

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Chukat)

I can still remember the exact moment: we had just come in from manning an impromptu roadblock all day and I was still on edge. Six of us had been tasked with setting up a road block round a bend in the road in Lebanon's Bekaa valley no more than a few kilometers from the Syrians, and you could not help but tense up every time a car or truck came around the bend.

Would they stop or try to run through us? Would they be armed? Open fire? As the officer in charge, it was nearly impossible to ensure all the men were adequately protected; all you could do was set up a couple of the guys in cover fire positions and do your best to keep everyone on their toes for eight hours in the sun....

By the time we got back in the late afternoon, my nerves were fried, and I was completely exhausted. But as soon as I entered our base a message was waiting for me to report to the Company commander. Usually, this meant another mission in a few hours so I was wondering whether I would at least have time for a shower and some shut eye.

As it turned out I had a surprise waiting for me: our whole company was heading down to Netanya for some R&R (rest and relaxation). Apparently the *yoman iruim* (missions log kept in the Operations room) had registered too many front line 'events' (ambushes, incidents of being fired upon, wounded etc.) and we were being pulled off the line for a week.

And so, less than 24 hours later, I found myself sitting on the beach in Netanya with nothing to do but contemplate the waves and the setting sun as we tasted a week of bliss in *Beit Goldmintz*, a center for soldiers to get a break from the front lines. Apart from early morning runs along the beach and daily sessions with IDF social workers and Army psychologists, we had a week to simply chill....

I don't ever recall a situation that took me from one extreme to another as radically as that experience. One minute we were keeping our heads low in flak vests and helmets to avoid being shot at, and the next we were chilling on a beach along the Mediterranean.

Ever wonder why, despite the fact that so many Israelis experience combat situations and come home with their guns on leave, one does not hear of violent incidents involving soldiers on leave? Maybe it's because the IDF takes this so seriously and works to keep the pressure from getting too great.

But why does this work? Why does going from one extreme to another have such a desired effect?

This week we read the portion of *Chukat* which describes possibly the most bizarre ritual in Judaism: When a person comes into contact with a dead body, he or she is rendered impure. In order to again achieve a state of ritual purity he or she must undergo the ritual of the red heifer known as the *Parah Aduma*. (Numbers 19:1-2)

A *Parah Aduma* is a completely red cow (a heifer) that has never been used for labor of any kind, which is a very rare find.

Paradoxically, while the ashes of the *Parah Aduma* purify the person who is impure, they also cause the pure person (the necessarily pure *Kohein* (priest) who gathers the ashes in preparation) to become *impure*! The same object which purifies one person, renders another impure, which seems completely illogical. Furthermore, not everyone who deals with the ash is defiled; the person who actually sprinkles the mixture of water and ash, as well as the one who mixes the ash with water to

initially consecrate the mixture remain pure; the ash does not seem to affect them. How are we to understand this paradox?

The *Seforno* (ibid. 19:2) suggests a fascinating point:

Part of the ritual of the Parah Aduma is to take a piece of cedar and a branch of hyssop and mix them with the red heifer's ashes. The mighty Cedar seems almost the antithesis of the lowly hyssop bush which, suggests the Seforno, is exactly the point.

Maimonides in his *Hilchot Deot* (chap. 1) suggests that we are meant to strive to live by 'the golden mean' or the middle (straight) path. Every character trait has its extremes, and the challenge is to find the middle ground: neither stingy nor too philanthropic, neither arrogant nor self-effacing, avoiding anger on the one hand and apathy on the other.

But what to do when finding oneself off balance and leaning towards an extreme? Then, says the Rambam (Maimonides) one should (ibid. 2:2) go to the opposite extreme until eventually returning to the more healthy and balanced middle ground. If a person is too stingy, he or she should practice wanton giving until finding a balance and giving within one's means.

And one must take care to eventually leave the extreme and return to a balanced middle ground, because extremes in general are not good.

Thus suggests the Seforno, the mighty Cedar is mixed with the lowly Hyssop to demonstrate that neither extreme is good, and they are mixed with red heifer's ash because (as seen from the ritual on Yom Kippur of the two goats) red is the color of transgression. And which extreme one must temporarily practice depends on which extreme one begins with. Thus, the pure will become impure and the impure will become pure. But the one who mixes the ash representing balance, remains pure....

And of course, what remains most critical is for a person to recognize when he or she is off balance and figure out the best way to get back to the middle path.

Imagine a person is extremely overweight; such a person usually cannot get back to balanced living simply by eating more healthy food, they must resort to an extreme and monitored diet and fitness program until they have lost enough weight to resume a more balanced and moderate regimen.

And the same is true for all imbalances. The first stage is for a person to recognize (often through some physical manifestation) that they are off balance. The next stage is to figure out the goal (i.e. what their ideal weight would be). And then they can create a plan, often extreme, with which to get there, knowing that the extreme is only temporary until they can restore themselves to a more balanced approach.

Spending one's life living on the beach and chilling all day every day, would not be heaven, it eventually would be hell. But a week of that after a few months in Lebanon turned out to be a healthy extreme allowing us to get back to the middle ground if even for a while.

Perhaps that is also the secret of Shabbat; one would not want to live a life of Shabbat every day, seven days a week. But once a week, as a balance to the frenetic lives we lead, Shabbat is a welcome opportunity to 're-balance' ourselves.

And this, perhaps is the secret of the *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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