



ALIYA-BY-ALIYA SEDRA SUMMARY

RABBI REUVEN TRADBURKS
RCA ISRAEL REGION

PARSHAT CHUKAT



1ST ALIYA (BAMIDBAR 19:1-17)

Para Aduma: This is the Torah law. Elazar the Kohen shall remove from the camp an unblemished red heifer that has never worked. It is burned. Cedar, hyssop and red thread shall be burned with it. The Kohanim involved in the process are Tamei until evening. The ashes are used to purify those Tamei from contact with the dead. On the 3rd and 7th day a mix of these ashes and water are sprinkled on the Tamei person. Absent this process, one who has come in contact with the dead cannot become Tahor.

The law of the Red Heifer is a colorful one. A person who has been in contact with the dead has the most severe type of tuma, impurity. The Red Heifer removes the tuma.

The Red Heifer is taken out of the camp, burned, ashes mixed with water, sprinkled twice on the person who is tamei.

Two things shout out for attention. First, why are we discussing tuma here when we spent many parshiot in the book of Vayikra addressing tuma? Vayikra is the book of holiness; Bamidbar the book of national travel to the Land of Israel.

And second, unlike the purification processes of sacrifices in Vayikra, the Red Heifer breaks all the rules. It is taken out of the entire camp, not in the Temple. It is completely burned, down to ashes, not burnt on the altar. In a sacrifice the blood is sprinkled

on the altar; here, ashes in water sprinkled on the person.

It is a purification process of an entirely different sort.

I would like to offer that this tuma, contact with death, is placed here deliberately in the march to the Land.

I would like to offer a theory of tuma. This is speculative but I feel it is somewhat compelling. We discussed this in the book of Vayikra.

Tuma could be seen as bruised nobility. Man is created in the image of G-d. Noble, elevated, holy. Regal. In that capacity, he engages with his Creator. In addition, as a Jew, he is part of a grand covenant. Tuma bruises this nobility, this regality.

Tuma occurs as a result of our encounter with the part of the human being that is less noble, less elevated. Less regal. Those parts of our experience that we share with animals: our physical existence, our bodies. Food, procreation, illness and death.

When we walk through life, we have elevated moments. And we have encounters with our human frailty, our animal side, that bruise our dignity, our majesty, our feeling of being in the image of G-d. When we feel cast about as a driven leaf, subject to the vagaries of life, to the mortality of our being, no more than a glorified animal, majesty lost.

We argued in the book of Vayikra that encountering G-d in the Mikdash, in the Temple, requires man in his full majesty. When his sense of grandeur is bruised by tuma, by an impinging sense of physicality, he feels bruised majesty. That majesty must be

restored, he must become tahor. Only man in his full majesty can encounter his G-d in the Mikdash.

Here in the book of Bamidbar we are not engaging G-d in the Mikdash, we are marching as a people to our Land, to be a part of that great covenant of the Jewish people with G-d. This covenant of the Jewish people redeems us from the limited circumference of our life and lifts us into the grand march of human history. Our little life is part of a grand history, the history of the Jewish people. We are part of something far bigger than ourselves. The grand march of Jewish history.

It is here that the tuma of death is introduced. Mortality. Death is final. All that we aspire to in life is, well, left undone. Death confronts us with our end. There will be a day in which we will be no more.

That view of the mortality of life flies directly into the face of our covenant, our view of the march of history, that we are part of something larger.

The march to the Land of Israel in our book of Bamidbar requires a people who see a vision of the covenant, arching over their individual lives, into something far grander. We, little us, are part of a grand history. Death bruises that vision.

Tuma of our animal nature, like in Vayikra, bruises the nobility to stand before G-d. Tuma of encounter with death bruises our vision of our place in the immortal march of our covenant.

The purification here is not in the Temple. Temple purification is for the moment standing before G-d. This purification is for reaffirming our covenant, that our people is greater than just ourselves, that it will live on in a glorious covenant with G-d. We burn the Red Heifer, symbolic of our vibrant, but physical

life. *That* physical life has its end. Ash. But we mix it with “mayim chaim”. Life. As if to affirm that life will go on after death. Well, not that individual life. (I am not addressing the continued existence of the soul but rather life in this world). That life will not live on. But. Our people will.

The bruised, despondent view of our mortality is purified with an affirmation that in spite of our personal mortality, our national covenant lives on.

And hence, the tuma of death is placed deliberately here in the book of the march to the Land.



2ND ALIYA (19:18-20:6)

Hyssop is dipped in the purifying waters and sprinkled on the person or vessels requiring this purification. A tahor person sprinkles on the tamei person on the 3rd and 7th day; this tahor person then becomes tamei for the day. One who is tamei through contact with the dead and does not do this purification and then subsequently enters the Mishkan has committed a most grave sin. Miriam dies after the camp travels to Midbar Zin in the first month. There is no water. The people complain: oh that we had died like the others (over these 40 years). Why did you bring us from Egypt to die in this nasty place? Moshe and Aharon went to the Mishkan; G-d's glory appeared to them.

The death of leaders demoralizes in a different way. It is a very practical type of demoralization. Who will lead us? Will we ever have a leader like Miriam?

Our covenant gives us confidence that while we may never have a leader like Miriam, the covenant endures. We will live on, albeit differently, with new leaders.



3RD ALIYA (20:7-13)

G-d said to Moshe: gather the

people to the rock. Speak to the rock. Water sufficient for them and their flock will be produced. Moshe said: Listen oh rebellious ones. Will water emerge from a rock? Moshe hit the rock. Water emerged, enough for the flocks. G-d said to Moshe and Aharon: since you did not believe me, you will not enter the Land.

If the loss of Miriam is demoralizing, the impending loss of Aharon and Moshe compounds that. But the march to the Land will continue.

The death of Moshe and Aharon can be seen as a powerful statement of the greatness, the capability, the trust of G-d in His people. The Jewish people are greater than any leader or other; even Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. You, Moshe and Aharon, *you* will not enter the Land; but the *people* will. Had Moshe led the people into the Land, we would forever wonder if our fate is due to Moshe's greatness. And without him, who are we?

The death of both Moshe and Aharon before realizing the dream of entering the Land is jarring. And crucial. The Torah will end with the greatest leaders falling short of realizing the dream of entering the Land. But far from being a dystopia, and while not being a utopia, it is an affirmation that the Jewish people as a people rise above the presence or absence of individual leaders. As great as some leaders are, the Jewish people are the story here. And they will enter the Land. The Jewish people will always *have* great people; but the Jewish people *is* a great people.



4TH ALIYA (20:14-21)

Moshe sends messengers to the King of Edom. You are aware of your brother Israel's history: we left Egypt with G-d's help. We need to cross your land, at no cost to you, to enter our Land. The King said no. The people answered: we will stay

on the road and pay for water. Edom said no and came with a large contingent. The Jewish people circled back.

The journey to the land hits a roadblock. We need to pass through the land of Edom. The King says no.

This story parallels the crossing of the sea. Like here, we journeyed. Hit a roadblock, the sea. And couldn't turn back because the King, Paro, blocked our way.

But the outcomes are opposite. The sea split. Here, we reroute around Edom.

At the sea, Divine intervention. The sea split miraculously. Here, the confrontation with Edom. Nothing. We circle around Edom.

This story is part of the transition from the life of miracles. To the life of normal human impediments. There will be roadblocks. And no miracles. This is the transition from Divine control to human leadership.



5TH ALIYA (20:22-21:9)

At Har Hor Aharon is told he will die. Up the mountain, Moshe clothes Elazar in the garments of Aharon. Aharon dies. The entire people mourn for 30 days. The King of Arad in the Negev hears and does battle with the people. The people prevail. The people travel to circumvent Edom. The long journey aggravates the people. They complain. Snakes attack. The people regret their sins. G-d tells Moshe to make a copper snake. When the people gaze on it, they recover.

The death of Aharon and the clothing of Elazar continues the transition of leadership. Moshe, Aaron and Miriam led. Now it is going to be Elazar. The transition occurs before Aharon's death. Transitions are inevitable and need to be planned.



6TH ALIYA (21:10-20)

The travel takes the people to the

east of Moav. They travel north to the area of the Emori. The travels are recorded in the books of wars, traveling on to the well. They sang of their fortune and their travels.

The circuitous route of the march is perplexing. From the Sinai desert to Israel is, well, yashar, yashar. Straight up north. The direct route into the land of Israel is from the Negev. Travel north past Beerhseva to Chevron. Then keep going. Straight. Yet, they travel east to the nations on the east bank of the Jordan. Their path is then north up through Jordan, ending up opposite Jericho. And from there, once they enter the Land, they will go to Shechem.

Why this wide, wide swing to the east, up north through Jordan? Why not enter from the Negev straight north? The Torah does not tell us. But we can speculate.

At this point in Jewish history, the Jewish people have entered the land 3 times: Avraham. That went well. Yaakov when he returned from Lavan. That went well. And the spies. That didn't go well.

And now we are entering again. Whose footsteps would you like to follow? Avraham and Yaakov both entered from the north and went immediately to Shechem. The spies came up from the south to Hevron.

The people avoid the path of the spies. And adopt the path of Avraham. Hence travel up north on the east side of the Jordan, so you can enter the Land and head straight to Shechem. Just like Avraham. And Yaakov.



7TH ALIYA (21:21-22:1)

Messengers are sent to Sichon for permission to cross his land. Sichon confronts them for war. Sichon is roundly defeated. The people settle in the land of the Emori. They travel to the land of Og, the king of the Bashan. G-d tells them

they will succeed against Og, as they did with Sichon. They defeat Og, arriving at the plains of Moav, opposite Jericho.

In this march up the east side of the Jordan, the Divine has been conspicuously absent. Israel sent messengers to Sichon. No Divine command. Moshe staked out the cities along the route into the Land.

The march into the Land has begun. And while the march of the people until this time has been with the Mishkan in their midst, the manna falling from heaven, slowly the transfer of leadership into the hands of man is occurring. While He lurks, ever present, it is man leading the march.

HAFTORAH SHOFTIM 11:1-33

The haftorah opens with an attack on the Israelites from the people of Ammon. The Israelites call upon Yiftach to lead them into battle. He sends a message to Ammon which includes a reference to the conquest of the lands of Sichon and Og, which apparently is the tie in with our Torah reading.

Yiftach made a condition with the Jewish people regarding his willingness to take on this role as commander: "If you bring me back to fight with the children of Ammon, and God delivers them before me, I will become your head." The Jewish people accepted his terms.

Yiftach after trying to make peace with Ammon has no choice but to go to war. He successfully leads his people in battle and they eliminate the Ammonite threat. ■

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HALACHIC ESTATE PLANNING TIRTZA JOTKOWITZ, ESQ.

tirtzaj@gmail.com • 052-509-3356 • 02-625-6475
(845) 425-8871 • (845) 694-7645