

## Pesach

### What is the Parah Adumah and what connection does it have for us today in our preparations for Pesach?

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*Class of 2018*

In the weeks before Pesach we have four additional readings to prepare us for Purim and Pesach. Most relate directly to rituals related to these holidays. Parashat Parah seems to be the exception. The Torah in Numbers 19:1-22 describes a ritual in which one must be sprinkled with a mixture of water and ash in order to counteract the impurity incurred from contact with a dead body. The ash is made of both rare and common ingredients. The process of making the ash is highly unusual, even in the context of the sacrificial culture of our ancestors. The primary ingredient is the carcass of the *Parah Adumah* (red heifer) an unusual animal which was completely red or brownish red. Similar to other animals designated to be a *korban* (sacrifice), the heifer had to be young and never been used for work. The other ingredients include *hyssop* (חֵרְשׁוֹן), an aromatic herb common to the Middle East, and cedar or perhaps acacia wood, plant materials used to produce a lot of ash. The carcass is wrapped in red cloth dyed with the same dye used to make some of the clothing of the *kohanim*. Finally, the strangest ingredient by far is the blood of the cow. Why strange? Usually in the offering of a *chatat* (sin offering), the blood was drained from the animal after it was *shechted* (slaughtered) but before it was burned. The Parah Adumah is called a *chatat*. However for this purpose, a little bit of the blood was sprinkled in the direction of the *mishkan* or the Temple and the rest was burned within the carcass of the animal.

There are several other unusual aspects in the preparation. Unlike sacrifices which were burnt on the altar in the *mishkan* or Temple, the *Parah Adumah* was burnt outside the camp or later outside the precincts of Jerusalem. The Kohen, after sprinkling a little bit of blood in the direction of the *mishkan* or *Kodesh haKodashim*, was directed to wipe his hands off on the carcass and stay and watch until it was completely burned. Lastly, unlike other sacrifices, the people preparing the ash became ritually impure. Once the ash is prepared, it is mixed with water and sprinkled on the person who had come into contact with a corpse. The purification ritual took a whole week with sprinklings on the third and seventh day of the week. After the second sprinkling, the person is pure and could go to the Temple to offer sacrifices. Unlike other purification rituals there is no *mikvah* (ritual immersion) and no clothes washing for the person being purified. You may have noticed that we don't practice this ritual at present although occasional sightings of a potential *parah adumah* make the news.

The Torah calls this ritual a *chok*:

This is the ordinance of the Torah that the Lord has commanded you." (Numbers 19:2)

זאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה ה' לְאֹמֶר

The designation of *chok* means "don't even think of thinking of a reason for this mitzvah - just accept it as God's rule". In fact Rashi says, "גזרה היא מלפני, אין רשות להרהר אהריה" Rashi says that the *Parah Adumah* is a ruling from God and we do not even have permission to speculate about a reason. The anonymous work, *Sefer HaChinuch*, which provides reasons for almost all of the mitzvot, says about *Parah Adumah* "My hands grew weak and I was afraid to open my mouth." The great explainer was silenced by this mitzvah! Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, a 19th Century Lithuanian scholar, known as the Beit HaLevi, noticed that

the pasuk says חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה - a *chok* of the Torah. He reasoned that since the word Torah is included, not only is the *Parah Adumah* a *chok*, but the whole Torah is a *chok*—that is, all the mitzvot in the Torah are interrelated and unknowable. Thus, *Parah Adumah* serves to teach that we cannot fully understand the reasons behind any of the mitzvot. I find this frustrating. So while there are numerous admonitions not to inquire into the meaning of this ritual, I will try to give you some contexts and perhaps some explanations for our reading and thinking about this strange and no longer practiced ritual.

### Traditional Explanation

The midrash in *Shmot Rabbah* 19:2 notices that the *Korban Pesach* (Pascal sacrifice), is also called a *chok* and makes a link between the *Parah Adumah* and the *Korban Pesach*. The midrash asks which is more important - למי יש יותר כבוד? The answer the author of the midrash gives is that *Parah Adumah* is more important, for without it one could not participate in the *Korban Pesach*. The requirement for participation in the *Korban Pesach* was that one had to be ritually pure. Therefore, the reason classically given for reading *Parashat Parah* three weeks before Passover is a practical timing issue. According to the Rabbis, the farthest any Jews lived from the Temple in Jerusalem was a two week walk. If you needed a week of purification in Jerusalem before sacrificing your *Korban Pesach*, the reading would be a timely reminder. Time to pack our bags and leave for Pesach.

Clearly this is neither practical, nor does it speak to our reality. So do we read about the *Parah Adumah* because we always have and someday we will need the purity reminder again? We all know that it takes at most a day to get to Israel from anywhere in the world today, unless of course there is more snow in the forecast. The Talmud tells us to start preparing for Pesach a month before the holiday arrives but is that preparation just physical? While I have started the sorting and the lists, I don't find the mandate to clean for a month either intellectually or spiritually uplifting.

In our tradition, we could legitimately say we read about the *Parah Adumah* to remember what we did in the past. Two weeks prior to reading Parshat Parah we read Parashat Zachor, the command to remember Amalek and not forget. Purim is full of remembering and forgetting and reminding. Our goal, Pesach, is all about remembering and retelling. But those are recounting events either real or quasihistorical that make up our legacy. The *Parah Adumah* seems to stand alone, ahistorical. We are not, for example, reading about the seven times that the *Parah Adumah* mixture was made. We are not reenacting the *Parah Adumah*. So despite Rashi's warning and the Rambam's exhortation in *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed) that "one who engages in creating reasons for the details of a commandment is acting under the influence of a major delusion." I will, with your permission engage in some *hirhurim* or investigation into the meaning of the *Parah Adumah*.

### Comparison with Korban Pesach

The Midrash has already drawn our attention to a connection between the *Parah Adumah* and the *Korban Pesach*. Perhaps there is more. The midrash reminded us they are both connected to the word *chok* but unlike the seemingly out of context *Parah Adumah*, the *Korban Pesach* is full of context. It is embedded in the story of the exodus. It is a fundamental part of our national identity and the birth story of our people. We symbolically place it on our Seder plates. How could it be a *chok*? - it seems so understandable. An aspect of the *chok* designation is that we don't understand the reason and have to take the fact that the mitzvah has meaning on faith. *Leil haPesach* was a night full of faith. God and Moshe had forced Pharaoh's hand

and the night of the Pesach would be the final plague. Would the gamble work? Would *B'nei Yisrael* be allowed to leave? Would the people find the faith to leave everything they know and follow God? Would the blood on the door post really protect them from the promised death that would sweep the land? What would this God require? Perhaps that was what the Beit haLevi meant that the whole Torah was a *chok* ultimately it must be taken on faith.

**Blood**

Perhaps the connection between the *Parah Adumah* and the *Korban Pesach* is blood. There sure is a lot of discussion and use of blood. As I said, the *Parah Adumah* was burned with the animal's blood still in the body in violation of all other sacrificial laws. The color of the cow reminds us of blood as do the red clothes in which the carcass was wrapped prior to being burned. What is this all about? Blood in our tradition represents life, which is the reason given for draining it from an animal through the process of kashering. The word *nefesh* is often used in the Torah to mean "person" or "living being". Animals are often referred to as "*nefesh behemah*." The term *nefesh* is particularly associated with blood, as it says in Leviticus 17:11:

The life [nefesh] of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life.	כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נֹתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא בְנֶפֶשׁ יְכַפֵּר
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Isn't it then interesting that this blood full ash is the antidote to contact with our dead? The life source is no longer flowing of the person we love and then we are anointed with more blood. This ritual could have taken place just after sitting shiva or many months later, but it is in effect a closing ritual to mourning. A precursor to joining in the festival that marks the moving on of the people to a new life and the birth of a nation. Perhaps it was a comforting ritual marking the end of mourning a ritual that is missing from our practice today when *aveilut* sort of fades away.

Another blood connection is the smearing the blood on the *mezuzot* of *B'nai Yisrael's* houses prior to sitting and eating their *Korban*. The midrash tells us not to celebrate the death of the Egyptians at the Sea but what of the fate of the first born? Perhaps the blood on the doorposts was a kind of blood guilt symbol? Could it foreshadow the use of blood in the *Parah Adumah* to purify from death? The *Parah Adumah* is called a sin offering and completely burned like one, but is not attached to a particular sin. Could it be some sort of restitution for the innocent lives lost that night?

While we are on the subject of blood, I have one more blood and *chok* connection. The Torah tells us that anyone who wanted to eat from the *Korban Pesach* had to be circumcised. *Shmot Rabba* (19:5) connects the blood of the brit milah to that of the *Korban Pesach* and says that the brit milah is the *chok* referred to in the pasuk.

God said to the people if you are not circumcised you may not eat the Pesach	הִיָּה אֹמֵר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אִם אֵין אַתֶּם נְמוּלִין אֵין אַתֶּם אוֹכְלִין
as it says, 'and God said to Moshe and Aharon this is the <i>chok</i> of the Pesach'	שְׁנֵאמַר וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן זֹאת חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח וְגו'
immediately they circumcised themselves and the blood of the Pesach mixed with the blood of the brit	מִיָּד נִתְּנוּ עֲצֻמָּן וּמְלוּ וְנִתְעַרְבַּ דַּם הַפֶּסַח בְּדַם הַמִּילָה

milah

and God went around visiting each one and kissing them and blessing them.

והקדוש ברוך הוא עובר ונוטל כל אחד ואחד ונושקו

As it says "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee wallowing in thy blood" (Ezekiel 16:6) you will live with the blood of the Pesach as you will live with the blood of the brit milah.

ומברכו, שנאמר (יחזקאל טז, ו): ואעבר עליך ואראך מתבוססת בדמִיךְ וגו' חיי בדם הפסח חיי בדם מילה

We have blood that reminds us of God's promises to *Avraham* and relationship with *Avraham* and the fulfillment of those promises. We have blood that is usually associated with the beginning of life and that of the blood of the birth of our nation. By continuing that blood connection and yetziat mitzrayim perhaps by association we can see the *Parah Adumah* as the undoing of death. By preparing for the *Korban Pesach* with the *Parah Adumah*, we override death or at least undermine its importance. Death is a divine decree and the *Parah Adumah* is a corrective for death also in the form of a direct decree.

### Tikkun for death

There was a cult of death in Egypt with its elaborate culture of embalming and burial. The Torah warns in many places that we are not to emulate the Egyptian death cult. In fact the Torah, in contrast, is silent about the afterlife. So the *Parah Adumah* could be another counter to that culture of death worship and in doing so freeing us from another aspect of our enslavement.

Several commentators, including Chizkuni and Rabbenu Yosef Bekhor Shor, explain that the Torah imposed particularly rigorous guidelines for the purification from *tum'at met* (impurity of death) in order to discourage excessive preoccupation with the dead. The elaborate process involved in divesting oneself of *tum'at met* discourages people from coming in contact with dead bodies unless it becomes absolutely necessary. The Torah, these commentators explain, urges us to focus our energies on life, on living people, on the improvement of the world in which we live, rather than on those who have passed. Redemption of Pesach four parshiot different forms of remembering lead into the Seder experience of reliving.

In sum, perhaps we have Parshat Parah Adumah as a pointer or reminder that Pesach is approaching. This reading reminds us to get going with our Pesach preparations in earnest. In its mysterious way the *Parah Adumah* is also symbol of redemption and life. Pesach is a holiday of the birth of our nation, of faith and of renewal, of spring. On Pesach we don't just remember as we did with Amalek and Purim. We relive and reaffirm our place in the Jewish people and in the future of our nation. The *Parah Adumah* both ritually then and intellectually now helps us live in the here and now. It teaches us that our celebrations in this life matter. Whatever has happened this winter spring is coming again soon. Chag Sameach.



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