

Shabbat Parah: An Invitation to Purification

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Dear Friends,

This week we have a double parasha - Vayakhel-Pikudei - which concludes the book of Sh'mot. These parashot deal with the completion of the building of the Mishkan - the Tabernacle - in the desert.

This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Parah" (in Hebrew, Parah means "cow")! What a name for a holy day! I think, though, that if you read this drasha, there is a chance you will see how meaningful it actually is.

Shabbat Parah is the Shabbat after Purim, named after a reading from the Torah, that is read three weeks before Pesach, at the time when pilgrims began their long journey to Jerusalem in the times of the Temple.

The special reading appears in this week's Maftir, the "transitional" Torah verses read between the parasha and the Haftorah (which is taken from the Prophets). On special Shabbatot, like this one, an additional Torah scroll is used and the maftir section is read from another place in the Torah. The Maftir this Shabbat comes from the book of Bamidbar. It relates the ancient Israelite ceremony of purification, in which a reddish-brown, unblemished cow was burned. Its ashes were mixed with pure stream water, which were then sprinkled on an impure person, rendering him or her pure. This water was called "Mei Niddah".

This week we are discussing the art of purification.

Purity and impurity are existential states which are very foreign to us today. The ultimate impurity in the Torah is death. Anyone who came into contact with a dead person, or even found themselves under the same roof with one, was considered impure. In other words: life=purity, death=impurity. And there are intermediate situations as well: the monthly menstrual cycle and the emission of seed (not during sexual relations) rendered woman and man respectively impure, because the blood and the semen were viewed as "organic matter" that had the potential for life which was not actualized.

Impurity then, is related to death. If we are able to think outside the dichotomy of life and death being two extremes, we will be able to observe how, at all times, we are somewhere on a continuum of vitality. There are days, or moments, when we feel drained of energy, exhausted, low, or even depressed. And there are other days when we feel entirely alive.

The Torah first introduces the concept of death when God warns Adam and Eve that they will die if they eat from the Tree of Knowledge. They disobey, and yet they do not die!

Or maybe they do?

The great tragedy of human knowledge - awakened, as it were, upon eating that forbidden fruit - is the knowledge of death. Only humans know they are mortal. Animals have instincts that warn them of danger, and some even sense their impending death. Yet, only humans KNOW that there is such a notion as time, and only humans KNOW that their time here is limited. Hence, only humans plan their days, make appointments, and set goals and deadlines, because only humans know time is (of) the essence.

This knowledge is very difficult to bear, and it is the price we paid for our curiosity. We wanted knowledge, and we received an awareness of our mortality. And yet we continue to seek knowledge. Our thirst for knowledge is unquenchable, and has defined human uniqueness and culture for millions of years, as we gobbled up more and more from the fruit of that Tree. The desire for knowledge is like an addictive drug. We are all addicted; we all pine after the many secrets and facets of existence. We seek more and more of that knowledge, and in return we gain more and more consciousness of mortality!

My spiritual mentor, Aharon David Gordon, of blessed memory, taught that knowledge, or awareness, as he called it, is the miraculous, albeit bitterly painful, nature of human existence. This knowledge, he explains, while giving us unprecedented wisdom, also detached us from the intimate and direct flow of life. Since eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and Awareness, humans went from living life directly to becoming distant observers of life. Awareness and knowledge provide a sense of time - a grasp of the past, the anticipation and dread of the future, and the knowledge that our lives will end one day.

In this way, knowledge and awareness create impurity: not only do they make us aware of death, but they also place a wedge between us and the immediate stream of life by turning us into observers. This deadens us to the life we have!

Paradoxically, the reason we seek more and more of such deadening and distancing knowledge is because we think that somehow knowledge will do the opposite - that it will help us beat Death. If we just discover the source of cancer, for example, and develop the adequate protein to thwart it, we will live forever. If we just know the secret of eternal youth we will be eternal, and so on.

But this line of thinking is destined to fail. More and more knowledge will not beat death. It may prolong our life, but it will not enhance LIFE.

Is all lost, then? Is there, perhaps, another kind of knowledge, a more satisfying source of knowledge towards which we can channel our hunger?

I think there is, and I think the answer lies in the idea of purity and impurity!

Following the explanation above, I would like to suggest that **the source of impurity is not death, but rather it is the knowledge of death!** It is not death that drives us crazy, it is the Knowledge of our death that drives humans to extreme measures. We feels we HAVE to accomplish dreams, HAVE to do and act, HAVE to live to see great-grandchildren, HAVE to

leave an imprint on the world in order to be remembered, HAVE to ensure that something of us remains after we are long gone.

But the Torah teaches that life is purity. Not immortality! Furthermore, if our quest for immortality is driven by our fear of death, then seeking immortality is part of the mechanism of the impure. We are so busy dreading the future and worrying about our immortal legacy that we barely have time to live - now, today!

Let's be honest about this: most of us will not leave an imprint on the world. Perhaps our grandchildren will remember us, but that's about it.

What would our lives look like if we were released from the addiction we all have to eternity and immortalization? What if we just sought to live? To live every day completely, fully, simply, joyfully, pleasantly, and tenderly?

We don't have to give up our healthy curiosity or scientific investigation and discovery. But we can fine-tune our consciousness.

There is a way, but it negates everything our culture represents and may not suit everyone. It requires changing the way we think, and it requires developing a new kind of knowledge.

It is possible, however! If there is a blessing to be had from the bite we took from the mythic fruit of the Tree of Knowledge - and my Jewish belief is everything is a blessing - it is that knowledge can actually deepen our **knowing of life**, in order to really live. **The task at hand is transforming our addiction to knowledge about life into a knowledge of life itself.**

This is where God comes in. Not the old man on the cloud, but the essence of life itself. (If the word "God" makes it difficult for you to read on, please use whatever word works for you - perhaps "The Source of Life"?).

In our prayer book, as well as in the Torah, immediately following the "Sh'ma", a powerful sentence appears (don't forget to replace the word "God" with "Essence" or "Source" or "Life" in order to make it meaningful to you...) **"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might"** (D'varim 6:5). With all your heart - with all of your will; with all of your soul - with all of your emotions; with all your might - with all of your being.

Not only thinking is fueled by knowledge. So is love! Total, complete, deep love requires knowledge, and it can actually heal that which conscious knowledge damages.

Service of the Heart: Ve'ahavta!

We humans are offered an ability that no other creature is offered. Because we are conscious beings, we are able to love life completely and totally. It is a privilege that is ours alone.

I would like to suggest that this is the method of modern purification. I am not suggesting, God forbid, that the ancient biblical ceremony is no longer necessary. Rather, that I believe that love of the Creator and of life in all of its complexity has the ability to purify us from the pathology of our awareness of death. That is not to say we won't die. We will. Neither does it mean that we can't argue or disagree with life, or that we can't be angry. Of course we will and we can.

But if one wishes to live more fully, to be purified even a little bit from the consciousness of death which distances us from life, then the service of our heart is to knowingly love (which is a deep translation of the Hebrew word "Lada'at" - to know), with our entire heart, the wholeness of our soul and with all our being.

The prophet Yechezkel knew this! In this week's special Haftarah, the prophet speaks of a new kind of purification, a whole new vision of Knowledge, of heart, of spirit (Yechezkel 36: 24-27) **"I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean. I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your fetishes. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh and I will put My spirit into you. "**

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha