

A thought for Shabbat - and July 4th.

This week we read the double Parshiot of Chukat and Balak. Both parshiot can be seen as describing the transformation of curses in to blessings. That of course is the story of Bilaam - hired to curse us, and was thwarted at every turn by the words in his mouth being turned by the Almighty to words of blessings. But upon reflection it's also the message of the beginning of Parshat Chukat - the mysterious Mitzvah of the Parah Adumah.

Death is a reality. But it is also profoundly depressing. Bereavement and loss can be unbearable. Contemplating our own mortality is sobering - at best. Judaism does not pretend that death does not exist, that it can be wished - or prayed - away. Instead, it teaches us to embrace life - precisely because it's finite nature makes it so precious. The Torah tells us that one who has been in contact with a corpse is Tameh / Impure - and will remain so until they have the ashes of the red heifer sprinkled on them. Specifically mentioned in the Parsha is the prohibition of entering the Mishkan Sanctuary in this state of impurity. The focus of the Mishkan is not supposed to be about death. Many times I heard from Rabbi Riskin that - in contrast to Ancient Egypt whose religion revolved around the 'Book of the Dead' - in Judaism the Kohanim are forbidden from contact with death.

There is no 'antidote' for death. We live in this world, and the better part of us, the Soul, returns to Hashem. But there is an antidote for the hopelessness and negativity that our contact and contemplation of death brings. And that is the Mayim Chaim, the Living Waters described in the Torah. How exactly it works - why it works, is a mystery. As of course, everything connected to Life and Death is. But this much is clear. It works because it comes from the Source of Life - the Makor Hachaim - The Torah, Hashem Himself. The process - seven days long, the reversal of shiva, reattaches a person to Life, by attaching them to the Mitzvot of the Torah that teaches - in every verse - that life is NOT futile, meaningless or empty. Instead, life is precious, purposeful and Holy. Good deeds are eternal. Every human being leaves an impact on the world. A life led doing simple acts of kindness, goodness and mitzvot creates examples and norms for the next generation. From a kabbalistic point of view every Mitzvah creates spiritual energy in the world. From an economic point of view, every Kosher store, restaurants, school, shul, yeshiva supported and patronized creates strong norms and makes Judaism easier for the next generation to observe. Life is an endless series of opportunities to make a difference. That is what we learn from Torah, and that is why Torah purifies us from despair.

Just as the curses of Bilaam's mouth were transformed to blessings, the curse we too often curse ourselves with - to see life as tragic and futile, are transformed by the Para Adumah.

And so a word, of course about the virus. These last four months we have focused on death. That is the reality. Case counts, hospitalizations, death counts. We are staying safe, trying to stay healthy, but we live in a world now almost wholly focused on a deadly illness.

We are all tamei met - impure. Because we are all - I think, at least the majority of us - profoundly miserable, as a result of all of this. It feels like things will never get better. That the joy from so many things has gone. People who are ready to pretend that the virus is 'over' are sadly, wrong. But it will be - one day - and hopefully sooner than we think. The Torah does not call it a sin to be impure this way - it is almost inevitable that in every life, in every generation, things that will profoundly depress us will

happen. What the Torah does is help us recover - recover hope, meaning and joy. That is the ritual of the Parah Adumah - that when life seems its most empty - the Kohen, the emissary of G-d appears, and restores life by restoring hope.

And a word about July 4th. This is my second as a US Citizen. I hope you don't think it is inappropriate to say that America is profoundly challenged right now. It is divided, it is angry, it is restless, much of it is in turmoil. Our response to the virus has been terrible. Leaders have failed us, institutions have failed us.

But - for all that - I read headlines and articles that 'America is finished' The American dream has soured, that this time - this crisis - is really different. I understand the perspective - but I cannot agree. For all its challenges, America was founded on - and still exudes - hope. When I swore my citizenship oath there were people from over 100 countries there. I am willing to wager that when immigration services return - there will still be people from all over the world who more than anything want to be citizens of this great country. It is, I agree, a little more challenging to revel on July 4th. But celebrate we will - for all its profound disappointments and challenges - I am proud to be an American. These last few months I never once regretted coming here, and I for one await - with hope and anticipation what the future looks like. And for the record, I feel the same way about a) New York City, b) the Upper West Side and c) - (especially after our amazing dinner on Sunday night!) most emphatically about Lincoln Square Synagogue.

Shabbat Shalom, and Happy Independence Day!