

West Side Minyan D'var Torah
Shabbat Parah March 10, 2007

When I began thinking about the D'var Torah for this Shabbat, I realized that this was Shabbat Parah. Eighteen years ago, Chai, I delivered my senior sermon at the Jewish Theological Seminary on this very date--I think some of you may well have been there.

Of course my first thought was to recycle that sermon--as I recall it was very erudite, full of text citations and Talmudic and Midrashic references. My second thought was not to recycle it, and I usually go with second thoughts. It seems to me that I must have learned something new in the ensuing 18 years that I could share with you.

Shabbat Parah is the Shabbat after Purim and before Pesach when we read the portion from Numbers, in *Chukat*, about the Red Cow. (Actually, the cow was really a heifer, a very young cow, and she was not really red but kind of a reddish brown.)

It begins with the words: *"The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying: this is the law of the Torah which God commanded saying speak unto the children of Israel."* (Num. 19, 1-2). The verses continue to spell out that the red cow is to be handed over to Elazar the priest, who is to take it outside of the camp and slaughter it there. Elazar is to sprinkle blood from the red cow toward the front of the Tent of Meeting, then the whole carcass of the cow is to be burned in his sight (וְיִשְׂרַף אֶת הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו) and a priest is to add cedar wood, hyssop and crimson stuff (שְׁנֵי תוֹלְעוֹת) about which we've read a lot in the last two weeks) to the fire. (Num. 19, 3-6). The ashes of the cow, mixed with water, were to be used as a sprinkling liquid in a purification ceremony for anyone who had come into contact with a dead body--the most contagious form of impurity there was. With the reading of this special maftir, we actively enter the time of preparation for פסח.

In Temple times, everyone eating the Pesach sacrifice had to be in a state of ritual purity. Depending on the situation, immersion in a mikvah would not be enough, and planning was needed to engage in more elaborate rituals, such as those involving the פרה אדומה. The Rabbis instituted this special Torah reading, along with the Haftarah from Ezekiel 36, to remind us to engage in both the spiritual and physical purification which are the necessary components of preparation for Pesach.

When i spoke about the ritual of the Red Cow eighteen years ago, I focused on the

paradox it presents--everyone involved in this ritual, designed to purify one who was unclean, **טמא**, in the process was made unclean, from the man who burned the body of the cow to the priest who sprinkled the ashes. The rabbis were puzzled by the paradox--there are numerous references to their bafflement in rabbinic literature.

But there is another way of looking at it. The ritual of the **פרה אדומה** is about much more than burhing up cows with faultlessly auburn hair. The maftir is really about healing. Impurity was seen as a kind of sickness, and to be cured of the sickness was a gift from God and a time for thanksgiving, a time to go to the Temple and offer a todah sacrifice. Can you imagine how happy these purified, cured people must have been after the sprinkling ceremony of the red cow's ashes? They were no longer pariahs, no longer oddities to be avoided at all costs. They could once again participate fully in life, including in the communal Pesach celebration, as they had before their unfortunate exposure to a dead body.

Water was not only an essential part of purification rituals, but also of healing. It is not coincidental that the ritual requires **מֵיִם חַיִּים**, *living waters*, to be effective. Pure, fresh water is everywhere a symbol of life. What better way to counter the threat of death, of the contamination that death brings, than by using **מֵיִם חַיִּים**.

Today in many contemporary healing rituals, we use water to symbolize the renewal of body and spirit. Water plays a large role in Simchat Bat ceremonies as well. And while we moderns know to wash our hands before eating or any other activity that might involve germs, we know that water for hand washing is traditionally an essential part of Jewish life. In our Pesach Seder, we wash not once, but twice, and we dip our food in salt water as well.. As we read about this ritual with its focus on water, cleansing and healing, it brings to mind that Pesach is now only a few weeks away. If you haven't already begun the frenetic cleaning, shopping and soon-to-be cooking for the holiday, Shabbat Parah reminds us that it is time to start. But keep in mind as well, the need for spiritual and physical wholeness as we enter this season of Freedom and Redemption.

Discussion:

How do you see the relationship between water, purification and healing?

In light of this, how do you understand the paradox of becoming **טמא** while helping someone else to become **טהור**; or “burning out” in the process of healing others?