Purification: Thoughts for Shabbat Parah

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In ancient times, one who came into contact with the dead body of a human being was considered to be ritually impure and needed to undergo a purification process involving the ashes of a red heifer. It should be remembered that it is a mitzvah to care for a dead body and to participate in a proper funeral and burial. Thus, becoming ritually impure was a “normal” fact of life which occurred to almost everyone.

Since it is praiseworthy and a mitzvah to come into contact with a dead body for the purposes of burial, why does one become ritually impure in the process?

Perhaps the rules of ritual impurity and purification can be understood in the following way. A living human being has a body infused with a soul. A living person, with body and soul, has physical form as well as thoughts, feelings, and personality. Upon death, though, the soul departs, leaving only the body behind. The body looks exactly like the person who has died. The form is the same; but the soul is gone.

Ritual impurity is a way of teaching that a body without a soul is no longer a full human being. While we must treat the body with utmost respect, we must also realize that the body is only a physical entity that must be buried. The soul—which had infused the body with spirit and life—no longer inheres in the body. We are commanded to tend to the dead and to confront ritual impurity so that we must necessarily recognize this truth: body and soul together equal a human being; body without soul equals a dead body.

When we come into contact with a corpse, it is emotionally painful. We are reminded in a stark way of human mortality—our own mortality! We witness the physical packaging of a human being that is now deprived of its life force. This confrontation shakes us; symbolically, we become ritually impure, thrown off balance. To regain our composure, we need to undergo a kind of purification to reaffirm the ongoing value of life, the importance of remembering the person as he/she was when alive. Ritual impurity signifies our sense of despair; ritual purification signifies our desire and need to regain our emotional balance.

We need to take notice when a soul leaves a body. We need to see that something serious has happened, something important has changed.

There is a lesson in this beyond the specific rules relating to a corpse. The broader teaching reminds us that an entity may retain its physical form and yet be deprived of its spiritual essence.

In his novel, “Babbitt,” Sinclair Lewis describes a conventionally successful businessman who has a fashionable house, and who seems to be doing everything that would be expected of a successful person. After describing Babbitt’s conventionally appointed home, Lewis notes: “In fact, there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home.”

Babbitt’s house looked just right and had all the suitable furnishings; but it lacked the warmth, the spiritual essence necessary for it to be called a home. It was a “body” without a “soul.”

So it is with so many aspects of life. People maintain the external forms which seem just right; but the inner soul is missing. People focus on creating a successful image, the posture of being happy: but they aren’t genuinely successful, and they aren’t happy.

There are many houses that are not homes. There are many buildings that are not places of sympathetic human interaction. There are many institutions which maintain external forms of worship, public service, civic propriety: but which are devoid of authenticity. The external appearance may seem to be intact; but the soul is not there, genuine life is not there.

When we confront a body without a soul, we are saddened and upset. We must deal with ritual impurity. Then we must seek purification.

When we confront the world in which we live, we must cleanse ourselves from the popular but mistaken emphasis on external appearances. We must not be deceived by counterfeit signs of “success,” but must quietly and humbly strive for authenticity.

Nothing is truly alive if it has lost its soul.

Angel for Shabbat