

פרשת הקת

OVERVIEW

“Speak unto the children of Israel that they take for You a completely red cow which has no blemish on it, on which no yoke has come”. This law that has a prominent place among the legislation regarding impurities, introduces our Sidrah. The ashes of the cow mixed with spring water will serve to restore purity after seven days to those who come into contact with a dead body.

Miriam dies in the desert and is buried in Kadesh. The well dries up. Moshe is instructed to speak to the rock in order to bring forth water from it. Instead he lifts up his hand and smites the rock twice with his staff. Water flows in abundance but Moshe will be punished for his negligence. He will not be able to enter the longed-for land.

Israel asks Edam for permission to pass through its land. Edam refuses and Israel is forced to make a detour to reach the mount of Har. There Aharon dies. His son, Elazar, clad in the priestly garments, takes his place.

Again a wave of dissatisfaction spreads among the people, for the travel is arduous and the goal distant. Snakes invade the camp and many of the ringleaders perish. The copper snake, formed with Moshe's hands, saves the lives of those who look up to it.

COMMENTARY

The Red Cow

The fundamental importance involving the red cow is shown by its central role in the temple ceremonial. We do not know the real reason for this law but there is nothing unusual about it. The Jewish concept of purity and impurity is rooted in the spiritual sphere that borders on the metaphysical and is hardly accessible to man's rational thinking. But it is certainly not beyond man's intellectual competence to search for possible explanations that would allow an insight into ideas that form the basis for this unique legislation.

The Color

Red and white are the two colors at the extreme end of the symbolical spectrum: red is the animalistic color, symbolizing physical strength, ebullient vitality, pulsing life. But decay and death are nature's logic - nothing physical is permanent. White is the symbol of the divine, of purity, bringing together all colors, all nuances, in perfect harmony. In the face of death, man is in mortal danger. The purely physical seems overpowering, all-pervasive, pitiless in its condemnation of every spiritual activity to an unsatisfactory fate in the face of death. Death confronts man with the problem of his natural limitations, his receding powers, his ultimate decay. Nature's might is embodied in the animal of red color which is to be sacrificed by the priest, clad in white, as a proclamation of the victory by the spiritual over the physical.

The Ashes

Here is the only case where the ash of the burned sacrifice is used for the act of sprinkling which is normally performed with the animal's blood. Perhaps this is to show the pathetic end of a strong and healthy living being. While the material aspect of the sacrifice is obvious, the real emphasis is on the triumphantly timeless spirituality of the ceremony.

The two-fold effect of the Ashes

A peculiar feature of the ashes is that they cause the impure person who comes in contact with it to become pure, while the priest who performs the act of sprinkling in a state of purity must maintain as a result a period of impurity. This apparent inconsistency reflects the dualism of the contrariness in the human condition: the soul's eternal life vs. the body's inevitable death. In the face of the depressing reality of his ultimate decay, man gains confidence and inner strength through the radiant reality of his spiritual survival.

The Death of Miriam and Aharon

In the context of the above it is of profound significance that the great lesson of man's victory over death precedes the Torah's

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mention of Aharon's and Miriam's death. Our sages compare the death of the righteous with the expiatory effect of the ashes of the red cow. Both proclaim the immeasurable power of man's spiritual potency that guarantees his ultimate victory over the fleeting passage of physical existence.

Moshe's Offense

The discrepancy between Moshe's transgression (striking the rock instead of speaking to it) and the very severe punishment requires clarification. We refer to the role played by the miraculous event in the desert. The people's survival in the lifeless desert served to deepen its awareness of G-d's Presence in their midst. But this period of miraculous survival in the desert also bore the danger of lightheartedness and carelessness regarding the people's responsibility for its own future that depended on its unreserved loyalty to the demands of the divine Word.

The time had come for the rod, symbol of miraculous deliverance, to be replaced by the Word. Moshe, for his part, had become accustomed to depend on G-d's direct intervention. He was the man of Egypt, of the red sea, Sinai, the desert, Joshua, his successor, will be the man of conquest, of political planning. This is how one must understand Verse 12 in Ch. 20 in which G-d reproaches Moshe for his failure to sanctify the divine Name by striking the rock and not speaking to it. Man's true sanctification of G-d does not result from his obedience in the presence of a miracle but by his free-willed subordination under G-d's Word without the crutch of a miraculous event. Jewish thought refers to this attitude as "Emunah", total trust in G-d. Here was the decisive moment of the people's transition from national infancy to adult maturity.

The three Leaders

The Midrash tells us that the three gifts of loving kindness that G-d bestowed upon the people in the desert - the Manna, the abundance of water and the protective cloud - were granted in recognition of the leadership of Moshe, Aharon

and Miriam. Each of the miraculous events bears a particular relationship to their particular sphere of influence and accomplishments. Moshe, the uncompromising leader, champion of the divine justice, earned the credit for the Manna. For this was the divine gift of life, source of our physical strength, basis of our existence and survival, symbol of divine loving kindness. Aharon, man of peace, whose compassion mollifies the severity of the divine judgment, represents a combination which is symbolized by the protective cloud that softens the sun's blinding brilliance and envelops the earth in its cooling shade. Miriam, the guardian of the inexhaustible source of human beauty and of moral conduct before G-d, unveiled the concealed spring of pulsing water.

The Snakes

This tragic event was designed to bring home to the people the awareness of a constantly lurking danger that the steady presence of divine protection had caused it to ignore. At the sign of the people's growing impatience and rebellious manner, G-d withdraws temporarily His protective Hand and exposes them to the menace of a hostile environment. The copper snake, erected on a pedestal, was to direct the people's attention once again upwards to G-d. "Those who look up to the snake will live". The lesson? Rebellion against G-d unleashes the forces of nature. Looking up to the snake reminds the beholder never to forget this lesson. It is G-d's appeal to our conscience: never forget.

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