



## BAMIDBAR

### Chukat

What Heals the Ill, but Infects the Healthy?

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## WHAT HEALS THE ILL, BUT INFECTS THE HEALTHY?

### BALANCING PRIDE AND HUMILITY

#### ABSTRACT

What purifies the impure, but impurifies the pure?

Some years back, a red heifer – named Melody – was born on a farm in Israel. Immediately she made news as no one had seen a perfectly red cow for some two thousand years.

While Melody stood in her stall chewing cud and swatting flies, a furious debate swarmed around her red being. Some saw her as an imminent threat to peace in the region, fearing that she would embolden extremists to destroy the Muslim Dome of the Rock and start building the Third Temple. Others debated whether she was actually “red” or really more kind of “auburn.”

Before long, however, Melody sprang some white hairs on her snout and tail and was disqualified for Temple duty. Alas, she proved to be more of a red herring than a red heifer

Every year – as this week – we read in the Torah about the commandment of the red heifer, which defiled the pure while it purified those defiled by death.

A strange rite indeed, and even in the Temple times rarely used. So we might wonder what possible relevance does the mysterious red heifer have to our modern times?

A powerful teaching, an analysis of the Hebrew parah adumah, coupled with a piercing story and the piercing words of the Frierdiker Rebbe (whose 138th birthday and 91st anniversary of his liberation we celebrate this week) about misplaced humility – offers us fascinating psycho-spiritual lessons from the Torah’s red heifer, and it brings down some important lessons for today’s war against assimilation.

### 1. A Red Heifer Named Melody

Some years back, a red heifer – named Melody – was born on a farm in Israel. Immediately she made news as no one had seen a perfectly red cow, with not even one red hair, for some two thousand years.

During Temple times, such a perfect red heifer was used for a rare and special purification ceremony, and the birth of Melody was seen by some as a portent of the Messianic Era and the

imminent rebuilding of the Temple.

For this reason, Melody immediately aroused controversy. While Melody stood in her stall chewing cud and swatting flies, a furious debate swarmed around her red being. Some saw her as an imminent threat to peace in the region, fearing that she would embolden extremists to destroy the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Others debated whether she was actually “red” or really more kind of “auburn.”

Before long, however, Melody sprang some white hairs on her snout and tail and was disqualified for Temple duty. Alas, she proved to be more of a red herring than a red heifer.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Commandment

Every year – as this week – we read in the Torah about the commandment of the red heifer, or *parah adumah*, as she is known in Hebrew:

G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying “This is the statute of the law which the Lord has commanded: Tell the people of Israel to bring you a completely red heifer without defect, and upon which a yoke has never been placed. And you shall give her to Eleazar the priest, and she shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him ... And the heifer shall be burned in his sight; her skin, her flesh, and her blood, with her dung, shall be burned; and the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet stuff, and cast them into the midst of the burning of the heifer ... And a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the people of Israel for the water for impurity, for the removal of sin [connected with death]. But the kohen who gathers up the cow’s ashes must immerse himself and his clothing, and remain unclean until evening.”<sup>2</sup>

A strange rite indeed, and even in the Temple times rarely used.<sup>3</sup> So we might wonder why bother with it today – what does the mysterious red heifer have to teach in our modern times?

A beautiful insight from the Baal Shem Tov<sup>4</sup> sheds fascinating light on the subject.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1997/05/18/the-strange-case-of-israel-s-red-heifer.html>

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 19:1-12.

<sup>3</sup> Only nine times in history – Parah 3:5.

<sup>4</sup> Keser Shem Tov section 393.

### 3. Permanent Lesson

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, was once asked by his students: what is the universal and timeless message in the Parah Adumah?

The Baal Shem Tov taught that all the commandments of the Torah, even those bound by a certain time, place and mode of action, are eternal and timeless. The Torah is divine and that means forever. Therefore, every detail in Torah must carry a permanent lesson in our lives, a lesson that is relevant in every moment in time. What then, wondered the students, is the enduring lesson of the red heifer?

The students also asked the Baal Shem Tov to explain the Parah Adumah paradox: From the Torah's wording we see that purified the impure and sullied the pure.<sup>5</sup> Its ashes purified those who became contaminated by death, but in the process they sullied the priest who brought the offering!

### 4. Inflated Ego

Answered the Baal Shem Tov:

The red heifer represents pride and haughtiness (*gavbus*). And the Hebrew word of it – *parah adumah* – contains the hint. The word *parah* (meaning “heifer”) also means to swell and expand, referring to the inflated ego that swells and expands one's mind. The word *adumah* (meaning “red”) implies that this “swelling” ego is negative or unhealthy. *Parah adumah* thus means “unhealthy swelling.”

It was therefore necessary to “take a piece of cedar wood, some hyssop, and some crimson wool, and throw it in the midst of the burning heifer.”

Why?

Rashi, the great 11th century Torah commentator answers:

Cedar wood symbolizes haughtiness; hyssop and crimson wool represent humility. What remedy heals a person from haughtiness? One who is haughty like the cedar needs to be humble like the lowly hyssop and the which infested the berries from which the crimson dye was extracted to color wool.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 19:5. Tanchuma Chukas 7.

<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Numbers 11:6. From Badmibdar Rabba 19:3. Tanchuma Chukas 6. See also Rashi on Leviticus 14:4. From Tanchuma Metzora 3. See also Likkutei Torah Chukas 57a-b. 59a-b. 60c. Ohr haTorah Chukas pp. 782-802.

## 5. The Explanation

However, at times, we do need pride – and especially self-confidence – to serve G-d and fulfill our calling. That is why we also take the cedar wood, which represents strength and self-assurance. The question is how do we reconcile all these required elements – pride and humility, confidence and modesty?

The answer lays in distinguishing between the attitude and feelings we must have at the outset, when we begin our work, and the attitude and feelings we must have once we are in midst of our work.

The Torah says in the Book of Leviticus that when we first come close to G-d – that is, we bring an offering, called a *korban* from the root meaning “to come closer” – we are permitted to bring “yeast and honey,” i.e. to serve with pride and a sense of self-importance.<sup>7</sup> At this first stage, we are allowed to serve with ulterior motives, as the Talmud states “one should always begin keeping Torah and its commandments out of ulterior motives, because from these ulterior motives one will come to perform them with pure motive.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, a sense of self-assurance and confidence is necessary when beginning to approach divine service. Because the evil inclination uses misplaced “humility” as a shrewd method of dissuading us from doing a mitzvah, by telling us: “You are unworthy of performing such a great mitzvah and service; you are unfitting and undeserving of getting close to G-d!”

Therefore, we need a healthy measure of pride and stalwartness to counter this demoralizing voice. As the Book of Chronicles states: “His heart was proud in the ways of G-d.”<sup>9</sup>

We must feel proud to know that the “entire world was created because of me,” that the world is dependent on me.<sup>10</sup> This confidence counters any argument from the “other side” that we are not worthy of achieving anything.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 2:11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Pesachim 50b. See Rambam end of Hilchos Teshuva.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Chronicles 17:6.

<sup>10</sup> Mishne Sanhedrin 37a.

## 6. Detrimental Force

As much as this pride is necessary at the beginning of our journey, afterwards, however, pride is a detrimental force.

Once we reach a higher level of service and are ready to bring an offering on the altar – do not bring pride (symbolized by yeast and honey) because “G-d detests the proud of heart,”<sup>11</sup> and even a tiny bit of pride pollutes the purity of divine service

## 7. The Paradox Resolved

This is the solution to the paradox of the red heifer, which on the one hand purified the impure and on the other sullied the pure!

For pride (as symbolized by the red heifer) has the paradoxical quality of purifying the impure – that is, allowing those distant, impure and not yet connected to G-d to begin their journey toward purification. On the other hand, for those already pure (due to their service and closeness to G-d), even a small measure of pride defiles their divine service.

Therefore, we need all the elements of the ritual – the cedar and the hyssop and crimson wool. For the cedar represents the pride needed at the outset, while the hyssop and wool symbolize the humility necessary in the actual service.

Maimonides<sup>12</sup> rules that the “piece of cedar wood” should be only one cubit, for the pride necessary to perform a mitzvah needs to be carefully measured and calculated with a ruler to ensure that it not exceed more than necessary. As soon as that measure is reached, it is necessary to be humble like the hyssop.

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<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 16:5.

<sup>12</sup> Hilchos Parah Adumah 11:1.

## 8. Two Types of Humility and Pride

In effect, there are two types of humility and pride: Holy humility and pride, and unholy humility and pride.

Holy pride counters unholy humility from arguing that you are worthless and not worthy of serving. Holy humility counters unholy pride by not allowing it to seep into your divine service.

And this brings us to the issue of misplaced humility.

## 9. Misplaced Humility (Story)

On the topic of misplaced humility, a story is told about the Frierdiker Rebbe, whose 138th birthday and 91st anniversary of his liberation from Soviet prison we celebrate this coming week, on the 12-13 Tammuz.

As a young yeshiva student, Rabbi Avrohom Hecht, was encouraged by the Frierdiker Rebbe to deliver a talk in the shul of another community. Having never done anything like this before, the teenage Avrohom demurred, claiming that he was young and unqualified to speak in public. “Misplaced humility,” the Frierdiker Rebbe told him, “is rooted in arrogance.”

## 10. Getting the Job Done

At times, when a job needs to get done, pride and confidence is necessary, not shrinking away in humility.

Recently a colleague of mine related that he had asked one of our congregants to speak with a man who was in need of sensitive attention. The congregant replied: “Look Rabbi, you are the one trained to help people. This is not my area of expertise.”

I, myself, recall another individual declining from volunteering for a particular project, arguing that he is not the right person and that others were far more competent.

All these responses – we can call them “excuses” – are perfect examples of misplaced humility.

## 11. Yud Beis Tammuz

Indeed, this attitude – not to be trapped in misplaced humility – captures the driving force of the Frierdiker Rebbe, and his son-in-law, our Rebbe, especially demonstrated in the events surrounding the Frierdiker Rebbe’s liberation on 12-13 Tammuz 1927:

What so poignantly defined the Frierdiker Rebbe’s imprisonment and liberation 91 years ago was his sheer defiance of his enemies and all obstacles in the path of his holy work of spreading Yiddishkeit.

He was arrested precisely because of his staunch attitude. When Jewry in Soviet Russia was threatened with spiritual extinction, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, with incredible mesirus nefesh, resisted the furious onslaught and kept the flame of Judaism burning.

At a time when other Jewish leaders and Torah greats, considering the situation hopeless, had left the country, the Previous Rebbe increased his efforts in the dissemination of Torah and mitzvos. A place needed a Rabbi or shochet? The Rebbe sent one. Students wanted to learn Torah? The Rebbe founded yeshivahs and cheders, underground if need be. A mikvah was necessary? The Rebbe had it built. No facet of Jewish life escaped his notice and attention.

His efforts brought down upon him the wrath of the *Yevsekztzia*, the Jewish section of the Communist party, and the authorities. Harassed and threatened, the Rebbe still did not desist. He continued his work in secrecy.

The storm broke. On the fifteenth of Sivan 1927, the Rebbe was arrested and incarcerated in the infamous Spalerno prison in Leningrad. His captors subjected the Rebbe to beatings and interrogations and kept him locked up in squalid filth, trying to break the one person who thwarted their designs.

They were fanatical in their hatred of Torah and the man who held high its banner. It was not illegal to keep the Jewish faith. The Soviet Constitution explicitly allows for freedom of religion. But a Torah lifestyle was anathema to the men of the *Yevsekztzia*, some of whom were descendants of religious and even Chassidic Jews. They would do anything, even break their own laws, to remove this man who was a bone sticking in their throats.



His captors were desperate, enraged. They became more cruel, more violent. But the Rebbe did not yield, refused to acknowledge them or their beatings. Brute force was of no avail against this man of the spirit.

Story after story of those events demonstrate how the Frierdiker Rebbe would not compromise one drop of commitment to his work despite the imminent death threats and obvious dangers he was facing. As the Frierdiker Rebbe writes in his diary, called *Mesechta Gehenim* (tractate from hell): “I determined from the outset [of my arrest] that I would not budge one iota.”

He maintained this attitude even after he was severely punished for not answering their questions. He was locked for twenty-four hours in a filth-filled dungeon crawling with rats and vermin, so narrow that there was no room to move. But even after such treatment his resolution remained the same - he would ignore his captors, they would be as naught.

Thursday morning, *Rosh Chodesh* Tammuz, the Rebbe’s jailors entered his cell and ordered him to stand - for to show that prisoners were totally under their authority, prisoners were required to stand when receiving any type of communiqué?. The Rebbe, not wishing to acknowledge their authority, refused.

On three separate occasions the Rebbe refused, and three times he was beaten. Yet he remained undaunted and in the end his jailors admitted defeat.

Was this due to misplaced pride? Absolutely no! It was due to the Previous Rebbe’s utter commitment to preserve Judaism, and he knew that even the smallest compromise would be his undoing.

When the Rebbe was released from prison he declared: “All the peoples of the earth should know that only our bodies were delivered into exile and servitude, not our souls. We must openly declare that concerning our religion, Torah, mitzvos, and Jewish customs, no one can tell us what to do, and no coercion is allowed.

“We must declare with all the firmness of our Jewish stubbornness, with the Jewish self-sacrifice of thousands of years - ‘Do not touch My anointed ones and do not do evil to My prophets.’”

## 12. A Fire is Burning

The lesson for all of us is quite obvious. There is no room for misplaced humility when life is at stake. Today, thank G-d, we do not have to contend with the dark forces that faced the Friediker Rebbe. Our physical lives are not being threatened. But our spiritual lives are at stake today – and we must all rise to the occasion.

We are all in this together. With the fires of rampant assimilation burning, with our youth not finding relevance in their heritage, we cannot afford to ignore the situation with any misplaced humility.

If you were walking down a street and witnessed a burning building, with a child screaming from the window, would you demur and say “I can’t do anything; let’s wait for the trained firefighters...?” Even if you may ignore it for whatever reason, would you do the same if it was your child in danger?

When a fire is burning, humility is not what is called for. Every form of death or threat of death – especially spiritual and psychological “death” – requires first and foremost boldness, courage and pride. Once you have taken on the challenge, humility is critical as well, but never at the expense of ignoring the task at hand.

This would be true even if you were not endowed with unique strengths and abilities. However, it is a fact that you are blessed with distinctive qualities, opportunities and contacts, and that (as each one of us) you have a sphere of influence – and you cannot hide behind humility and modesty and get out of using your gifts to the fullest.

And *even if* your pride were to defile you, it will purify the people you are helping!

But really, in the end, it will also purify you. For pride is a necessity that drives you to perform, excel and overcome obstacles as you reach toward a higher level.

## 13. The Task Ahead

The fact is that we all have pride, which often is used not necessarily expressed in the best ways. So, at this stage, we might as well use our pride for positive things – to bring light into the world, to help others, to do a mitzvah. Then, once we have undertaken the job, we can and must work on being humble and modest.

Each of us has tremendous potential and unique gifts. Each of us thus carries great responsibility. Each one of us has our own special ability and opportunity to help others, to influence our surroundings.

When fires of ignorance, indifference and divisiveness burning around us, there is no time for re-treating in the name of humility.

Can we conquer the challenge of “death”?

Absolutely!

But it requires our mutual participation, our collective and individual pride, each of us utilizing to the fullest our unique gifts and abilities. And yes, also our humility ... Amen.

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