

Torah Thoughts Vayakhel/Pekudei

5778:

In addition to having a double parshah this week – Vayakhel/Pekudei – this Shabbat also includes a special reading drawn from another section of the Torah. The focus of that reading is the *parah adumah*, the red heifer; for that reason this Shabbat is called Shabbat Parah. This portion is another instance in which a strange, ancient rite can shed light on the human condition. The red heifer is an all red (or perhaps brown) cow, one that had never been used as a beast of burden, which was slaughtered and then burned to ashes. Those ashes, in turn, were mixed with water and used as a purifying agent, which was sprinkled on those who had contracted ritual impurity through contact with the dead. The reading is done at this time of year because those making pilgrimage trips to Jerusalem for Passover in ancient times would have to be ritually pure to be able to eat the Passover sacrifice. The ritual was a means of purification from contact with the dead and a way to move someone who was temporarily isolated from the community back into it.

The red heifer ceremony originated as ritual that marked the end of a person's impure status following contact with the dead, and their ability to re-engage in communal life after a week of isolation. And although the use of the red heifer's ashes fell out of use after the destruction of the Temple in the first century, the human need to recover from the effects of death, and then to re-enter the life which death interrupted, remained. While Jews today do not consider contact with the dead as defiling, Jewish custom has maintained the practice of semi-isolation following a death through sitting shivah. Mourners are to stay at home for a seven day period, except for Shabbat, when they come to communal services. In a sense, our visits to mourners during shivah perform the same function as the ashes of the red heifer: By comforting the mourners, we ritualize their grief and provide a way for them to return to their regular activities.

The death of someone close to us is no longer considered defiling, but it can wound us emotionally and spiritually. Spending a week at home to recover from it is not only a religious mandate; it is a helpful practice that gives us time to grieve and to recover. Just as the ashes of the red heifer marked the transition from death back to life, shivah and the visits associated with

it can usher a mourner through the psychological impairment of loss and sadness back to their former status. We continue to need rituals to mark such transitions; their value lies in their symbolism and in their repeated use over lifetimes. As we approach Passover, and its complex seder, we are mindful of the importance of ritual in binding us to one another and to our sacred history.