice and hard work was so invisible to the people that they complained to him, and about him, incessantly. When the water disappeared, the people immediately turned to Moshe and Aharon, blaming them for bringing them into the desert. The people had the nerve to say to their redeemers: We wish that you had never brought us out of Egypt.¹³ This attitude of the people towards their loving shepherds helps to explain a strange moment in the *midrash* which highlights Moshe's connection to the *parah adumah's* unexplainable quality:

מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) חוקת ח

ויקחו אליך (במדבר יט:ב). רבי יוסי בר חנינא אמר: אמר ליה הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה, אני מגלה לך טעם פרה, אבל לאחרים, חקה...

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Hukkat 8

And they will take to you (BeMidbar 19:2). R. Yosi bar Hanina said: The Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, "I will reveal the reason of the *parah* to you, but to others it will be a *hukkah*."

Perhaps the reason why only Moshe understands the *parah adumah*, but everyone else is mystified by it, is that Moshe is the least appreciated. Moshe prayed and suffered for the people. He starved himself of food and drink, he starved himself of rest, and he prayed for the people time and time again. The people never say thank you, the people never tell Moshe that they love him and see his efforts. The people complain. They don't see that Moshe is caring for them, cleaning up after them, carrying around their filth, trading on his own merits

¹³ See BeMidbar 14:2.

to ask God to grant them forgiveness and expiation.¹⁴

This insight explains another oddity of the *parah adumah*, which is not addressed by the *midrash*:

במדבר יט:ב

זאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עוֹל.

BeMidbar 19:2

This is the law (*hukkat*) of the instruction that God commanded saying: Speak to *Benei Yisrael* and they will bring to you a perfectly red heifer, that has no blemish and has never borne a yoke.

A straightforward reading of the verse yields that the term *hukkah* actually applies to the taking of the cow, not to the process of preparing its ashes. What might seem unexplainable is that the cow has to be completely red, flawless, and unworked. Rabbeinu Bahya¹⁵ provides an explanation for these qualities:

רבינו בחיי על במדבר יט

אדומה, על שם שהחטא קרוי אדום, שנאמר (ישעיה א:יח) אם יהיו חטאיכם כשנים כשלג ילבינו. תמימה, על שהיו ישראל תמימים ונעשו בו בעלי מומין תבא זו ותכפר עליהם ויחזרו לתמימות. לא עלה עליה עול, כשם שפרקו מעליהם עול מלכות שמים.

Rabbeinu Bahya to BeMidbar 19:2

Red because sin is called red, as it is said, **if your sins are as red as scarlet, they will be whitened as snow** (Yeshayahu 1:18). **Perfect** because Israel was perfect and they became blemished, so let this come and atone for them and they will return to perfection. **Has never borne a yoke** just as they have removed from themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.

The red heifer is us, and the *hok* is that we don't understand this. We don't know what it means to bear a yoke. We think that the mystery is that the pure become impure, but what is truly mystifying is how intentionally blind we are to the fact that other people are purifying us, taking our responsibility onto themselves. We remove the yoke from ourselves and burden other people who are serving us, providing for us, cleaning up the messes that we make. We never truly see all of the effort that goes into the services that we use and everything that we

¹⁴ See Shemot 32:32.

¹⁵ Bahya ben Asher, 1255–1340, Spain.

consume. Not because the people or the work are invisible, but because we are not committing to seeing them.

Our insistence that the things we benefit from magically appear, that the process of our purification is a mystery that can't be solved, reflects our unwillingness to encounter and really appreciate the people in our lives who make the way we live possible. But, we need to pull back the curtain and pay loving and appreciative attention to who is cleaning us, who is providing us with spiritual and physical sustenance, who is enabling us to take them for granted.

The hukkat haTorah is that there is no hukkat haTorah.

Wishing you a Shabbat of solved mysteries.





Death-Impurity and the Pursuit of Life

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Parashat Hukat 5777

The first chapter of Parashat Hukat deals with death and the struggle with its potentially paralyzing dimensions. The chapter has two parts. In the first part, we hear about the process for preparing the ashes of the red heifer that serves as the vehicle for purification in cases of corpse impurity. The second part describes the ways in which people and objects contract this type of impurity. Read together, they call us to see that life must continue moving forward even as it does and must encounter and engage with death.

A. How does one become impure?

The chapter begins by describing the process of preparing the ashes of the red heifer:

במדבר יט, א' – ב'

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ²זֶאת תִּקְחַת תְּחִלָּתָהּ אֶשְׁר־צִנּוֹה ה' לֵאמֹר דַּבְּרוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיהָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין־בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל:

BeMidbar 19:1-2

¹God spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: ²This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.

After a lengthy description of the process, we hear about its purpose:

במדבר יט, י' – י"ב

¹⁰וְהִיְתָה לְכִנִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם: ¹¹הַנִּגָּע בָּמָת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שְׁבַע יָמִים: ¹²הוּא יִתְחַטֵּא בָּו בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִטָּהֵר...

BeMidbar 19:10-12

¹⁰This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. ¹¹He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days.

¹²He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean...

These verses clarify that, on the one hand, those who come in contact with the dead are impure, but, on the other hand, they have the opportunity to purify themselves.

The second part of the chapter deals with the question of how exactly one is defiled by a corpse. We hear about three basic modes for contracting this impurity.

First, one can be located in a shared space with the dead, a space referred to as a “tent.” In this scenario, one can be defiled without even touching the corpse; the very fact of shared presence with the dead causes the living to become impure. The dead body’s presence affects not only people but objects as well: “This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever [*lit.* whatsoever] enters the tent and whoever [*lit.* whatsoever] is in the tent shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:14). We see from this that death has a broader social significance, even when it plays out in a private space. The impurity of the surrounding objects demonstrates that the very fact of the presence of a dead body in a community affects all of the individuals within it and limits their behaviors. Death has wider significance than personal experience alone.

The second mode comes through contact with bodies or bones found out in the field. Even if death happens or persists beyond the bounds of society, there are communal consequences: “And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone...shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:16).

Third, graves defile: “anyone who touches... a grave, shall be unclean seven days” (BeMidbar 19:16). Even when individuals or societies try to take control of and organize death and its consequences, it is not possible to create an entirely neutral reality. Even the most controlled experience of death remains significant and an enduring source of impurity.

Contact with death, then, defiles in the private sphere, beyond the bounds of society (in the “field”) and even when this contact has been organized and controlled. Contact with death in any of these contexts demands a response. Moreover, our *parashah* suggests that a dead body is a defiling entity under a wide range of conditions: immediately after death as well as after a long time (as in the case of a bone); the corpse defiles but so does the grave. In practice, our *parashah* clarifies that a dead person, anywhere, anyhow, any time, continues to defile. Nature, culture, private and public spaces: they are all affected by and involved with the presence of death.

B. Responding to Death

With all of this in mind, our *parashah* demands a process of purification after contact with the dead. This demand implicitly reveals that the effects of life’s contact with death are reversible. Even though a person touched a corpse, was in the same room or shared space with the dead and is now impure, there is a pathway to purification. Put more directly: what it means to be alive is to be capable of becoming pure after contact with death. Yes, the dead defile forever, no matter how much time has passed, but a living person can toggle between states of impurity and purity and can be renewed after contact with the dead.

Our *parashah* does not present this possibility for purification as a neutral option, a mere description of a difference between the living and the dead. It is rather a normative demand: those who come in contact with or proximity to death must respond to it; they may not remain indifferent, neutral and unaffected. The encounter with death must trigger action, not paralysis. One cannot hide from the encounter with death nor may one sink into it for a prolonged period of time. This demand comes across loud and clear when the Torah describes the consequences of not dealing with the reality of death.

We hear twice:

במדבר יט, י"ג; כ'

¹³כָּל־הַנִּגָּע בְּמֵת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת־מִשְׁכַּן ה' טָמֵא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מִי נִגָּה לֹא־זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא יִהְיֶה עוֹד טָמֵאֵתוּ בּוֹ:
²⁰וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־טָמֵא וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִתּוֹךְ הַקִּהָל כִּי אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁ ה' טָמֵא מִי נִגָּה לֹא־זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא:

BeMidbar 19:13, 20

¹³Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles God's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him...

²⁰If anyone who has become unclean fails to cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled God's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him: he is unclean.

According to these two verses, corpse impurity is connected to the realm of the sacred. The existence of a dead body and a living person defiled by it both affect the sacred domain. Put another way: The relationship between death and the sacred is mediated through the

impurity of death. Whenever the impurity of death is found for a prolonged period of time in the camp, in the midst of the community served by the sacred, that impurity defiles the sacred as well.

The verses are thus clear that there are two consequences to the decision not to purify oneself and to remain in a state of impurity, two different ramifications when people stubbornly cling to death. First, there is a fundamental contradiction between the community's sacred spaces and the prolonged presence of one defiled by a corpse: "defiles God's Tabernacle... he has defiled God's sanctuary." This defiling of the sanctuary does not require direct contact between the impure person and the sanctuary. The very fact of the prolonged impurity in the community is sufficient to defile the sacred. Furthermore, those who cling to the experience of the impurity of death not only affect the sacred but are socially distanced. If you choose to remain with death, you cannot remain long within the community of Israel: "That person shall be cut off from Israel... that person shall be cut off from the congregation." Corpse impurity that is not addressed through purification has enduring meaning, both in the realm of the sacred as well as in society at large.

These consequences attest to a key distinction between the living and the dead. Not only are the dead always impure, whereas the living can be pure or impure, but this characteristic of the living demonstrates a fundamental fluidity and dynamism. And the Torah demands that the living embrace and embody this characteristic. The demand to move on from death and to purify oneself transforms the encounter with death into one that affirms life through a dynamic commitment to act, to move forward, to become pure again.

Rabbi Sid Schwartz on Chukat:

In this week's parsha, Chukat, we read about the ritual of the Red Heifer. The purification rite prescribed using the blood of an unblemished cow to atone for coming into contact with a dead body. A midrash says that the purification rite is to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. Interestingly, the requirement is not just for the generation that engaged in that idolatry. The rabbis believe that later generations bore some responsibility for the transgressions committed by previous generations. The Jewish tradition has an expansive understanding of culpability. That is what it means to be Jewish.

Reading the parsha this week, juxtaposed to an America that is finally getting woke to the transgression of racism for which we are all partly responsible, the meaning of the Red Heifer ritual hit me like a ton of bricks. Just because we have averted our eyes to the suffering of Black Americans for generations, does not exempt us from responsibility to remedy an injustice that has been allowed to exist for far too long.

And, yes, it may impact our privilege because freedom is never free.

Jews, like most White people (and most of us do pass as White and enjoy the privileges of being White in America) have a host of reasons to deflect responsibility for America's original sin of racism. I have heard dozens of arguments from White people denying that the privileges that they enjoy contributes to the oppression of Black and Brown people.

But, in the end, I can boil all the arguments from a shelf-full of books on White privilege down to a poster that I saw at a Black Lives Matter rally I recently attended. It read: "Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem for you."

Spend some time talking to Black people about the obstacles they face daily to access good schools, healthy food, adequate health care, equal justice under law, and you too will feel ashamed of the privileges that we enjoy and that we take for granted. Contemplate the statistic that in the year 2020, the net wealth of an average Black family is only 10% of the wealth of an average White family in America. Consider how many public policies have contributed to that statistic. Or put yourself in the shoes of a Black child who is more likely to see police as someone who will harm them than as someone who is there to protect them.

Abraham Joshua Heschel said, famously, "Some are guilty; all are responsible."

Excerpted from Rabbi Sid Schwartz; **Jews and Racial Justice: Making Amends or Avoiding Responsibility?**