

Torah Table Talk

Matters of the Heart:

Passover Cleaning and Spiritual Renewal

Parshat Shemini/ Shabbat Parah

Leviticus 9:1 – 11:47, Numbers 19:1-22

Ezekiel 36:16 – 38



Shabbat Parah is one of the four special Sabbaths which precede the celebration of Passover. On each of these Sabbaths we read a special section from a second *Torah* scroll as well as a special *Haftorah* portion. The special *Torah* portion we read this Shabbat is taken from Numbers, Chapter 19. It deals with the *Parah Adumah*, the red heifer, which the ancient priests *ritually* slaughtered and burnt on the altar. The ashes of the *Parah Adumah* was then mixed with water as well as certain types of plants and was used in an elaborate ritual of purification for those who came into contact with a corpse or an impure animal. Such a person could not enter the Temple precincts until he underwent a ritual of purification. We read about the *Parah Adumah* before Passover because anyone who wished to participate in the Passover sacrifice had to make sure that he was ritually pure before the celebration of this holiday.

The law of the *Parah Adumah* was considered to be a *khok*, a statute, or a law for which there is no apparent rationale or explanation. We are commanded to fulfill these *Mitzvot* out of faith; we do it because God said so. The idea of purification, however, is very much in the air at this time of year as we prepare for Passover and we get rid of all the *hametz* in our possession. The *haftorah*, taken from the book of Ezekiel which we read on *Shabbat Parah* also deals with the theme of purification. It describes a form of purification that is far more spiritual. For Ezekiel, the people of Israel must undergo a process of renewal and transformation so that they will have a “new heart.”

Ezekiel 36:25-28

I will sprinkle pure water upon you and you shall be pure; I will purify you from all your impurities and from all your fetishes. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My spirit in you. Thus I will call you to follow My laws and faithfully observe my rules. Then you will dwell in the land which I gave your fathers and you shall be My people I will be your God.

Leviticus Rabbah 35:5

R. Levi told the parable of an isolated settlement thrown into confusion by ravaging troops. What did the king do? He set a guard within it to protect it. The Holy One [acted in a similar way when He] said: The Torah is called a stone, as in the verse "The tables of stone, and the law and the commandment" (Exodus 24:12); the impulse to evil is likewise called a stone, as in the verse "I will take away the heart of stone out of your flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). Thus, since Torah is a stone, and the impulse to evil a stone, let one stone guard against the other stone

BT Yoma 85b

Rabbi Akiva said: Happy are you, Israel! Who is He before whom you are cleansed? And who is He that makes you clean? Your Father who is in heaven, for He said, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean" (Ezek. 36:25). And Scripture further says, "Thou pool/hope of Israel, the Lord!" (Jer. 17:13). Just as the pool cleanses those who are unclean, so the Holy One cleanses Israel.

Berachot 17a

Rabbi Alexanderi used to offer the following prayer after reciting the *Amida*: Master of the Universe: You know that it is our desire to do your will! What stands in our way? It is the leaven that is in the dough, and the oppression of the nations. May it be your will that you save us from them so that we can again serve you with a whole heart. ” (*Rashi*’s comment on the phrase, **The leaven in the dough**: This is the evil inclination in our hearts that causes us to ‘become leavened.’)

Rabbi Joseph Hertz in his commentary on Pirke Avot, Sayings of the Father

In Hebrew the heart is the source of feeling and action, as well as the seat of understanding. “The heart sees, hears, speaks; the heart rejoices weeps, breaks and rebels; the heart invents, suspects, desires, loves, and hates; meditates, schemes, and obeys.” (Midrash) If the heart is good, it will prompt only right action.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does it mean to have “a good heart?” Is a good heart a choice or simply an inbred characteristic? Why does Ezekiel contrast a heart of stone with a heart of flesh?
2. Almost all of the sources above including the Book of the Ezekiel speak of the human heart as the source of action. In modern terms would we speak of the heart in this way? What part of the human anatomy, if any would we associate with these qualities? What do all these sources have in mind when they speak of the renewal of the heart?
3. The Talmud speaks of the evil inclination as *chametz*, and as “the yeast in the dough.” Why? Is the *chametz* really evil or toxic? What would our bread be like if we didn’t have the yeast with which to make it? What do you think the rabbis are saying about the evil inclination?
4. Ezekiel implies that human beings are unable to change and renew themselves. God must, “give us a new heart and a new spirit,” and “remove the heart of stone” from our bodies. Why is this? Do you think that Ezekiel is really expressing pessimism regarding the human ability to change?
5. What is the connection between cleaning our homes for Pesach and self-renewal? What does repentance have to do with the celebration of Passover? If we think of *chametz* as something we must remove not only from our homes but from our being, what qualities would you like to get rid of as part of your spring Passover cleaning?
6. Besides house cleaning and cooking how else should we prepare ourselves for Passover?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org or contact Rabbi Mark B Greenspan at Haravmark@Optonline.net. Readers are invited to sponsor a weekly edition of Torah Table Talk.

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

Copyright 2005 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan