



## Parsha Perspectives

RABBI DOVID BASLAW

ושרף את הפרה... את ערה ואת בשרה ואת דמה על פרשה ישרף

*"Someone shall burn the cow before his eyes, its hide, and its flesh, and its blood; with its dung, shall he burn."* (Numbers 19:5)

**A** woman was a servant in the king's palace. One day, the woman's toddler was playing in the palace, when he soiled the pristinely polished floor. The king saw the foul sight and immediately demanded that the child's mother — and no one else — come clean up the mess. Similarly, after the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron, commanding the Jewish people to observe the mitzvah of the Red Heifer sacrifice with the intent that it should serve to "clean up" the sin of the Golden Calf.

Rashi develops many parallels between the Red Heifer (the ashes of which were used to purify the impure) and the Golden Calf. Just as the Golden Calf was fashioned by fire, the body of the Red Heifer was to be consumed by fire. Rabbi Goldwasser points out an interesting contrast between these two cows. The making of the Golden Calf involved a transformation from an inanimate object (gold) into something that became alive, through fire. On the other hand, the ashes that were needed to carry out the Red Heifer sacrifice came about in a reverse process: something alive would, through fire, become inanimate (ashes). Rabbi Yaakov Yisroel Bifus comments (*Lekach Tov*) that one can see that the power of fire (and other elements of nature such as water, wind, and earth) can be used to build the world or destroy it.

On a deeper level, the relationship between the Red Heifer and the Golden

Calf teaches us that what may first appear to be an act of destruction may really be an act of creation. In the case of the burning of the Red Heifer, an opportunity is created — the opportunity to reclaim purity. Similarly, what might appear on the surface to be an act of creation may, in fact, be destruction, such as the almost irreversible damage that ensued because of the Golden Calf.

Immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War, a yeshiva student took a long walk in the forest. Unbeknownst to him, he crossed over the Russian border. He was arrested, charged with treason, and incarcerated for five long years. Denied contact with his family and friends, he paced his prison cell, questioning what he could have done to deserve all his anguish and suffering. Upon his release after the war, he made his way back to the yeshiva and discovered that all of the other

students, as well as the rabbis, had been shot, leaving him the only survivor. Being arrested and put in prison, accused of a crime he was not guilty of, was in reality an act that saved him from certain death.

World events and even small events in our lives that appear devastating may, in fact, be the preliminary stages for creating new opportunities.

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### WORD of the WEEK

## חיים

*"You shall place on it מים חיים — mayim chaim — living water..."* (Numbers 19:17). The word *chaim* is usually translated as "live," "alive," or "living." When it is used to describe water it means water directly from a flowing spring, where, since the water is continuously moving, it is "living." It also means that the water is healthy and clean, so even if it is flowing, if it is bitter or tainted it is not called "living water." One more meaning of *chaim* regarding water (and other foods) is that it is in its natural, uncooked state. The Mishnah (*Parah* 8:9) requires all three of these conditions for something to be considered "living water": directly from a flowing spring, not bitter, and not cooked, in accordance with the meanings of *chaim* (*Haktav Vehakabbalah*, Numbers, *ibid*)

# Table Talk

FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

As a result of the sin of the spies, the Jews were to remain in the wilderness for 40 years. 38 of those years had already passed, and all of the people who were going to die because of this sin had already done so. Then Miriam died, and upon her death, the Jews' source of water (the Well of Miriam, which had existed in her meirt) dried up.

נ) After 38 years in the dessert, the guilty people had already died, and the remaining nation was comprised of righteous people who merited entering the land of Israel (Rashi 20:1). Yet almost immediately after Miriam's death, they began to complain about the lack of water (20:2-5). How could righteous people speak in a manner reminiscent of that used by the wicked who had perished?

כ) Miriam's death is juxtaposed to the laws of the Red Heifer in order to teach that the death of the righteous affects atonement similar to the bringing of sacrifices (Rashi). Why might this lesson be taught specifically through the death of Miriam, and why compare it to the Red Heifer and not one of the more classic sacrifices?

## A QUESTION FOR THE RABBIS

Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliyashiv was asked if it is correct for a customer at a Jewish-owned restaurant or hotel to say the "Blessing for the Host" during Grace after Meals. He is, after all, paying for the meal and is not really a guest. He answered that it is appropriate to bless the owner, as he is certainly benefiting from the existence of the restaurant and its convenience. He added that there is support for this from our *parsha*. The Jewish people, when requesting passage through Edom, offered to buy food from Edom, even though they had their own provisions. Rashi (Numbers 20:17) notes that this teaches us that when one stays somewhere, one should specifically buy food locally in order to benefit the host (e.g. the innkeeper). The Torah wants us to benefit our host, and a blessing is an appropriate way to fulfill this idea (*Chashukei Chemed, Berachos 46a, paragraph 3*).

## HEY, I NEVER KNEW THAT!

Chukas deals with the laws of purity and impurity. Maimonides concludes these laws in his Mishneh Torah (*Mikvaos 11:12*) as follows: "It is clear... that the concepts of purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees, not matters determined by a person's understanding... Similarly, immersion in a mikveh... because impurity is not mud or filth that can be washed away with water. Instead, the immersion is a Scriptural decree and requires the focus of one's heart. Therefore our Sages said, "When one immersed, but did not intend to purify himself," it is as if he did not immerse. Although it is a Scriptural decree, there is an allusion involved: One who focuses on purifying himself becomes purified once he immerses, even though there was no change in his body. Similarly, one who focuses his heart on purifying his soul from its impurities, wicked thoughts, and bad character traits becomes purified when he resolves within his heart to distance himself from such counsel and immerse his soul in the waters of knowledge. And Ezekiel (36:25) states, "I will pour over you pure water, and you will be purified from all your impurities and from all your false deities, I will purify you."



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