

PARAH: POST-PURIM PURIFICATION

Shemini/Parah 5779

I.

THIS MORNING we read the special *maftir* of *parah*, the third of four special *parshiyot* we read in the month of Adar. We started with *parashat shekalim* a few weeks ago, read *zachor* the Shabbat before Purim, and will read the fourth and final special *maftir*, *ha-chodesh*, next Shabbat. But *parah* stands out because, unlike all the other special *parshiyot*, the rationale for reading it today isn't obvious. *Shekalim* makes sense: the beginning of Adar was the time people were reminded of their obligation to donate the half-*shekel* to the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and we continue that tradition by reading the verses that recall that obligation. *Zachor* is read before Purim because of the connection between Amalek and Haman. *Ha-Chodesh* is read the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Nisan to recall the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish people, the calendar, just before they left Egypt – and we read it just before we celebrate and re-experience leaving Egypt.

But *parah* is confusing. It's from *parashat chukkat* (Num. 19:1–22) and describes the complex ritual needed to purify someone from contact with the dead. Why is it necessary to read it today?

The classic answer is that it's read to prepare us for Pesach. Only someone who was ritually pure was able to eat the *korban pesach* on the night of Pesach and so our reading serves as a public announcement to remind people to purify themselves for Pesach. Though we no longer eat the *korban pesach* because the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is no longer standing, we keep the reminder.

And the tradition of how we read the four special *parshiyot* reflects this purpose. While we took a Shabbat off with no special *maftir* between *shekalim* and *zachor* and another between *zachor* and *parah* today, we go straight from *parah* into *ha-chodesh* next week. And that's no random quirk. It's by design. As the *Yerushalmi* (*Meg. 3:6*) records:

רבי לוי בשם רבי חמה בר חנינה: אין מפסיקין בין פרה להחודש.

R. Levi said in the name of R. Chama b. Chaninah: we do not stop between *parashat parah* and *parashat ha-chodesh*.

Parah and *ha-chodesh* are supposed to be juxtaposed because of their thematic connection. Now is the time to prepare for Pesach – to purify ourselves for Pesach – and the special *maftir* underscores that.

II.

But here's the thing. Though common practice is to connect *parah* and *ha-chodesh* and the impetus comes from the *Yerushalmi* I just read, there's an opinion quoted just before that one:

רבי בא בשם רבי חייה בר אשי: אין מפסיקין בין פורים לפרה.

R. Ba said in the name of R. Chiyya b. Ashi: we do not stop between Purim and *parah*.

There's a dissenting opinion. You can argue just as compellingly – at least in theory if not practice – that *parah* is connected to Purim and not Pesach. That it's not the first step of our Pesach preparation but the final stage of our Purim celebration. And this idea is reinforced by a fascinating opinion recorded in the *Shulchan Arukh*. You'll remember a couple of weeks ago, during *zachor*, how I announced that we were fulfilling a biblical obligation. How we read it a second time after shul so that people who had missed the first could still fulfil their obligation. How I announced before *me-gillah* that those who had yet to fulfil their obligation of *zachor* could fulfil it now. We take *zachor* very seriously. So seriously, as I mentioned in my *derasha* then, that we read alternative versions of its central word *zeycher*. It's a biblical *mitzvah* and thus deserving of its seriousness.

Now, listen to the words of the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 685:7):

יש אומרים שפרשת זכור ופ' פרה אדומה חייבים לקרותה מדאורייתא. לפיכך, בני הישובים שאין להם מנין צריכים לבא למקום שיש מנין בשבתות הללו – כדי לשמוע פרשיות אלו שהם מדאורייתא:

There are those who say that the obligation to read parashat *zachor* and *parashat parah* is biblical. Therefore, those who live in towns without a *minyan* need to go to a place with a *minyan* on these *shabbatot* – in order to hear these biblically-mandated *parshiyot*.

It's not just *zachor* that's biblical! It's also *parah*! Now, practically speaking, we don't follow this, for reasons elaborated on in the surrounding commentaries on the *Shulchan Arukh*. But here we have another proof that, at least theoretically, today, *parah*, is connected to Purim and not Pesach. But what is that connection? If *parah* is all about reminding ourselves of the need to be purified, it makes sense with Pesach – there was the obligation to eat a *korban* and we still observe the need to purge our homes of *chametz*. But why is there a need to purify ourselves post-Purim?

III.

The rabbi of Ruthy's parents' shul, Rabbi Nasanyl Braun, shared with me a beautiful and powerful answer to this question. How does the story of Purim end? How do the Jewish people save themselves?

וַיִּכּוּ הַיְהוּדִים בְּכָל-אֹיְבֵיהֶם מִכַּת-חֶרֶב וְהָרַג וְאָבְדוּן וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְּשׂוֹנְאֵיהֶם כְּרִצּוֹנָם:
וּבְשׂוֹשָׁן הַבֵּיָרָה הָרְגוּ הַיְהוּדִים וְאָבְדוּ חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ:

So the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies. In the fortress Shushan the Jews killed a total of five hundred men (Est. 9:5-6).

They go on a murderous rampage! Anyone who had hoped to kill them finds themselves on the wrong end of the sword. The Purim story is resolved with violence. With murder. With hatred extinguishing hatred. And when we read *zachor* the Shabbat before, the same theme was present: *timcheh et zeycher amalek mitachat ha-shamayim*, “wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the Heaven” (Deut. 25:17). Kill them all. Wipe out their hatred with your own. Pick up arms and commit genocide.

Violence and murder have been the themes of the past few weeks and so something is needed – something that ensures we do not idealize such values: *parah*. The moment after Purim ends, says R. Ba in the Yerushalmi, read *parashat parah*. Remind yourself that death is contaminating. That it soils our very soul. That we cannot fulfil our religious obligations in such a state – you cannot observe Pesach with blood on your hands.

Now, you could argue that the violence called for in *zachor* and perpetrated in Esther is different: after all, the Jews in Shushan acted in self-defense, it was kill-or-be-killed. Amalek wants to wipe us out and so we have to act first or risk our own annihilation. But the instant need to read *parah* reminds us that there is a limit to that justification. Killing others in an act of self-defense may be warranted from time to time, but that cannot be the mantra of Judaism, because death defiles. It invalidates. It prevents us from living our Jewish lives.

IV.

A few weeks ago, I was stunned to hear how many Jewish people and organizations were willing to jump to the defense of Bibi Netanyahu following his deal with Otzma Yehudit, a right-wing Meir Kahane-inspired political party whose members have not only called for the de-citizenship of non-Jewish residents of Israel, sought to break up – and in some cases physically attacked – Jews in

relationships with non-Jews, and celebrated violence committed against non-Jewish residents in the Land of Israel.

And I wasn't shocked by the response of people who identify as disciples of Kahane or people who have very right-wing solutions to Israel's challenges. At a certain point, if those are your views those are your views. But what I was struck by was the willingness of people who do not otherwise identify with the Kahane cause, or who are not otherwise particularly right-wing, feeling a need to defend the Israeli Prime Minister and claiming that all was okay because his decision was ultimately a political calculus.

The message of *parah* when juxtaposed with Purim declares the antithesis of such a view. We can never idealize violence. We can never claim that extremism is justified without also acknowledging that it taints us. That it prevents us from observing our Judaism. *Parah* teaches us that we must become purified. Not just for what we are about to do, Pesach, but because of where we have come from, Purim.

As Jews we must purify ourselves and shun, not defend, those things that defile us. We read *parah* to recall the announcement made for the Jewish community in times of old. Unfortunately, its message is just as relevant today.