



Grief and Ritual that Transcend our Understanding: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Hukkat*

Numbers 19:1 – 22:1
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In *parashat Hukkat*, we are struck by a specter of death and turmoil within the narrative describing the people of Israel as they wander the desert. In considering this portion, we may gain important insights into our understanding of death, loss and healing.

In the opening verses, we are instructed that a person who is rendered "unclean or defiled" through contact with a corpse is to be sprinkled with "water of lustration" made from the ashes of a sacrificed "red heifer without blemish." This mysterious ritual is elaborated for eleven verses and described as "a law (*hok*) for all time." (Numbers 19:1-11)

As the portion continues, we learn of the deaths of Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron -- each different in terms of their recorded dying process as well as in the reactions of the nation.

In the case of Miriam, the text succinctly reports (Numbers 20:1) that she has died in the desert and was buried there. No further response or ritual is described about the end of life of a woman whose leadership in the exodus from Egypt is well celebrated (Exodus 15:20).

Later in our *parasha* (Numbers 20:25), Aaron's death is detailed. Moses is instructed to ascend a mountain with his brother and nephew, disrobe Aaron, and adorn Elazar with his father's garments. The dramatic scene culminates with Aaron's public death atop the mountain. The people, having witnessed this elaborate ceremony, respond with crying, as the verse indicates "and the entire house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days" (Numbers 20:29). This vivid narrative is the source of our custom to mark the first 30 days after a death as an intense period of mourning – *Shloshim*. The two contrasting accounts of reactions to Miriam's and Aaron's deaths are instructive as we attempt to navigate the paths of our individual and national losses.

It is relevant to attend to the storyline that interweaves the accounts of the red heifer and deaths of Miriam and Aaron – that is the thirst and search for water. Throughout the portion, we learn of a people famished for water, belligerent, and even bemoaning their salvation from the bondage of Egypt only to perish in the desert (Numbers 20:3-4). This desperation and upheaval culminates a few verses later in Moses' fateful beating of the stone, an outburst for which we learn that he forfeits his right to enter the land of Israel.

I'd like to suggest that we consider this frantic search for water in the context of a reaction to loss. The death of Miriam, unprocessed and raw, gives rise to an outcry, unfiltered, visceral and aimless. As we are aware, losses, particularly traumatic losses, engender a spectrum of physical, cognitive and emotional

responses. These normal reactions, which range from being unpleasant or terrifying to offering solace and healing, are known to be hard wired into our being and stem from the range of relationships which we experience as we travel life's journey.

The losses of Miriam and Aaron, distinct in their accounting, also may cue us to recognize the variability in the way people die – and attest to the nature of death and loss – equally as individual as the imprint of one's life. These differing accounts suggest that reactions to loss, be they ritualized (in the case of Aaron), or covert (in the case of Miriam) may be “expressed” in varying forms.

When the nascent Jewish nation is confronted with the loss of Miriam, equilibrium is disturbed and a world of safety and security is shaken. Moses, also in grief, is challenged to find a framework to stabilize a nation seeking to be grounded. The ritual of Aaron's death offers such a context.

Let's reflect back to the juxtaposition of the intriguing rite of the red heifer and its role in the purification from the *tum'ah* (defilement) of death. Nineteenth century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh noted an etymological relationship between *tum'ah* and *timtum*, "confusion"; a connection which suggests that the intensity of physical experience is what renders a person "impure" by virtue of his or her being emotionally overwhelmed. Acknowledging the inherent chaos of losing a loved one as a place of "impurity" – not in the sense of degradation, but rather in the experience of alienation and otherness – sensitizes us to the often deep and existential pain which loss may provoke. The elusiveness of the red heifer, as a "law of all time" suggests to us that the eternal mystery and destabilizing potential of death as an integral aspect of mortality may best be navigated by a willingness to surrender to the unknown and the Holy. In *parashat Hukat*, the red heifer is offered as a paradigm of *hok* (i.e. law without any clear rationale), highlighting the limits of our understanding and the necessity, at times, to abandon logic and reason by submitting to faith and belief in the Transcendent.

Life's journey is by nature fraught with love, attachments, losses and pain. While we each possess the capacity to access resources and responses that have meaning in our lives, it may also be true that the ultimate path toward healing and purity lies in that which is not logically comprehended, nor need be.

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