

JewishTimes

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The Red Heifer: Death & Immortality

*Red cow ashes, red string,
cedar and hyssop branches.
Mysticism or psychology?*

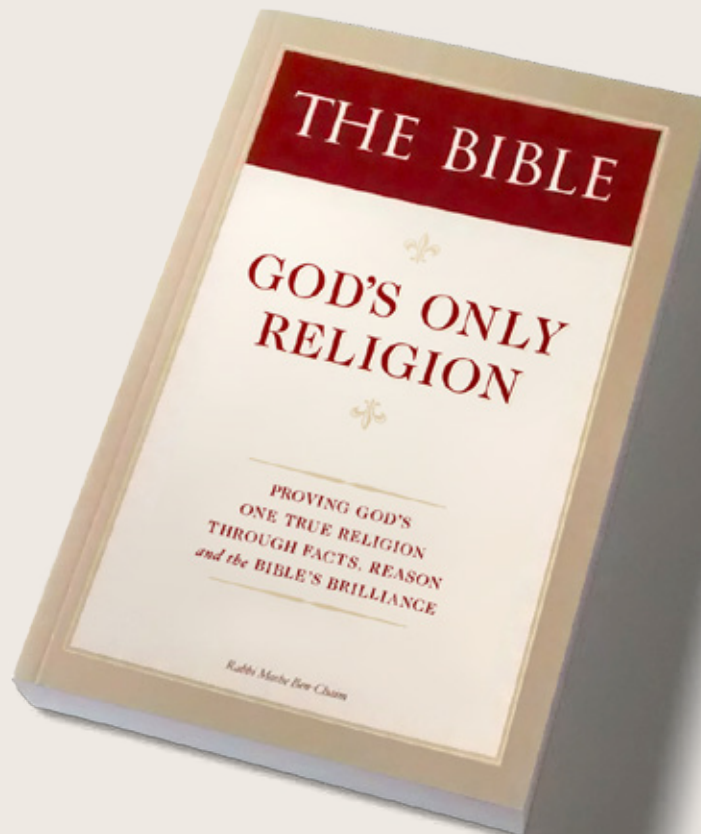
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

God Doesn't Change

Miller: How is it that G-d doesn't change His mind and is omniscient, despite the fact that Psalms 106:23 says that if it wasn't for Moses standing before G-d, he would have destroyed the Jewish people? But at the same time, Jews say that Moses changing G-d's mind doesn't actually mean he did, because he is omniscient?

Rabbi: Metal distant from fire is in darkness. Draw it closer and it becomes illuminated. Even closer, and it grows warm. Still closer, and it melts. In all cases, fire remained the same; it was the proximity to the flames that caused changes in the metal (Maimonides' metaphor).

God does not change, as that which is perfect seeks no alteration. When Moses prayed, raised himself to a higher level,

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on which, God's system of providence no longer required the death of the Jews. Moses could now address the Jews' flaws in place of God's punishment, while prior before Moses' change, he could not, and they deserved annihilation. Just as the fire did not change, God did not change, but Moses did, and was now in the position to correct the Jews. God's system of providence is perfect. It is designed to relate to man in more beneficial ways when man obeys God. But that system does not change. When one draws closer to God, His providential system benefits his life in various ways, just as fire has various effects based on proximity.

Can God Testify in Court?

Detroit: Can God act as a witness in court and be counted as one of the required witnesses? The Tanakh records Hashem as witness to certain events, but is this the same thing?

Rabbi: The court system is of God's design, constructed for man, not for God. Further, God is not subject to His creations. Thus, He is not physical, He has no eyes, and does not contend within the confines of the laws He created solely to govern man. Tanach's reference to God as a witness or God swearing indicates the "absolute truth" of the matter discussed.

Losing Hope

Eddie: The Talmud teaches that if you lose an object, and someone else finds it, it still belongs to you unless you are meyayesh (give up hope). Yaakov was meyayesh Yosef after he was sold, and he believed he was dead. So why did Yaakov still have ownership of his son in halacha? Why was he able to give him inheritance?

Rabbi: Yi-ush (abandoning hope) does not apply to offspring, since there is no ownership of children. Yaakov's yi-ush of Yosef applied to finding him, not ownership of his body or soul. Yosef never lost his status as a child of Yaakov, so inheritance was due to him.



Why Didn't Pharaoh Die?

Miller: Was the Pharaoh during the Exodus a firstborn? If he was, why wasn't he killed when God decreed that the firstborn will die? What spared Pharaoh?

Rabbi: God wished Pharaoh to lead his army to their deaths in the Red Sea. This consideration demanded Pharaoh not die in Egypt.

Is Judaism Progressive?

Saul: Are Jews or Judaism a progressive people/religion? Are the laws of the Torah eternal? If they are, I would like to cite a few examples as questions. It is written in Exodus 35:2 that one who does work on Sabbath, he shall be put to death. Is it followed? It is written in Exodus 21:15/17 that one who curses his parents shall be put to death. Will any parent do it? It is written in Leviticus 20:10 that the adulterer and adulteress shall be put to death, so is it done? It is written in Leviticus 20:13 that gays/lesbian shall be put to death. So do we follow it? Do we boycott those that intermarry? As we do not punish, does it mean that we adopted the spirit of the Torah to bring a change in our society? Do we cling to the letter of the law or to the spirit of it? Do following such laws make us barbaric, or do we reform our laws? Kindly explain and advise.

Rabbi: "Are the laws of the Torah eternal?"

Yes, God said the Torah is not to be altered. God knows the future and when He said not to alter the Torah, He knew all future considerations. When the Bet Din is reestablished, all penalties will be administered. Laws are not barbaric, but they are severe, as are the crimes. The punishment of death for Torah violations indicates the crime was so great, one forfeits his/her life. Abstaining from work on Sabbath educates the world about the existence of the Creator. Its violation forfeits this intended lesson to mankind. Parents are our authority models directing us to ultimately accept and respect the true Authority. Cursing them prevents one from accepting God. Sexual violators display one's inability to rise above an instinctual life. All sinners whose crimes meet with death have not lived at the minimal level of deserving life. God created life, and it has terms. Study the philosophical and psychological corruptions in sinners and you will arrive at a knowledge of what is human perfection and imperfection. You will learn the conditions for retaining one's right to life. God created life, and sets the rules.

Of course, today's liberals will be troubled with Biblical laws. But the response is not to pander to ignorant humans, but to study the Creator's laws and raise our thinking to agree with His moral principles.

Birthdays

Reader: Is it allowed to celebrate birthdays in Judaism? If allowed, what is the Jewish way of celebrating?

Rabbi: This is not governed by Torah, do as you wish. But the Rabbis are not known for celebrating. And King Solomon said, "Better is the day of death, than the day of birth" (Koheles 7:1). ■

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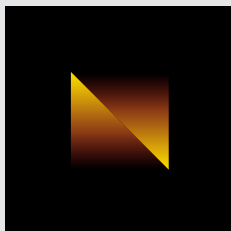
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The Red Heifer

A Lesson in Psychology

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Contact with the dead requires these objects. Without an intelligent analysis, one might view Torah as voodoo. Oddly, hyssop, cedar branches, and a red thread are also requirements for one who spoke Lashon Hara. What is God's message?

I understand that a person who speaks evil and degrades others (Lashon Hara) has committed a crime. Thus, remedial action is required. But what about fulfilling a mitzvah (command) of burying the dead: why is there a response of sprinkling the ashes of a Red Heifer on one who was in contact with the deceased? Meaning, why should a mitzvah—a positive act—require a supplemental act? Additionally, why were the Jews in Egypt who fulfilled the command of the Paschal Lamb required to paint their doorposts and lintels with the lamb's blood? In these two cases, the Jews fulfilled God's command. A supplement would appear unwarranted. Again, Torah has no supplemental action for one who prays, makes a blessing, or performs any other mitzvah: the mitzvah has no follow-up activity. Yet, one who buries the dead or sacrificed the Paschal Lamb requires some additional act. It's difficult to grasp a supplemental response to a mitzvah. As always, God's generous clues are found in all mitzvahs.

When burning the Red Heifer into ashes, the Torah commands us to throw into its flames a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. Very unusual. Ibn Ezra writes:

This [the cedar, hyssop and red string] is just like the leper, and there I hinted to a principle (Ibn Ezra, Num. 19:6).

Ibn Ezra is referring to his commentary on Leviticus 14:4:

Behold, the leper, the leprous house, and the defilement by contact with the dead are related...and behold, they too are similar to the form of the Egyptian Exodus.

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Just as these three items, the cedar branch, hyssop plant, and the red string are used in the Red Heifer rite, Leviticus 14:4 commands that the leper's remedial practice also include these three items. Nowhere else in Torah is this found. What's the connection? Regarding the leper (the speaker of Lashon Hara), two birds are taken; one is killed, and the live bird together with the cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string are dipped in the dead bird's blood and the live bird is let loose over a field. Regarding the Exodus, Ibn Ezra refers to the practice of dipping the hyssop in the lamb's blood and painting the doorposts and lintel. Here too the hyssop is used, but we note the omission of the cedar branch and red string.

Ibn Ezra points us to three seemingly unrelated institutions that share identical elements, a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. These three are burnt with the Red Heifer, they are bloodied in connection with the leper, but the hyssop alone is used in connection with the Passover Exodus during the plague of the firstborns, as the Torah says:

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side-posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you (Exod. 12:22,23).

What initial step can we take towards understanding Ibn Ezra's "principle" to which he clues us by linking these three areas to the cedar, hyssop and red string? The Rabbis also note that the hyssop is the smallest plant, and the cedar is the largest. What is that clue?

My friend Jessie Fischbein said, "Death creates distortions." I thought about her words and immediately realized she was keying in to the common denominator. All three cases deal with death. The Red Heifer removes ritual impurity from one who was in contact with the dead; the leper's speech was a crime of character assassination (the Rabbis teach evil speech equates to murder), and the



lamb's blood saved our firstborns from the Plague of Firstborn Deaths. In all three cases, a person was somehow related to death. The fact that all three cases require some rite, indicate that without that rite, man is left in unacceptable conditions. What are those conditions?

Interesting is that once Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God feared he would eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. Therefore God placed cherubs (childlike figures) and a flaming spinning sword to guard the path to the Tree of Life (Gen. 4:24). Meaning, as soon as man sinned and he received the punishment or death, he immediately desired immortality. But God did not allow man to attain immortality through the Tree of Life. Instead, God struck a balance in man's imagination: he would perceive his youth (cherubs) while also facing the unapproachable spinning sword which represented his death. God deemed it proper that in place of the extreme which Adam desired—immortality through the Tree of Life—an equilibrium be achieved.

He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end (Kobeles 3:11).

Ibn Ezra comments, "everything beautiful in its time" refers to death in old age, while "He hath set the world in their heart" refers to the feeling of immortality. While death is a reality, and man cannot

lie to himself that he is immortal, he also cannot face his death daily. It is too morbid. Man requires a sense of permanence if he is to live happily. A balance is again detected in this verse. How does this apply to our three cases?

Death: The Distortion

Why does a person who performs a mitzvah of burying the dead require the ashes of the Red Heifer be sprinkled on him? He did nothing wrong, and in fact, he had no choice but to follow God's command of burial. Furthermore, what is this strange practice?

We must first recognize that it is not only errors or sins that require religious remedial practices, but even positive actions can negatively affect us. Jessie is correct: when one is in contact with the dead, we notice a denial. People find eulogies difficult, and will laugh hard at the smallest drop of humor. The tension at funerals evoked by facing one's own death generates powerful denial. Like Adam, we "rush for the door" seeking immortality. But that extreme is as equally unhealthy as is harping on our day of death, however true it is. Contact with the dead creates a denial that must be corrected. We are not allowed to deny our mortality. The ashes of the Red Heifer signify that a body—human or animal—is but dust. The body is not the definition of a human being. We must immediately correct our denial of our mortality by embracing the ashes sprinkled on us to remind us through proxy, that just as the heifer is but dust,

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Hyssop



Cedar



we too ultimately pass on.

The one who speaks evil destroys others through character assassination. He did not treasure life, similar to one who murders. In his mind alone, he has “set things aright.” God does not approve of a person venting his aggression. This extreme requires a fix. The evil talker is smitten with leprosy, which Aaron said is like death (Num. 12:12). He must also shave all his head, eyebrows and all hair. Why? One’s identity is very much tied to how he wears his hair, and his unique personality expressed with his eyebrows. One would have difficulty distinguishing two people who were both hairless. It is safe to say that God created different hair colors and different hairstyles so people are distinguished. Now, when the leper is shaven and has no more hair just like infants at birth, his identity is lost to a great degree. The remedy to his disregarding another person, is cured by his experiencing a loss of his own identity. This is compounded by the law that he must move outside of society.

In Egypt, the Jews sinned through idolatry. Through the Plague of the Firstborns of those Egyptians and Jews who worshipped the lamb (and did not slaughter it) a direct relationship was seen between sin and death, and mitzvah and life. The blood on the doorpost, through which the Destroyer might enter, focussed the dwellers on the truth that worshipping the deity of Egypt caused death, and our mitzvah of the destruction of the deity secured our salvation. The doorpost of the home, through which the Destroyer might enter was the optimal location for all to ponder the absolute truth that the lamb—idolatry—is absolutely false.

Extremes are Sinful

Death is too morbid a thought to face daily. But immortality is false. The Rabbis teach the hyssop and the cedar represent two extreme poles of a spectrum, the small and the large in plant life. Sforno teaches the harm of living at the extremes of any attitudinal spectrum is expressed through these two species and the red string that represents sin[1]. (It could have been a large and small rock, but something had to be used.) If one is too courageous or too cowardly, he cannot act properly at the appropriate time. A miser and spend-thrift; a sad or an elated person...any extreme is improper. King Solomon teaches that there is a time for every attitude (Koheles 3), meaning there are times not to follow that attitude. Thus, remaining at the pole of any spectrum is harmful.

God wished to include in the Red Heifer the additional lesson that denial of death or embracing death—either extreme—is sinful.

The evil talker’s carelessness for another person is countered by his reduction of identity. But just as the Red Heifer’s ashes are remedial, and not to be focused on as a permanent ends, the evil talker too must regrow his hair. A remedial rite is temporary by nature, just enough medicine to cure the disease and redirect the person back to an equilibrium[2]. We now appreciate how these seemingly out-of-place plants point to a fundamental lesson and remedy.

But why is the hyssop alone used in connection with the Paschal Lamb? This is because there is no extreme in this case

from which we must bounce back. Here, the death of the Egyptian deity is an absolute truth: idolatry is absolutely false. Thus, there is no lesson of two harmful extremes, as is so regarding the Red Heifer and the leper. And our fear of death has been calmed by the lesson that sin brings death, whereas mitzvah secures life. The purpose of painting the doorposts with blood has been explained.

Ibn Ezra teaches us that death affects man uniquely, it requires a unique address, and there are a few related Torah cases that share a bond, indicated by the use of the same three species. Proximity to death frightens man, causing him to flee to the opposite pole of immortality, but this extreme is false. Death is also used regarding the leper where he initially had disregard for life; he must be bent back to the other extreme where “he” loses his identity. But why did God choose the phenomenon of death per se to teach the harm of extremes? I feel this is due to the nature of the immortality fantasy...

Immortality: The Most Primary Drive

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that King Solomon’s work Koheles is based on this fantasy. Meaning, all of man’s drives depend on the immortality fantasy. Man would not fantasize about any pleasure, or plan, or sense any ambition, if he truly felt he was going to die. Under every emotion, lies the feeling of immortality. He wrote as follows:

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“One generation passes, and another generation comes; but the Earth abides for ever (Koheles 1:4).”

The Rabbis teach, “A person does not die with half of his desires in hand. For he who has a hundred, desires to make of it two hundred.” [3] This means that the fantasy exceeds reality. King Solomon addresses one of the two fantasies that drive people. One fantasy is regarding objects or possessions. The second fantasy deals with man’s feeling of permanence. Man’s fantasies make sense, but only if he’s going to live forever. An idea has two parts: 1) the idea itself, and 2) the emotional effect of the idea. Every person knows the idea that he or she will die. But the emotional effect of death is usually denied. This enables man to believe his fantasy is achievable. It is impossible to live without the fantasy of immortality. It expresses itself one way or another.

The meaning behind this verse is that the average person looks at life as the only reality. He cannot perceive himself as a single speck in a chain of billions of people and events, where he plays but a minuscule role, and passes on. Any feeling man has of greatness comes from the feeling of immortality. Immortality never reaches into lusts; only ego. Here, the king places the correct perspective before us. We look at the world as starting with our birth, and as dying with our death. As soon as one sees that his life is nearing its end, he cannot enjoy things anymore. The enjoyment of things is tied to the belief of an endless lifetime in which to enjoy them. Man’s attention is directed primarily toward his well-being. If a life-threatening situation faces man, this is the most devastating experience; everything else doesn’t make that much difference to him. Once a person faces death, all fantasies of pleasures don’t carry much weight. Rasbi says on this verse, “Who are those that exist forever? They are the humble ones that bow down to the ground.” Rasbi means there is in fact an eternity: this is for righteous people—tzadikim—expressed as those who humble themselves, “bowing to the ground.” The soul of the tzaddik will endure forever.

As man is most excited about his mortality, and is driven primarily by the immortality fantasy, it is most appropriate that God teaches man not to follow his extreme tendencies in this area.

Summary

Death is bothersome, but we cannot deny it. The Red Heifer’s ashes remind us that our physical life is not permanent: we all return to dust. We need this reminder when we come in contact with the dead; a traumatic moment in which we most likely have reacted with denial about our own mortality. We also cannot disregard the life of another through evil speech. If we do, we have gone to another harmful extreme, and shaving our hair reduces our identity, temporarily, to help us bounce back to a correct equilibrium. God signaled the sinful nature of extremes using plants of extreme size differences, and including the red thread that signifies their sin.

We are again awed by the perfection and structure of the Torah, God’s Bible, where religious practice is designed to perfect man’s flaws. Whether we sin by evil speech, or are negatively affected by a mitzvah of burial, or the Paschal Lamb, God includes remedial acts that guide us on a life of truth.

Thank you again Jessie for directing me to this fundamental. ■

[1] On Yom Kippur, the red string represented the Jews’ unforgiven state. And when it turned white, it indicated God’s forgiveness. Torah verses too refer to sin as red: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).”

[2] Maimonides Laws of Character Traits addresses this topic.

[3] Koheles Rabbah 1:13n

Explaining Torah to Children

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

"You created Your world long ago" (from the Sabbath/New Moon blessing) Although in the prayers on sabbath and the new moon we don't say the phrase above, why do we say it when sabbath and the new moon are the same day? Sabbath is the day that reminds us of what happened on that day: God completed creating all "things." The new moon is when the orbit of the moon starts over again. When we see some law in nature repeating, that's how we know it's a law. But if something happens only once, like a lightning bolt happening on Tuesday at 1:00 in the afternoon, we don't say it's a "law" that lightning happens on Tuesdays at 1:00. Lightning happens at anytime. But the moon always repeating its path around the earth every 29 days, that is a law. And that law could not be seen on the first sabbath...but only 29 days later.

So, the new moon is not about "things" that God made, but it's about God's other creation: laws. And when the sabbath and the new moon happen on the same day, there is a reminder of more of the world God created long ago, which includes "things" and "laws." That's why the Rabbis wrote the prayer on the sabbath/new moon "You created Your world long ago": this day reminds us of both creations. As Rabbi Israel Chait said, you can teach a child anything. Just speak his language. ■





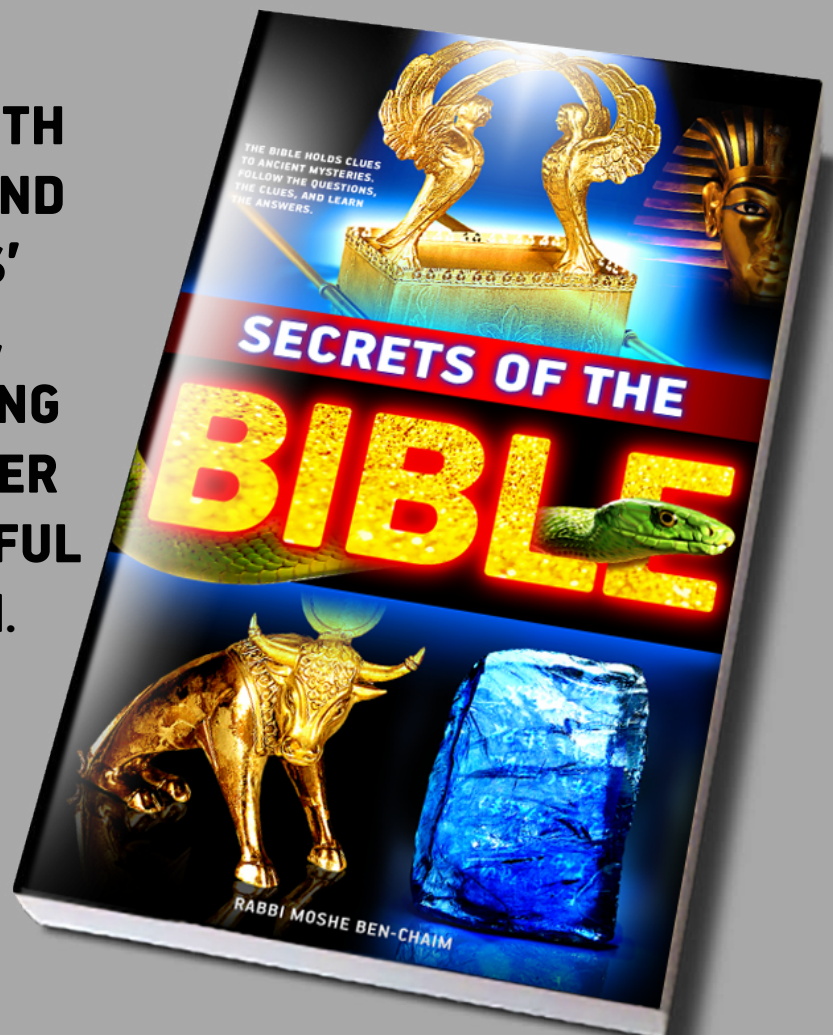
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The Red Heifer

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week's parsha, Chukat, describes the ritual procedure of the "Red Heifer." The Torah has a unique attitude to the subject of death. We need to recognize and appreciate extreme difference between Judaism and the other religions on this matter.

The two other "major" religions are firmly grounded in man's aversion and inability to accept human mortality. Man faces an intractable conflict between his yearning for immortality and his inescapable awareness that this world is temporal. He is forced to recognize on an intellectual plane that, at some point, he is going to die.

But do we truly internalize this truth on an emotional level? Even at an advanced age, many people initiate ventures that

would only make sense if they were to be around for a very long time. Many human behaviors are founded on the unconscious premise that that they will be here forever.

To resolve this fundamental dilemma of human existence, people turn to religion, which enjoys immunity from rational scrutiny or the need to make sense.

Under the influence of the "religious imagination," man invents a fantasy of paradise, in which he will exist eternally. This is expressed by the idea of the "happy hunting grounds." The particulars of the afterlife vision vary with different groups, but essentially reflect their primary values and ultimate aspirations.

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Of course, there is a “price” to be paid for admission to heaven. The basic requirement is that one must sacrifice, to a certain extent, one’s share in this world. For some reason, which is not fully explained, you just can’t have it all. You must choose. If you desire the joys of paradise, you must cut back on the delights of this world.

Therefore, the underlying motivation of most people in assuming the restrictions of their religion is to be “saved” from death and awarded immortality.

The most blatant illustration of this type of thinking is the Islamic jihadist. In his view, life in this world is devoid of significance and value. It is a paltry price to pay for the great joys of the afterlife.

This attitude is regarded by the terrorists as a significant advantage in their war against the infidel. They openly proclaim that we are at a disadvantage because we cherish life, but they love and celebrate death. Faulty religious doctrine can be the most destructive force on earth. It is only through major theological revision within Islam that the war against terrorism can be won.

What is Judaism’s view on this vital subject? Our religion affirms the supreme value of “tikkun olam,” perfection of the world. Those who contribute to the betterment of mankind through commerce, scientific progress, and social welfare perform a great mitzvah.

According to the Rambam, the commandments have two purposes. First, they convey vital knowledge of the highest truths that are essential to human fulfillment. They are also designed to improve our moral nature by instilling ethical virtues and training us to behave with mercy, justice, and love for mankind.

The Torah does not want us to sacrifice life, but rather to joyfully live it on the highest possible level. That is why the Torah doesn’t speak very much about death, which is not the focal point of its philosophy. Instead, its aim is to ameliorate the human condition in this world for both the individual and society as a whole.

The afterlife is alluded to, but not explicitly mentioned, in Scripture, which does not recognize a conflict between man’s enjoyment of life and his quest for eternity. To the contrary, for the person who lives righteously, there is a seamless transition between this world and the next.

Proper observance of the commandments perfects the soul, enabling the person to have a fulfilling life in the here and now. Upon death, the perfected soul continues its existence and attains an ultimate state of bliss that is beyond our capacity to imagine or describe.

Our parsha introduces us to the concept of tumah (ritual impurity) that is acquired through contact with a human corpse. The most pertinent consequence of tumah is the inability to perform the service in the Temple.

The ashes of the Red Heifer, when mixed with water, were used in the purification process, which required seven days. The impure person was sprinkled with this special water on the third and seventh day and, after immersion in a mikvah (ritual bath), regained a state of taharah (purity).

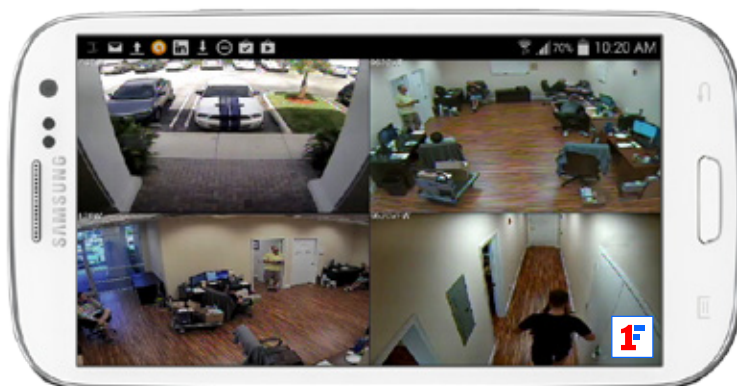
Why would contact with a corpse disqualify a Kohen (priest) from the Temple service? I would like to suggest one possible rationale. The type of religiosity that is steeped in the fear of death and longing for immortality is a corrupt theological approach that is totally antithetical to the ideals and objectives of Judaism.

Encountering a corpse has a sobering and depressing effect on man. It renders him susceptible to religious mechanisms that he hopes will save him from a similar fate. That is not the state of mind in which a person should approach the true service of Hashem. The Torah wants to dissociate the fear of death from the life-affirming values of the Holy Temple.

Our religion extols the “Service of Love” and urges us to worship Hashem with joy and happiness. May we merit to attain this lofty ideal.

Shabbat shalom. ■

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