

## ***Purification beyond Purell***

How fitting it is that as the world is convulsed with fear of the Coronavirus contagion, we have a special additional Torah reading this Shabbat that deals with purification. The main reading this week is from *Parashat Ki Tisa* (Exodus 30:11- 34:35) and it covers a wide range of topics, including: the Golden Calf incident, Moses smashing the tablets of the Ten Commandments and then pleading for our forgiveness, God's blessing of redemption, a unique request by Moses for a visual revelation, and the second carving of the tablets of the Ten Commandments. With all that is going on in the text, it is hardly surprising that sections of this important Torah reading are read during each of the Festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot), as well as during *Shabbat Shekalim*.

But what catches my eye this week is the special additional Torah reading, *Parah* (Numbers 19:1-22). This is the third of the four special Shabbat Torah readings that precede Passover. The passage conveys a rather strange purification concoction using the ashes of a red heifer along with other red ingredients like cedar wood, hyssop and crimson yarn.

Ultimately, the mixture would be sprinkled on a person who was considered ritually impure because they had come in contact with something that was unfit or had experienced a physical setback. Compounding the strangeness of this purification ritual is that all those who helped to make the purification mixture were themselves rendered impure.

For our ancestors, the purpose of this reading before Passover was to remind all that they were required to be in a state of ritual purity in order to participate in the offering of the Pascal lamb. But in this time of a universal health scare, the passage takes on a new significance. Today, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic, we are scrambling to reinforce the importance of frequent washing and disinfecting. We are much more on the alert about those around us who cough or sneeze. We are urging all who show any signs of illness to stay away from public places, regardless of whether or not they have been diagnosed with Coronavirus.

Note also, that those who are on the front lines of providing health care for the victims and those who are responsible for cleaning the affected areas are themselves at risk. Again, just as those who prepared the red heifer ashes were rendered ritually impure, those who are taking care of us are also the ones who are now most at risk.

Only time will tell if the extraordinary precautions that we are enacting to combat Coronavirus were effective or unnecessary exaggerations.

Regardless, as we grapple with the unknown ramifications of this disease, caution is the better part of valor.

Therefore, let us wash and disinfect, let us avoid shaking hands and touching other's plates and utensils, let each person cover his/her coughs and sneezes, and let us stay home and away from crowds if we are feeling sick. These are our modern rituals of purification, timely lessons that are inspired from the wisdom of our ancestors.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

*Rick*

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