

“Good News and Bad News”

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I have good news and bad news: The ritual of the *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer, makes no sense. That’s the good news *and* the bad news.

Good, in that you and I don’t need to feel stupid because we can’t make sense of a ritual that calls for slaughtering a red heifer a month prior to Pesach; burning its carcass down to ashes; saving the ashes in an earthenware jar; mixing the ashes with water and sprinkling them with hyssop on a ritually impure person; and almost magically converting the person from “impure” (*tamey*) to “pure” (*tahor*), and thereby qualifying that person to eat the Paschal sacrifice, among other privileges. Apparently, no one can make heads or tails of it.

Bad, in that we *do* feel and look stupid for adhering to seemingly arbitrary practices that don’t even make sense to our traditions’ greatest sages and gatekeepers of interpretation and wisdom.

Here’s an illustrative story from *Pesikta d’Rav Kahana*. Rav Kahana was a 5th Century second-generation Amora who lived in Babylonia until he had to flee to Eretz Yisrael. It was there that he collected and published a set of midrashic sermons, or sermon units, *p’siktot*, pertinent to the Jewish holiday cycle. Here’s one of the stories he gives us for Shabbat Parah:

A gentile questioned Rabban Yochanan ben Zakiai, saying: “The things you Jews do appear to be a kind of sorcery. A heifer is brought, it is burned, is pounded into ash, and its ash is gathered up. Then when one of you gets

defiled by contact with a corpse, two or three drops of the ash mixed with water are sprinkled upon hi, and he is told, 'You are cleansed!'"

Rabban Yochanan asked the gentile: "Has the spirit of madness ever possessed you?" He replied: "No." "Have you ever seen a person whom the spirit of madness has possessed?" The gentile replied: "Yes." "And what do you do for such a person" "Roots are brought, the smoke of their burning is made to rise about him, and water is sprinkled upon him until the spirit of madness flees."

Rabban Yochanan then said: "Do not your ears hear what your mouth is saying? It is the same with a person who is defiled by contact with a corpse – he, too, is possessed by a spirit, and the spirit of uncleanness, and as with madness, Scripture says, 'I will cause false prophets as well as the spirit of uncleanness to flee from the Land' (Zecharia 13:2)."

Now, when the gentile left, Rabban Yochanan's disciples said: "Our master, you put off that heathen with a mere reed of an answer, but what answer will you give us?"

"Rabban Yochanan answered: "By your lives, I swear: the corpse does not have the power by itself to defile, nor does the mixture of ash and water have the power by itself to cleanse. The truth is that the purifying power of the red heifer is a decree of the Holy One. The Holy One said: 'I have set it down as a statute, I have issued it as a decree. You are not permitted to transgress My decree. Zot chukat hatorah. This is a statute of the Torah.' (Numbers 19:1)"

I imagine that the least committed of ben Zakkai's students would now walk away from rabbinic life and practice. The whole thing is philosophically absurd. There's no practical point in carrying on the Torah tradition. It leads to a dead end with no promise of redemption, salvation, or even respite from the trials of our existence.

But the most committed of his students see right through the story. They realize that they have signed on to be teachers of a tradition that can claim absolutely no magical effectiveness; that it can only offer the tremendous benefit of "buy in" – i.e., of buying into a community that achieves "*tohorah*" – "purity" of mind, heart, and body – from our making it so for ourselves and one another. *We* buy in, and *we* effect the *tohorah* we seek. The ashes are the gimmick. Our commitment is the true purifier.

Ben Zoma says it clearly in Mishnah Avot: *s'char mitzvah mitzvah*. "The reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah." Meaning, I think, not that there is no real "reward" for performing the commandments we attribute to God's behest, but that there is indeed a tremendously satisfying reward, which is the intellectual honesty that comes with doing what is right and good, even if (and often *especially* if) it is out of synch with the world's social norms.

Likewise, we have a tradition about reciting the third paragraph of the Sh'ma. We over-pronounce the letter zayin in *l'ma'an tiZ'k'ru*, "so that you will remember." This is so that we don't think we're saying *tzS'k'ru*, "so that you will earn/deserve." We perform the mitzvot so as to remember to be a mensch, and not to earn credit or rewards.

We agree to be part of this community, which is defined by practices that even God sometimes seems not to be able to explain in their entirety. We agree to shoulder the burden of that community; to buy into it, and not to sell it out; to be responsibly hyper-critical of it internally, even as we defend it against an external world that cannot tolerate difference.

This, I think, highlights the distinction between Jews today who are arguing vehemently with one another over the best course for Israel to take in order to achieve its ultimate goals, and Jews who extricate themselves from the community and claim to have a different fate from ours.

Those Jews seem to me to be like the so-called *rasha* in the Haggadah who tries to sit outside the discussion at the seder table. Our job there, and here, and everywhere, is to enable that child to get ahold of some of those ashes, so that they can have the chance to buy in, and to contribute constructively, even reluctantly and angrily if need be, to our ongoing conversation about striving for purity of the mind, heart, body, and soul of our beloved Jewish people.