

Parshat Chukat: Job and the Red Cow Rabbi Dr. Devorah Schoenfeld

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2019

Parshat Chukat begins with the ritual of the Parah Adumah, or red cow, which is part of the process of purification from *tumah* acquired through contact with death. Bamidbar Rabbah, in its eight midrashim on the Parah Adumah, emphasizes over and over again how difficult this mitzvah is to understand. It begins its discussion, in Bamidbar Rabbah 19:1, by connecting the mitzvah of the red cow with a quote from Job 14:4

“This is the law (of the red cow)” (Numbers 19:2). This is like what is written, “Who can bring something impure from something pure? Not one!” (Job 14:4).

זאת חקת (במדבר יט, ב), זֶה שְׂאֵמֶר
הַכְּתוּב (איוב יד, ד): מִי יִתֵּן טָהוֹר
מִטְמֵא לֹא אֶחָד.

Job here is rebuking his friends who are blaming him and his sin for the death of his children. Like Job, the person coming to be purified has encountered death, since only (direct or indirect) contact with the dead gives the kind of *tumah* that is purified through the Parah Adumah. Perhaps the hesitation about explaining the Parah Adumah is that it could come too close to explaining the reason for death and falling into the same mistake as Job’s friends.

But why is it that the Parah Adumah can’t be understood? On this the Bamidbar Rabbah presents different approaches. Is it simply arbitrary? Or is there a moral lesson contained in it that we need to work to understand?

One possibility is that the mitzvah of Parah Adumah is in principle not rational. This is the approach that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai teaches his students in Bamidbar Rabbah 19:8:

He said to them, "By your lives, a dead person does not make things tameh, and the water does not make things tahor. Rather, God said, 'I have made a law, I have enacted a rule, and you are not permitted to go against what I decreed, as it says "This is a law of the Torah."

אָמַר לָהֶם חַיִּיכֶם, לֹא הִמַּת מִטְמֵא וְלֹא
הַמַּיִם מְטַהְרִין, אֲלֵא אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
חֻקָּה חֻקֵּי גְזֵרָה גְזַרְתִּי אִי אֶתָּה רִשְׁאִי
לְעֵבֵר עַל גְּזַרְתִּי, דְּכַתִּיב: זֹאת חֻקַּת
הַתּוֹרָה.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai here rejects all rationales not only for the purification process of the Parah Adumah but for the entire system of *tumah* and *taharah* itself. There is no meaning to being tameh and no moral judgement attached to it.

But Midrash Rabbah, as it often does, presents different approaches. At the conclusion of 19:8 we see an example of an opposite approach, that sees *tumah* as connected to sin:

Why are the rest of the korbanot male and this one female? Rabbi Aibo said: It is like a son of a servant woman who made a mess in the palace of the king. The king said, let his mother come and clean up the waste. Thus God said, may a cow come and atone for the sin of the calf.

וּמִפְּנֵי מָה כָּל הַקֹּרְבָּנוֹת זָכָרִים וְזוֹ נְקִיבָה, אָמַר
רַבִּי אִיבּוֹ מִשָּׁל לְבֵן שִׁפְחָה שֶׁטִּנַּף פְּלִטִין שֶׁל
מֶלֶךְ, אָמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ תְּבֹא אִמּוֹ וְתִקְנֶנּוּ אֶת
הַצֹּאֵה, כֵּן אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא תְּבֹא
פָּרָה וְתִכְפֹּר עַל מַעֲשֵׂה הָעֵגֶל.

In this approach the Parah Adumah functions specifically to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. *Tumah* isn’t morally neutral, it is very explicitly connected to sin, even if it is a sin that the tameh people did not themselves commit.

Another approach is to see the Parah Adumah as a mystery that God understands, and maybe Moshe does as well, even if the rest of us can’t. We see this approach in Bamidbar Rabbah 19.6:

“And they will take for you a red cow.” Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Hanina said: God said to Moses: To you I will reveal the reason for the red cow, but for others it will be a law (that is, will not have an explanation)...things which are hidden from you in this world will be brought up to the surface in the world to come...and I have already done this for Rabbi Akiva, for things that were not revealed to Moshe were revealed to Rabbi Akiva and his friends “His eyes behold every precious thing” (Job 28:10), this is Rabbi Akiva and his friends.

וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה. אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי
 בְּרַבִּי חַנִּינָא, אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
 לְמֹשֶׁה לָךְ אֲנִי מְגַלֶּה טַעַם פָּרָה, אָבֵל
 לְאַחַר, חֻקָּה... דְּבָרִים הַמְּכַסִּין מִכֶּם
 בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה עֲתִידִין לְהִיּוֹת צוּפִים לְעוֹלָם
 הַבָּא.. שְׂפָכֵר עֲשִׂיתִי לְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחִבְרִי
 דְּבָרִים שְׂלָא נִגְלוּ לְמֹשֶׁה נִגְלוּ לְרַבִּי
 עֲקִיבָא וְחִבְרִי. (אִיּוֹב כח, י): וְכָל יִקַּר
 רְאֲתָהּ עֵינָיו, זֶה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְחִבְרִי.

In this last approach there is hope that even if one generation does not understand, a future generation can. We know that this is possible because it has happened already, Rabbi Akiva has understood things that Moses never understood.

In this last approach we return to the story of Job. The last quotation is from a speech by Job, again in response to his friends, about the human search for understanding:

Man sets his hand against the flinty rock
 And overturns mountains by the roots.
 He carves out channels through rock; His eyes behold every precious thing.
 He dams up the sources of the streams
 So that hidden things may be brought to light.
 But where can wisdom be found; Where is the source of understanding?
 No man can set a value on it; It cannot be found in the land of the living. (Job 28:9-13)

בַּחֲלָמִישׁ שָׁלַח יָדוֹ הַפֶּךָ מִשְׂרָשׁ הַרִים:
 בַּצִּוְרוֹת יֵאָרִים בְּקַע וְכָל-יִקַּר רְאֲתָהּ
 עֵינָיו:
 מִבְּכֵי נְהָרוֹת חִבְשׁ וְתַעֲלֶמְהָ יֵצֵא אוֹר:
 וְהַחֲכֶמָה מֵאֵין תִּמְצָא וְאִי זֶה מְקוֹם
 בִּינָה:
 לֹא-יִדַע אָנוּשׁ עֲרֶכְפָּה וְלֹא תִמְצָא בְּאֶרֶץ
 הַחַיִּים: (אִיּוֹב כח, ט-יג)

Humans here are so powerful, able to carve through rocks and overturn mountains, and constantly searching for understanding. But can it be found? Not in land of the living, not completely, but we can strive towards it, and sometimes hidden things can be brought to light, as they were by Rabbi Akiva.

The person undergoing the process of purification through the Parah Adumah has encountered death and comes to be healed from this encounter. Is it a time for explanations? Bamidbar Rabbah, in its different interpretations, honors all the different possibilities. Sometimes there is no explanation that is possible, and even the thought that an explanation might be possible feels horrifying. Other times an explanation might help. Sometimes there is no explanation, but it is good to know of our own power to move mountains, and to discover new sources of wisdom. Even if there are things that we don't understand now, the thought that future generations might understand more can give us hope.



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