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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hukkat/Balak

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The laws of the Red Heifer are considered to be among the inscrutable commandments of the Torah. The elaborate ritual was ordained for the purpose of purifying those who had become ritually unclean through contact with a dead body.

One of the strange features of this procedure was that while it purified the impure, it defiled all those who were connected with the preparation of the ashes and water of purification “It purifies the impure, and simultaneously defiles the pure.” How could the exact same ingredients lead to opposite results? I suggest a possible explanation.

Those engaged in purifying others might naturally come to think of themselves as being highly important individuals. The impure people must turn to them for help. Being in this position of spiritual power could easily lead the “purifiers” to aggrandize themselves, to subtly (or not so subtly) adopt feelings of superiority. To prevent this eventuality, the Torah declares that the purifiers must themselves be rendered impure. Thus, they will not develop an inflated sense of self-importance, because they will realize that they must become ritually defiled while they purify others. The process does not raise them above those they serve, but actually lowers their status of ritual purity.

The ancient Red Heifer ceremony relates to a deeply significant aspect of religious psychology. Its message continues to be relevant today.

Some years ago I attended a meeting of Orthodox rabbis to discuss policies relating to conversion to Judaism. One of the rabbis unabashedly proclaimed: “We have the power! We can demand prospective converts to do everything our way. We do not need to make any concessions because we have total control. They need us, we don’t need them. We have the power!”

I responded: “Did we become rabbis so that we can gain and exert power? Isn’t it our responsibility to help others and bring them closer to God and Torah, humbly and sincerely? Isn’t it antithetical to our religious worldview to arrogate to

ourselves “power” to make people squirm, and bend to our will, and meet our demands—even when these demands far exceed what the actual halakha requires?”

He responded: “We have the power, let’s use it.”

His attitude has largely prevailed in the Orthodox rabbinic establishment. I frequently receive emails and phone calls from prospective converts who have faced abuse and arrogance in their dealings with Orthodox rabbis and rabbinic courts. Among the criticisms I’ve recently heard: the would-be converts are treated like numbers, not like people; the rabbis don’t return calls, don’t keep scheduled meetings, keep delaying the actual conversion; the rabbis keep adding requirements, well beyond anything stated in Rambam and Shulhan Arukh; in some cases the rabbis have made rude comments, even questioning the morality or integrity of the would-be converts. “We have the power, let’s use it!”

This is not “power” but arrogance and corruption. In halakhic terms, this is called “inuy hadin”, a miscarriage of justice causing undue suffering. It is a mockery of the halakhic process, not a fulfillment of it.

It is not that the rabbis are bad people. Certainly, they consider themselves to be good people who seek to implement Jewish law and tradition in the best standards possible. The problem is that when people are in positions of “power”, they are easily corrupted by this “power”. They come to see themselves as the ultimate arbiters of halakha and truth; they become part of a larger culture of power-grabbing and power-holding; they see themselves as representatives of real truth and they threaten or malign those who disagree with them.

The ritual of the Red Heifer provides a vital lesson for those in positions of religious leadership—whether rabbis or laypeople. It teaches us to see our roles with humility and sensitivity, not to inflate our self-importance, and certainly not to seek “power” over others. It reminds us to focus full attention on those who turn to us, to do our best to serve and to help.

It is not “power” that we seek, but compassion and justice. It is not lordship that we desire, but service to God and humanity.

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