

## Spiritual Spring Cleaning – *Parah 5775*

So, who loves *Purim*?

Me too!

It is pure, simple and unabashed joy! We get to dress up in costumes in *shul* and it doesn't even come with the death theme that other costume holidays get stuck.

*Purim* is just fun with a meaningful narrative about good defeating evil to boot!

And, I have to say that we, here at Emunah, really know how to have a blast on *Purim* from the awesome *megillah* readers, the Carnival, the dramatic *Purim* Pantomime to our videos and this year, the *Purim* flash mob

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSBxZW2eErl>), we do *Purim* right! We even had great Israeli music and line dancing at the post-reading party.

But there is always a moment during *Purim* when it hits me. This year, it was toward the end of the party: I was



cleaning up, throwing away some half-eaten *hamentashen* that were scattered around the social hall, when I realized it.

Once *Purim* is here, *Pesah* follows just 4 weeks and one day later! That sometimes takes me out of my fun, leaving me with that long list of Passover projects and cleaning.

The truth is our tradition wants us to spend a good deal of time getting ready for *Pesah*. It is such a vital part of our yearly practice as Jews. It celebrates the birth of our people, the redemption from Egypt, the Exodus, and the story of our people's journey to freedom.

But Judaism asks that not only do we need to observe the holiday for its eight days (seven in Israel), but we also need to prepare. We cannot merely walk in to *Pesah*. It takes a lot of effort. We have to clean our houses, ridding them of all the *hametz*,

leavened (bread and cereal and grain) products. Even if we are going away for the holiday, we are supposed to clean our homes. We also have to sell our *hametz* – please feel free to make me your agent for



that after Shabbat – and consume, sell or give away all the food that contains *hametz*.

This can be a tricky process. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld writes that it is a little like a card game – we gather up our *hametz* and try to

eat it all, but we want to leave some of it so it lasts through breakfast on the day that culminates with the first *seder*. We need a few cards left in our hand, but just not too many!



And beyond the home preparations, which are extensive, there are the special *Shabbatot* that lead us into this large festival. This Shabbat is the third of these, called *Shabbat Parah* – the Shabbat of the Cow or the Shabbat of the Red Heifer – part of the series of special *Shabbatot* that lead us into *Purim* and *Pesah*, this Shabbat focuses on the rituals of purity.



Our *maftir* portion contains the bizarre ritual of utilizing the ashes of a red heifer to make one's self spiritually pure; however, in a strange twist, it makes a person who is impure, pure, but a person who is pure, impure!

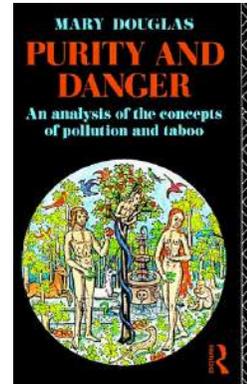
Let's try to understand this practice better and place it within a context that can deepen our own spiritual lives today.



First, we need to enter into an ancient world where many aspects of life were not as well understood as they are today. Death was especially frightening since often ancient peoples had almost no way to ascertain the cause of death. There were no autopsies to check for disease. Death ruled as the supreme unknown. That is not to say that we today have conquered death – we have not and cannot and do not always understand why someone dies, but it would be reasonable to say that thousands of years ago, encountering death was even more challenging than it is today.

The tradition wants us to eat the Passover sacrifice, known in Hebrew as the *Korban Pesah* in a state of ritual purity. It wants us to transcend our everyday experience of life, placing us on a higher spiritual plane. If we come into contact with death, we need a way to move away from that state of mind, we need a measure of healing. And the red heifer ritual was precisely that. It left the Israelites transformed – now they were ready to come closer to God, to feel God – they had entered the right spiritual frame of mind to feel the Divine.

This ritual with all its mystery and complication, enabled one to move away from a more challenged place to a state of spiritual holiness. Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, opened this up in her classic 1966 book: Purity and Danger. She wrote about

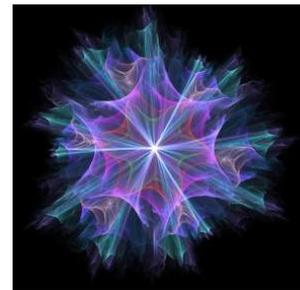


encountering death or dirt or uncleanness, claiming that it was really about disorder, chaos:

“[D]irt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. [...] For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.”

(2-4)

So, rituals, like the aforementioned Red Heifer, can impose some measure of order in the face of dirt/death/chaos.



Douglas explains: “This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; [but] also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power.” (94)

Embedded within Judaism was a system of *tohorah* – purity and *tum’ah* – impurity. But those English words do not convey the full sense of the Hebrew. Perhaps Douglas’ words are better – the world is filled with disorder and order. They are both essential – the disorder has no boundaries and thus, more potential; however, it also contains chaos. Order imposes limits on disorder, making it a safer space.



When we encounter a change in spiritual states, we utilize rituals to help us mark a transition, a liminal moment – usually from disorder to order.

To experience the full power of *Pesah* in the ancient world, one needed the Red Heifer ritual to help move oneself into that space. And even though our Holy Temple has not stood in two



millennia and thus, we no longer participate in this specific ritual, we do have many related rituals.

Some examples: If we are about to enjoy the sacred time of a meal with bread, we begin with a religiously mandated washing of the hands. Now, in ancient times this was probably also a simple physical cleaning of the hands to ensure some degree of cleanliness



before a meal that often involved dipping bread into shared sauces

and meats and lots of touching of the food! But over time, it acquired a spiritual dimension – we first wash our hands with soap and water and then wash them again before the meal to help us prepare for the sacred act of nourishment. We elevate the mundane act of eating, something that all animals do, by creating a meaningful moment of transition.

We can find this in other places in our tradition as well. Whenever we leave a cemetery – or shortly thereafter – whether having been to a funeral or just visited a grave, we pour water over our hands. Again, this marks a spiritual passage – a move from a place of loss and disorder back into our lives, back into a more ordered and structured realm.



We need these rituals and the very physicality of them. We are physical creatures, we need moments to feel the water on our hands, to know we are moving from one time to another or one state of mind to another.

These rituals are similar to what we do to help prepare a dead body for burial; *tohorah* is moving the deceased towards holiness, beginning the person's journey back to Holy One. We find this whenever we go to the *mikveh* – the immersion pool. Whether we immerse before a holiday, before getting married, or as we become Jewish, we highlight this moment, effectuating a spiritual change.



And there is something powerful about water itself to make this process so meaningful. That makes sense, since according to the Passover narrative, the Jewish people is born through the birth waters of the Sea of Reeds. Water connects to birth and sanctity – water is life-sustaining and affirming.

All of this brings me back to *Pesah*. There is a lot of water and cleaning in *Pesah*, and lots of scrubbing. But that is also part of the experience.

We need an in-depth experience to prepare for the birth of our people. It cannot just be easy. First of all, all our homes (and the

shul!) require a good yearly spring cleaning. You would never guess the things we find each year! But beyond that, we need the process itself to provide us with the physical actions that help bring about a renewal in our hearts, not only in our kitchens.



So, as *Purim* fades and *Pesah* moves into focus, let us be filled not with anxiety, but with a sense of opportunity. We are given a gift – concrete rituals that help us move from disorder to order – not merely in the physical realm, although they do that too, but in a spiritual realm.

The process itself thus becomes part of the journey. When the Tosafists, medieval rabbis from France and Germany, commented on *Shabbat Parah* and its unique ritual, they wrote that “it is like a lover’s kiss which cannot be explained, but only experienced.” (*Etz Hayim*, p. 850; BT Av.Zar.35a)

There is great truth to that – we cannot fully explain all our rituals – be they the red heifer, the washing of the hands before a

meal or even cleaning out our refrigerators before *Pesah*, but surely we can feel them.

As we work over the next few weeks, let us remember that. When I find myself scrubbing a last irremovable piece of dirt in the middle of night, I will try to think of something holy, so that all my cleaning propels me closer to the Divine. I hope that you will do the same.