

United We Stand

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Parshas Chukas/Balak

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The Parsha's Paths

This week's Parsha opens with the laws of the Red Cow. While Chazal explain that its description as the "chok" of the Torah means that we can't fully understand it, this did not prevent several commentators to attempt to at least partially explain some aspects of it.

The preparation of the Red Cow included burning it to ashes at the outskirts of the Jewish encampment (or Yerushalayim) and mixing these ashes with water. This water was sprinkled on anyone or anything that had become contaminated by a corpse as part of a process rendering them pure. Every time a Red Cow was burned throughout history, some of the ashes of the original Red Cow were mixed into the new waters (see Rashi 19:9). The most distinguishing aspect, however, is how it rendered all those involved in its preparation, or anyone who so much as touched the mixture, impure, even though it ultimately served as a vehicle of purity (the exception to this rule, according to Chazal, was the person who sprinkled the mixture onto the impure individual; he did not become impure). How could a source of impurity be the source of purity?

Last year we discussed how it seems from the midrash that the Red Cow represents a kind of *teshuva* process; for example, the midrash describes it as coming to atone for the Sin of the Golden Calf, and we explored how this sin was rooted in a feeling of being overwhelmed and insufficient when confronted with the Majesty of G-d that was revealed at Har Sinai and the demands that makes of man (*midas haDin*), which the cow represents. Thus the burning of the Red Cow can be seen, perhaps, as a destruction of this conception of G-d in order to relate to Him on a more intimate level in the place where we are. This is on the one hand arguably an impurifying experience, whereby we depart from the ideal, grand conception of how things should be and a more true and lofty view of the Divine, and yet sometimes that departure is critical so that we can feel G-d where we are and gain the support and connection we need to grow

once more. This, perhaps, is what makes the burning of the Red Cow a *chok*, a concept we can't fully comprehend: That G-d would allow the image of His Majesty to be desecrated for the sake of uplifting man.

Rav Ovadia Seforno offers a fascinating insight on the laws of the Red Cow that may serve to enhance and refine this understanding. He points out that whenever a person has a character flaw, it is necessary to go to the opposite extreme so that he can effectively return to the middle path. Both extremes of any trait are generally sinful and undesirable, but this is a necessary process. Thus we find, for example, that ashes from fire, representing one extreme, are mixed with water, representing another extreme, in order to achieve purity.

Perhaps we can use this idea to explain why those involved in the preparation of the Red Cow become *tamei* in accordance with our theory. For them, who are already pure, dealing with the extreme way of thinking that the Red Cow represents is an impurifying experience; it is not the ideal or appropriate way to think. Nevertheless, it is appropriate for the impure person (who feels distant and unworthy). This would also explain the view expressed in the Gemara that the waters of the Red Cow, while purifying an impure person, actually cause impurity when sprinkled on or touched by a pure person. Depending on the areas we need to work on most, one way of thinking or acting may be appropriate for one person but damaging for another.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe somewhat homiletically suggested that the reason the Red Cow is called the "chok" of the Torah means that it epitomizes the foundation of the Torah - which, Rabbi Akiva tells us, is to love every Jew as ourselves. He explains that the entire purpose of preparing the Red Cow is to help a fellow Jew purify themselves from their impurity - yet everyone involved in the preparation becomes impure in the process! This is what true love for a person is about; when we are willing to put our priorities aside and make personal sacrifices for others. Indeed, according to our theory about what the burning of the Red Cow is about, this is exactly what G-d is doing - sacrificing, as it were, the truer, ideal

conception of Himself in the eyes of man to “descend” to the impure individual and purify him. By taking part in the process of preparing the Red Cow, we partner with G-d in sacrificing for the sake of another, and thus, perhaps, gain a better understanding of what the Red Cow is all about. Whether it means welcoming certain people to our Shabbos table, going over to warmly greet, encourage, or compliment another, writing letters to those in need of support, visiting the sick or lonely, volunteering for chessed or kiruv organizations like Torahmates, getting more involved in communal affairs, or increasing our philanthropy, let us all take a serious look at what the message of the Red Cow means to us, and what we’re willing to do for a fellow Jew in need.

Pirkei Avos Paths

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Whoever possesses these three things, he is of the disciples of Abraham, our father; and [whoever possesses] three other things, he is of the disciples of Balaam, the wicked. A good eye, a humble spirit and a small appetite he is of the disciples of Abraham, our father. An evil eye, a haughty spirit and a limitless appetite he is of the disciples of Balaam, the wicked. (5:19).

[Rav Ovadia MiBartenura explains:

a good eye: *He is satisfied with that which he has and does not covet the money of others. As so did we find with Abraham (...)*

a humble spirit: *Extra humility. And so did we find Abraham (...)*

and a small appetite: *Cautiousness and separation from the desires. And we found this in Abraham(...) And with Bilaam, we find **an evil eye**, as he knew that it was bad in the eyes of the Omnipresent that he should go to Balak, and he went [regardless] in order to take payment, as it is written (Numbers 22:18), "If Balak give me the fill of his house [with] silver and gold."*

a haughty spirit: *since he said (Numbers 24:16), "Speaks the one who hears the utterances of God and knows the thought of the Most High."*

and a broad appetite: *As if he did not have great desire, he would not have counseled to release the daughters of Moav to promiscuity. And the sages said (Sanhedrin 105a), Bilaam had sexual intercourse with his donkey.]*

Rabbi Mordechai Willig suggests that the three traits stressed in this Mishna parallel those mentioned in a different Mishna: *Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: envy, desire, and [the desire for] honor put a man out of the world (4:21).* Envy corresponds to a Bad Eye, Desire corresponds to an Infinite Appetite, and a Desire for Honor corresponds with a Haughty spirit.

I would suggest that they also connect to another Mishna: *Shimon HaTzadik... used to say: The world stands on three things: Torah, Avodah (prayer), and acts of loving-kindness. (1:2).* Torah particularly requires a humble spirit and lack of desire for honor, because haughtiness prevents a person from putting aside their own views to try to understand and appreciate the Torah on its own terms. Prayer requires a lack of desire/small appetite, because temptation prevents us from focusing on our spiritual connection with G-d. And Acts of Loving-Kindness, to be done with full sincerity, require a removal of jealousy and a Good Eye.

Avraham discovered G-d in a godless world and changed the face of history. Why was he the only one capable of perceiving the truth? Rabbi Willig suggests that it was precisely because of his moral purity - the fact that he had mastered a Good Eye, a Humble Spirit, and a Small Appetite - that made him unbiased and receptive to the concept of G-d. Knowing that G-d exists has huge moral ramifications, and nobody else was ready to accept those facts.

I think it's particularly appropriate that Parshas Balak follows Parshas Chukas. In Parshas Chukas, we learn that in order to arrive at the path of truth, we must surrender our own understandings and strive to understand things on their own terms. While this is an important corrective, ultimately we need to work on perfecting ourselves morally so that we will be naturally receptive and better able to appreciate the truth. Parshas Balak highlights how far jealousy, ego, and desire can cause one to be blind to the Divine truth. Let us strive to identify and uproot all traces of these three pillars of sinfulness from our personality, and understand the paramount value in having a good eye, humble spirit, and small appetite.

Goal of the week

Chazal teach us that our face is public property. Whenever in public, make sure to smile.

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This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Tziporah Zlotta bas Bluma Yehudis, and Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos. [Have A Great Shabbos!](#)

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