

Short Comments on Hukkat
Rabbi Eliot Malomet July 9, 2022 10 Tammuz 5782

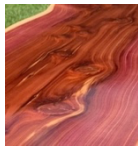
במדבר י"ט:ט וְאָסַף אִישׁ טְהוֹר אֶת אֲפֵר הַפָּרָה וְהָגִיט מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה בְּמָקוֹם טְהוֹר וְהִיטָה לְעֵלֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁמַרְתָּ לְמִי נִדָּה טְטָאת הָרֹא:

Numbers 19:9 *And a [ritually] pure man shall collect the ashes of the cow, and deposit them outside the camp in a pure place. It shall be for the community of the Children of Israel in safekeeping, as Waters of Undefilement; it is [for] decontamination.* Contact with death has such profound psychological, spiritual, and even physical consequences. What the Torah terms as "defilement" would for us be characterized almost as "trauma". How does one recover or move beyond the psychological/spiritual zone of trauma? Rituals provide some help, and the goal of the "purification" ritual described here is to help the individual move from the "zone" of trauma (defilement) to the "zone" of normalcy. In the sacrificial system, blood was the chief agent



to accomplish that. The "Red Cow" (not exactly red, but rust, or more precisely, according to the ISCC–NBS color nomenclature system, "reddish-brown") was chosen because, when burned to ash, together

with other reddish-brown things like cedar-wood, hyssop, and scarlet of worm, it would be ground into a highly potent purification powder, essentially a concentrate of deep



blood-red, that, when mixed with pure water, would function as the "purifying"

waters. Those who were involved in its preparation would be rendered impure. This deserves a closer analysis. The basic reason is that the Red Cow is a *hatat* - a purification offering, and like all *hatat* offerings, it renders all those who are in contact with it, impure. Perhaps homeopathy as an analogy: in high concentrations, disease causing substances are toxic, but in extremely low concentrations, they



are purported to be curative. More likely, there is an issue of "contact" here. Life/death, pure/impure are defined by boundaries. At the point of contact, the individual traverses from one to the other.

י"ט:י"א הַפִּגְעַת בָּמַת לְכָל־נַפְשׁ אָדָם וְטָמְאָ שְׁבַע־יָמִים:

19:11 *Those who touch the corpse of any human being shall be impure for seven days.* It is debatable whether or not the custom of shiva derives from this. It is more likely the reason for a seven-day period is because that is the basic unit of structured time. Homiletically, we might say that this is the unit of time that enables you to "re-create" yourself and your world in the aftermath of the traumatic contact with the dead.

כ"א וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֹן בְּהַדָּשׁ הָרֵאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמַת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֵר שָׁם:

20:1 *The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.* It's interesting that this parasha which deals at length with the purificatory ritual of having contact with the dead, reports the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, hints at the death of Moses (*You won't be bringing the people into the land* 20:12) and invokes death at least twice in the complaints of the Israelites. No information is given about the circumstances of Miriam's death. In "New York Times-speak": *The Torah declined to cite a cause.* Which only leads to speculation. The midrash offers that she shared the same fate as her brothers: just as Moses and Aaron were barred from entry into the land, so was she. She too, died *with a kiss from the Shekhina*. And her death took place on the 10th of Nisan.

כ"ב וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מִשְׁהַ וַעֲלִיאָהֳרֹן:

20:2 *The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.* The juxtaposition of the water problem with Miriam's death provides the basis of another midrashic theme: *Miriam's Well. The well that had provided Israel with water during the march through the desert, had been a gift of God to the people as a reward for the good deeds of this prophetess, and as this gift had been limited to the time of the march through the desert, she had to die shortly before the entrance into the promised land.* (L. Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*).

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כ״ה׃ וְלִמָּה הֶעֱלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהֵבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם הַרָע הַזֶּה לֹא אֶל מְקוֹם זָרַע וְתַאֲנָה וְגִפְזוֹן וְרִמּוֹן וּמִיָּזְם אֵין לְשִׁתּוֹת:

20:5 *Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!* It is always interesting to examine the content of their complaints. The mental picture they have the land is of its abundant produce. Grain for bread, figs for sweetness, vines for wine, and pomegranates for fresh juice filled with vitamins and antioxidants!

כ״ח׃ קַח אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה וְהַקְהֵל אֶת־הָעֵדָה אֹתָהּ וְאֶהְרֹן אֶחָיו וְדַבְּרָתֶם אֶל־הַסֵּלַע לְעֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִיַּמְיוֹ וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם מִן־הַסֵּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת־הָעֵדָה וְאֶת־בְּעֵירָם:

20:8 *“You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”* Not to be picky, but which staff was he supposed to take? Moses had his own staff, and we recall from last week, that when Aaron's staff was placed before those of the other tribes, it flowered and produced almonds. It was then placed in the Sanctuary and served as a warning sign against rebellion. The next verse says **וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ:** *Moses took the staff that was before God as he had been commanded.* Did he take Aaron's staff with its flowers and almonds? If so, perhaps by removing it from its designated spot, Moses committed a ritual transgression. But maybe there is an extra subtlety here. He took the symbol of repudiation as opposed to the symbol of God's previous miracles, especially those that had to do with water. And then...

כ״י״א׃ וַיָּרֶם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַסֵּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתֶּה הָעֵדָה וּבְעֵירָם:

20:11 *Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.* R. Friedman points out that this is the first time in the Torah that a human being transforms a miracle. All previous miracles are God's with humans as agents. Here, Moses' act stands on its own. With his own initiative he directs a divine power. But maybe there is another way to look at this. People who hike or live in the desert know how to find water. Typically, they look for signs of vegetation, and wildlife. They may know that water flows in the crevices between layers of

rock. Here God wanted Moses to "speak" to the rock, but this didn't make any sense to him since the last time he was faced with this problem, he was instructed to strike the rock. (Exodus 17:6) And presumably after sojourning 38 years in the desert, he had may have known where to look in the rock layers for water and how to extract it. Whether he acted on his own or usurped a divine power, either way, he "oversteps a divine limit and he pays a maximal price. His punishment is not death. He lives to be 120 years old, the maximum (as decreed in Gen 6:3); his punishment is exile—he is not permitted to enter the land—which is also like the punishment of Adam and Eve, who are prevented from reentering Eden." (Friedman)

כ״כ״ו׃ וְהִפְשַׁט אֶת־אֶהְרֹן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְהִלְבַּשְׁתָּם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנֵן וְאֶהְרֹן יֵאָסֶף וּמַת שָׁם:

20:26 *Strip Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar. There Aaron shall be gathered unto the dead.* Reading this closely, it's hard to imagine what must have been going through Moses' mind. We recall that when it came to Aaron's "investiture" Moses was the one who literally put the priestly clothing on him. This is what it said back in the book of Exodus:

שְׂמוֹת כ״ט׃ וְלָקַחְתָּ אֶת־הַבְּגָדִים וְהִלְבַּשְׁתָּ אֶת־אֶהְרֹן אֶת־הַכֹּהֲנֵת וְאֶת־הָאֵפֹד וְאֶת־הַהֹשֶׁבֶת וְאֶת־הַחֹשֶׁבֶת וְאֶת־הַחֹשֶׁבֶת וְאֶת־הַחֹשֶׁבֶת וְאֶת־הַחֹשֶׁבֶת:

Exodus 29:5 (To Moses) *Then take the vestments, and clothe Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod, and the breast-piece, and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod.* And that was after he *bathed him in water.* (29:4) We assume that he poured water on a naked Aaron and then clothed him. Did he do the reverse here? When he "stripped" Aaron and invested Elazar was Aaron left to die naked? Aaron's investiture was accompanied by a **symbolic** "birth" and his dis-investiture was accompanied by an **actual** death. And, by the plain sense of the text, he would not have been clothed. But, as with Miriam, *The Torah declines to provide specific details.* The midrash, unable to fathom the indignity of this moment, offers that he too died by a Divine kiss and also this: *As it would have been improper if Aaron had been buried quite naked, God brought about the miracle that, when Moses took of one of Aaron's garments, a corresponding celestial garment was spread over Aaron...* But the text doesn't tell us that Moses buried him! Could it have been that he died naked and was not buried? That doesn't make any sense! What could it have meant to die that way and return to the elements?

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