



July 13, 2024



Parshas Chukas

7th of Tammuz 5784

Fighter Pilots and the Springs of Life

No mitzvah in the entire Torah is associated with more esotericism and mysticism than the mitzvah of the parah adumah – the red heifer. Clouded in mystery, the parah adumah and its unique set of laws became the paradigm of laws unapproachable by human logic. And who can blame us for labeling it so, if the singular greatest mind in history, King Shlomo, (Koheles 7, 23) declared that he couldn't understand it? Who are we to even attempt to comprehend it? So by and large, people gloss over the words of the red heifer's peculiar procedure and move on, content that they have satisfied all intellectual obligations to glean meaning from this topic that our human minds can't understand.

And yet, with even a rudimentary glance at the commentator's writings on this mitzvah, one realizes that this approach is wrong. True, the Torah labels the mitzvah of the parah adumah as a chok (a decree from Hashem that is inexplicable to the human mind), but that, notes many commentators, is merely referring to the paradox the parah adumah contains (in the fact that the Kohen charged with preparing and sprinkling the concoction becomes impure while the individual sprinkled with it becomes pure). The actual ritual, however, is rich with meaning for us, and the inspiration is as relevant today as it ever was.

Spiritual Caution Tape

A dead corpse conveys impurity, and all who touch it need to be purified by the parah adumah. The process of its preparation consists of burning an entire red heifer in a fire, into which is added a cedar branch, hyssop and crimson-dyed wool. The remaining ashes are then mixed with spring water and sprinkled on top of the impure individual. These materials, says Rav Hirsch, are not random ingredients in an esoteric potion that magically fights impurity emitted by a corpse. These are specific symbolic items used to spiritually inspire a man needing the inspiration.

A dead body, explains Reb Hirsch, is the antithesis of a Jew on earth. It represents brute physicality and earthliness. A corpse is everything the soul is not. Stagnant. Mundane. Materialistic. As a means of protecting our souls from becoming intoxicated by worldly, earthly, unholy pursuits, Hashem placed several safeguards in our lives to ensure that we are focused on our soul and not on our body. One of those safeguards is avoiding contact with a dead body, the paradigm of mundanity.

A corpse does not have inherent radioactive toxins that are emitted the moment it dies; rather, Hashem places safeguards around a dead body so as to prevent us from coming too close to something that screams out brute physicality. Our souls are what we are centrally focused on, and Hashem wants us to keep it that way.

Hence, one who did touch a dead body, who perhaps got a little too close to death, the very symbol of yesterday, of decay, of stagnancy, needs a special concoction of symbolic items that will inspire him to remain fresh, vibrant and holy.

The cedar, one of the tallest of trees, serves to remind the man of the need to grow ever higher, using confidence and strength to spiritually forge forth in a largely unspiritual world. The hyssop, a lowly plant, inspires the need to be humble and focus on becoming a more caring, loving, compassionate, divinely oriented person. We take wool from the strong ram, colored with crimson dye, which is excreted by a weak worm, to represent the mastery man should have over the entire gamut of the physical world. We take all these elements: big, tall, strong and weak, and we reduce them to ashes, inspiring the man to reach higher in a world where it is so easy to remain low.

Finally, we mix these ashes with fresh spring water. Water, as in the elixir of life. Water, as in the symbol of life itself. We take the dichotomy of ashes and water, stagnation and growth, life and death, yesterday and tomorrow, and we sprinkle it on the man. We drive home the idea that both elements are needed to live in this world as a spiritual Jew. We need the power of our historical yesterday infused with the vibrancy and energy of the incoming tomorrow.

We as Jews abhor pure physicality and death, but don't negate all of the wisdom and meaning those deceased people stood for. We take the meaning out of their deaths and infuse it into our future.

The Midrash Tanchuma on parshas chukas (perek 8) writes that every single batch of the parah adumah concoction had mixed inside of it ashes from Moshe's original parah adumah. For that is precisely the point. We use fresh

spring water to remind the contaminated man to refocus on spiritual vibrancy and growth, and we mix it with ancient ashes to ensure we never forget our past and the rich meaning it gives us.

The Holy Balancing Act

Jews have been performing this balancing act for the duration of our existence. We live in the present, with an eye on tomorrow, and still focus on our rich and meaningful past, using it as a springboard for our physical and spiritual growth. For example:

On the one hand, No country in the world has more museums per capita than Eretz Yisrael; and no country in the world (aside for one) has more new books written. Israel leads the world in medical patents; and Israel has one of the highest numbers of registered tour guides of any country in the world. Eretz Yisrael has the city of Yaffo, the oldest port in the world, as well as the city of Yericho, the oldest continuously inhabited place on earth; and Israel boasts some of the world's fastest growing cities, such as Kiryat Sefer. There are more Jews studying ancient religious wisdom in its original text than any other religion in the world; and Jewish-owned companies comprise the third highest representation on Wall Street, behind only the USA and China. Jews are forever visiting the Kosel, Ke'ver Rachel and Me'aras Hamachpelah; and Israel is the only country in the entire world to have entered the twenty-first century in a net gain in the number of trees!

We are intensely attached to our past while being vigorously focused on our future.

Why Does the Torah Care About Split Hooves?

This dichotomy is interestingly expressed in the laws of kosher meat. The two symbols of a kosher animal are famously its split hooves and the chewing of its cud. Lacking one of these elements, the animal remains non-kosher. Ever wonder why these features, of all the animal features, were chosen to be the line of demarcation between kosher and treif? What is symbolic to those features?

Reb Yitzchak Zilberstein explains that these features represent two aspects of life that Hashem very much wants us to focus on. Chewing cud represents yesterday, history, review. An animal is re-eating a meal it already ate. A split hoof represents forwardness, climbing, going. The animal with the prime split hoof is the mountain goat. It is also an animal capable of climbing higher than virtually any other animal. The Torah, explains Rabbi Zilberstein, is telling us that not only must we have split hooves and be forward-thinking, but we must forever chew our cud, remembering our past, our history, and our ancestors. Only an animal that represents both is fit for Jewish consumption.

Conversely, the animal that most symbolizes Christianity is the pig (think bacon and pork). It is the only animal in the entire animal kingdom that has split hooves but does not chew its cud. Likewise, Christians are very progressive and full of reform and reconstruction, and are more interested in tearing down history than propping it up. The Muslims, on the other hand, are best symbolized by the camel, the animal they use most in the hot desert climates they call home. The camel chews its cud but does not have split hooves, and likewise the Muslims are intensely focused on their history, with tight-knit tribes run with an iron fist by the elders of the home. Naturally, they express extreme caution with embracing virtually any form of modernity.

The Jews have an infusion of both. We have a rich history that impacts virtually every part of our lives, along with a strong passion and desire to constantly grow, adapt, and spring higher.

This dichotomy is the greatest balancing act our nation performs.

We spend our days poring over ancient books written thousands of years ago, and at the same spend our days coming up with new and fresh interpretations. We tell our children immensely detailed stories of events that took place millennia ago, yet have conventions to discover new and innovative ways to teach students.

It is the only way our glorious heritage lives on. With a grasp on the past and an eye on the future.

War Planes of Glory

In early 1948, Leon Frankle, Harold Livingston, George Lichter and Coleman Goldstein were finally enjoying life after serving in the American air force as pilots, flying fighter planes during the war. Glad the war was over; they were more than ready to start families and finally live peaceful lives. One day, out of the blue, an old friend of theirs, Steven Schwartz, called them up and left them all a message: "Get to the Henry Hudson hotel in Manhattan, and get there fast. The survival of the Jewish people is at stake."

Knowing that the Holocaust was over, the four ex-fighter pilots were confused. Nevertheless, they rushed to the hotel to hear Schwartz out.

Sipping a glass of vodka, Steve Schwartz looked at the four young pilots and said, "Listen here, boys. Hundreds of thousands of Jews are about to pour into Palestine right now, and almost all of them are completely unaware that the five neighboring Arab countries are planning on invading and slaughtering every one of them. Egypt declared that 'we will do what Hitler did, only worse.'"

Steve put down his glass and looked at the four young twenty-year-olds. "The Jews have absolutely no way of defending themselves. We found four German planes that were abandoned in a field in Czechoslovakia. The Jewish people need you to fly them."

The four boys looked at each other. They had finally begun living a peaceful life, and now they were being asked to climb back into the seat of a fighter plane? And of all planes, old German ones?!

Steve Schwartz looked at them with fire in his eyes and said, "Millions of Jewish people in the Holocaust lost everything they had. You four have the opportunity to at least give them a future."

The four looked at Steve and replied, "Okay, we're in."

The four traveled east and secretly declared themselves the Jewish people's temporary air force. An air force consisting of four people. Not four thousand and four. Not four hundred and four. Not forty-four. Four people! Possibly the smallest air force of all time. Certainly, the most frightened air force.

On May 29th, 1948, the immense Egyptian army was twenty miles outside of Tel Aviv. Leon Frankle approached Harold and told him, "Listen, if one of us doesn't go up and bomb them out right now, they will be here tomorrow and there will be a bloodbath."

"Okay," Harold said, "I'll go."

Lifting the used German plane to the sky, Harold looked down and could see scores of fresh Jewish immigrants on the ground below, hoping and praying that they could finally start their lives anew. He nervously looked up ahead and saw the massive Egyptian army. He quietly flew his plane until he was moments away from being directly on top of them. On top of their gunmen. On top of their artillery. On top of thousands of soldiers who might shoot him down.

He tilted his plane entirely on its side to get the most direct angle to drop the bombs. He closed his eyes and screamed Shema Yisrael and let the bombs fall. And fall they did.

In a sheer miracle sent straight from Heaven, the Egyptian army was left in shambles, and Harold flew back completely unscathed. The oncoming Egyptian onslaught was ground to a halt. The war was won and the potential barbaric slaughter of thousands of Jews was avoided.

Years later, when he sat down with an interviewer, Harold was asked what he was thinking as he was flying towards the Egyptian army. He said, "I looked up to Heaven and I said, 'Hashem, those Arabs down there might want to

win, but we Jews **need** to win. Those Arabs might want to come out victorious; we **need** to. Those Arabs might want to claim this land; we **need** to. Our past is too glorious. Our future is too bright. Hashem, save us so the memory of the six million can live on. Hashem, save Your precious nation so we can continue to make You proud.”

We as Jews look to our glorious past for spiritual energy to propel us into the future. We rid ourselves of the stagnancy of death by ensuring that we are forever drinking from the fresh springs of life. With youthfulness and zest, we take our ancient traditions and use them to light up the world. We look to the past. We look to the future. We cling to our heritage and let it guide us down the road of life. Today. Tomorrow. Forever.