

Life and Death, Life-and-Death

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Parshat Hukkat

This Shabbat we read Parshat Hukkat. This Parshah begins (Numbers 19:1-10) with one of the strangest rituals in the entire Torah, the “Red Heifer.”

Contact with (even proximity to) a dead body rendered an individual “*tamei*.” *Tamei* is traditionally translated as “unclean,” but the English does not do justice to the import of the Hebrew word. *Tamei* is a state of disrupted spiritual polarity, triggered by intimate contact with the Source of life and death. The clearest example, mentioned in this Parshah immediately after the instructions for the slaughter and burning of the red heifer and the preparation of the “water of purification,” is contact with the dead. Other examples include sexual relations, a man’s nocturnal emission, a woman’s menstrual period, and giving birth. Restoration of spiritual polarity can be accomplished by immersion in a mikvah (a ritual bath), except for the ultimate case of *tumah* (*tumah* is the noun form of *tamei*), contact with the dead, which requires the water of purification, made from the ashes of the red heifer. (Today, and since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, we simply immerse, even for contact with the dead.)

The ashes which go into the water of purification are made of several ingredients – the carcass of the red heifer, cedar wood, hyssop (not the plant known today as hyssop, but probably a type of caper or savory), and crimson

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wool. There is but one characteristic shared by all the ingredients – they are all red! Red, of course, is the color of blood, and, as we are taught (Leviticus 17:11), **life is in the blood.**

Contact with the dead is the ultimate disruption of spiritual polarity, and the healing comes through contact (symbolically) with life.

But, as we have learned, there is a significance in the Torah that goes far deeper than the mere surface meaning. Intimate contact with the Source of life and death brings about a disruption of one's spiritual polarity. Ultimately, only immersion in life can effect a restoration.

When we view death as final, as the ultimate end of life, then we mix together unlike matters (life and death) and we disrupt our spirituality. We can restore our spirituality by coming to an understanding that what we call "death" is but a stage in our growth, a movement to a new and (hopefully) higher/deeper life. By understanding death, physical death, as a life transition (much as birth, maturity, and other life-cycle landmarks are life transitions), we can come to the point of no longer mixing unlike matters (life and death), but of seeing them as a unified whole (life-and-death). We will then understand that only One Who is capable of bringing about life is permitted to bring about death.

May we all soon find that wholeness.

Shabbat Shalom.