



על מהות הטהרה The Essence of Purity

■ The Red Heifer and the Color Wheel

One of the great fundamentals revealed in the Torah is the process of shaking off the defilement of death. It is effected via the ashes of the *Parah Adumah*, the mysterious Red Heifer. By sprinkling a mixture of ashes of a red cow, water and other ingredients upon one who is “impure,” his status changes to “pure.” The Torah itself calls this process a special *chukah*, a unique statute, implying that the human intellect cannot properly understand it.

Nevertheless, let us try, with the limited means at our disposal, to approach an understanding of some of the sublime concepts embodied in the Red Heifer purification process – if only to fulfill the words of our master and prophet, Moshe Rabbeinu:

... כִּי הוּא חֻמַּתְכֶם וּבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים
הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ רַק עִם חֻכְם וְנִבּוֹן הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה.
*...for [the Torah] is your wisdom and your understanding
in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all
these statutes and say, “Only this great nation is
a wise and understanding people.”*

... וּמִי גוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים צְדִיקִים כָּכֵל הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת...
*... and which great nation has righteous statutes and
ordinances, as this entire Torah? ... (D'varim 4,6-8)*

To this end, we will turn to the physical world, and specifically to the world of color. Let us study the spectrum of the seven colors of the rainbow formed by the diffusion of light rays by drops of water or a prism. The colors are as follows: Violet, Indigo (deep blue), Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange and Red. They include the three Primary Colors of Light, namely, Blue (color #3), Green (4), and Red (7). If they are mixed, white light results; when we take the opposite approach and “break,” or diffuse, white light, the spectrum’s colors are produced.¹

Let us now look at the seven days of Creation. The progression begins with the **inanimate** (the creation of water on days one and two), continues with **plant** life (grass and trees on days three and four), then **animal** life (fish and beasts on the fifth and sixth days), and finally, in the second part of the sixth day, the highest form of life: **man**, who has the gift of speech. This is the familiar series of inanimate, plant, animal, and man – and it is remarkably parallel to the progression of the primary colors along the spectrum: blue stands for mineral-like water, followed by green growth (grass and trees), then red (the blood of life), and finally white - within which all the other colors are included.

Let us apply this to the Red Heifer. The Torah has very specific commands regarding the exact mixture for the purification process. First, we must take an unblemished red cow; the redness must be absolute, without even two black or white hairs. To find such a cow is clearly not easy, and in fact, a Red Heifer is very rare. We can say that it represents the ultimate in animal life - symbolized by the color red, as in the blood of life.

The cow is then slaughtered and burnt on the altar, giving us a very concentrated abstract in the form of ashes. Into the fire the Priest throws more strong “red,” produced by the crimson worm (*tolaat ha’shani*). This is now a mixture of the extremes of animal life: the biggest and the smallest.

The Priest is not yet finished. He also throws into the flames two types of plant life: cedar (*erez*) and hyssop (*ezov*). Representing the color green, they are the two extremes of plant life: the strong and tall cedar tree, and the small and lowly hyssop that crawls along walls. Burning this mixture of red and green, of large and small, of animal and plant, produces ashes in their **most potent and most concentrated** form.

1. We distinguish between two sets of Primary Colors: those of Light (blue, red, and green) and those of Painting (blue, red, and yellow). Mixing the latter produces black, which is the absence of light, while combining primary colored lights (which include the additional colors that result from any two of them) gives white.

Finally, the Priest adds to the mixture a measure of inanimate spring water, which is the color blue: the reflection of the sky, and the color of the oceans as they reflect the sky. The final mixture, therefore, includes the three primary colors: Blue, Green and Red - the quintessential blend of mineral, plant and animal, in a concentrated mixture with ash and water.

The next step is to take this mixture and sprinkle it on the impure person, twice over the course of a week. Let us take note of the exact process:

On the third day of the person's defilement, and again on the seventh, he is sprinkled with a few drops of the water-ash mixture on a cluster of hyssop. We thus have, once again, a combination of water-blue (color #3 on the spectrum), blood-red (7), and hyssop-green (4).

We learned in our previous lesson, "*The Essence of Impurity*," that one who is impure after having come in contact with death feels an emptiness within him. To offset this and revive his disappeared basic life powers, we must arouse the dynamic force of life that will push him back into the circle of achievement and active living.

Once again, let us consult the physical world to help us understand this process. Our planet Earth spins around on its axis every 24 hours. What keeps us and Earth's other occupants from being thrown off it into outer space as it speeds around? The answer is: the gravity of Earth itself. Gravity is a general law of nature in the entire universe.

How strong is gravity? It depends on how strongly Earth pulls from its core, expressed in the weight of the object being pulled. If the Earth were to be squeezed down to half its size without losing any of its mass, becoming much more densely packed, our distance from the center of the Earth would be half what it is now, and our weight would be four times more. This means that gravity would exert four times as much force on us. The more the Earth is compacted, the more we would weigh, exponentially. If the Earth would be compacted into a tiny ball, the force of gravity upon us would be practically infinite.

How does this relate to the world of *tum'ah v'taharah* and the Red Heifer purification process? In a most remarkably parallel manner, as follows:

The ashen mixture of cow-worm-cedar-hyssop-water is the most concentrated blend possible of the forces of mineral, plant and animal – and is thus parallel to a tiny, compacted Earth. The "gravity" of this powerful concentrate is strong enough to draw out of the person who is *tamei* (defiled

by death) his buried sense of life, of action, of accomplishment. This force was deep inside him, but the powerful and concentrated compound of Red Heifer ash can draw it back out, and thus stabilize his spiritual state.

A new danger now presents itself, however: the possibility that his vitality will be so strong that his physical lusts will overtake him. To restore his balance and ability to control himself, one step still remains: he must immerse in a *mikveh*, a ritual pool of fresh or flowing water, on the seventh day. This final immersion in fresh water renders him totally pure – that is, in total sync and restored to his human state wherein he is drawn to action and accomplishment, and yet is able to rule over his animalistic inclinations and restrain them from controlling him.

■ Defiling the Pure

Now that we have outlined how the Red Heifer purifies a person, we must try to understand another problematic aspect of this process. Why do all those who helped out in the purification process, such as those who touched the ashes and the water mixture, now become impure? They had been in a pure, balanced state: Their mineral, plant and animal forces were lower, while their human powers were in control from above. Why should they now become impure by this same mixture that purified the one who was originally defiled?

The answer is that their previous balanced state of “man” was unsettled when they touched the Red Heifer or the mix of ashes, water, and the other ingredients. Their animalistic life force became so strong that it came close to taking over their humane ability to control their physical impulses. A small spiritual void was again formed – and this is the minor *tum'ah* that they contract for a day. In the evening, they must immerse in a ritual pool of fresh water to restore the proper balance to their soul.

In short: The Red Heifer ash mixture arouses one’s physical life forces, restoring him to parity after he has been defiled by death and the vacuum of anti-life forces. But for those who are already at equity, contact with the concentrate of physical life forces, as in the Red Heifer mixture, disturbs the balance - and they become impure.

In both cases, immersion in fresh water brings them to the level of purity. How does this work?

■ Birth and Renewal

The two final stages of the purification process, after the sprinkling of the Red Heifer's ashes, are immersion in water, and the setting of the sun – and only then is the person considered pure. How do these two elements interact and finalize the purification process? We will base our explanation on concepts taught in the Kabbalah. The *Arizal*, Rabbeinu Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi of 16th-century Tzfat, revealed to us that the purpose of immersion in a *mikveh* focuses on the “transfer from the present to the future.” Let us translate this as “Birth and Renewal.”

When the Torah refers to the purification by water of the impure person, it says he should “*wash himself in the water*” (Bamidbar 19,19). Though this sounds like he must simply take a shower, what is truly meant here is “immersion” of his entire body into water. How do we know this?

The first hint is given in the following verse, which tells us how to purify a vessel that has become defiled:

כָּל כֵּלִי... בַּמַּיִם יוֹבֵא... וְטָהַר.
*Every vessel ... shall be brought into the water ...
 and it will be pure.* (Vayikra 11,32)

This clearly indicates that purification requires that the vessel be immersed in the water, and not have water poured on it.

The second indication that “washing” here actually means “immersing” comes from the Book of Kings. When Naaman, Chief of Staff of the army of Aram, asks Elisha the Prophet to cure him of his leprosy, Elisha instructs him as follows:

הֲלוֹךְ וְרַחֲצֵתָ שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים בִּירְדֵּן וְיָשַׁב בְּשִׂרְךָ לָּךְ וְטָהַר.
*Go and wash in the Jordan River seven times,
 and your skin will be restored to you and you will be pure.* (Kings II 5,10)

A few verses later, when Naaman actually carries out this advice, we read:

וַיֵּרֵד וַיִּטְבַּל בִּירְדֵּן שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים כְּדִבַּר אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים...
*He descended and immersed in the Jordan seven times,
 as the man of G-d had told him...* (verse 14)

Thus, when Elisha told him “*to wash*,” he meant that Naaman should immerse himself. What is the essential difference between showering and immersing? In a shower, the man remains in his own world, and the water

comes to him, without touching him all at once. When immersing, however, the person leaves his own world and enters that of the water. His entire body is completely enwrapped in water. Immersion in the world of water brings him back to when he was a fetus in his mother's womb, floating in and surrounded by water on all sides. This was the pre-birth period, at the dawn of new life.

The world, too, when it was created, was originally covered totally by water; there was no dry shore or land. This starting point – completely pure of sin and wrong, totally clean of all impurity and defilement – heralds a renewal.

But this new beginning cannot penetrate completely into our consciousness until another stage occurs: the sun must set. Only then can we say that we have begun anew. This is because in the world of Torah, the day begins when night falls. Tuesday night, for instance, is actually the beginning of Wednesday, which lasts only until sunset Wednesday evening. As the Torah states:

וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד.

It was evening and [then] it was morning: one day. (B'reshit 1,5)

As we know, all of the festivals and holy days, from Sabbath to Yom Kippur, begin at night. The setting of the sun marks the beginning of a new day.

The combination of immersion in water and waiting for the night to fall leads to the turning over of a new leaf, pure and clean.

■ The Waters that Purify

Let us now look at the following verse, which concisely sums up the two ways in which water can purify: via a spring, or by a pit.

אֶךְ מֵעַן וּבֹרַר מְקוֹה מַיִם יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר...

Only a spring or pit – a gathering [mikveh] of water – shall remain pure... (Vayikra 11,36)

The basic laws pertaining to purifying waters begin with these two fundamentals:

- A spring is a natural burst of water from the earth, without human intervention. (The ocean, of course, is the largest natural gathering of water in the world, and is certainly a kosher *mikveh*.)
- A pit is a man-made hole in which rainwater is collected.

The common denominator of the two types of kosher *mikvaot* is two-fold: They are not made of water drawn via vessels, and they are not transferred by pipes that can become defiled. If either of these two conditions does not obtain, the mikveh is not kosher. The reason that only naturally-gathered or naturally-arising water can be used is because only they can serve as “beginning state” waters; water that is drawn artificially is cut off from its natural source. In addition, pipes that can become impure may not be used as a source of purity, because the water must be connected to the ground and gathered together in a natural way, or in a manner that cannot accept impurity.

We must also know how natural water “fills” a mikveh: The minimum amount for a kosher *mikveh* is 333 liters (352 quarts; the custom today is to have nearly three times that, at least 950 liters). A modern *mikveh* nowadays is built inside a building, and unsuitable water is streamed into it. These waters are then connected with a pit of kosher, naturally-collected water via an opening at least five centimeters wide, through which the two gatherings of water “touch.” The waters thus mix, and the entire *mikveh* acquires the status of “beginning-state” water and is thus kosher.

All of these basic conditions enable the *mikveh* waters to be connected with waters of the “original beginning” – the period in which life was not yet formed, when there was therefore not yet death, the basis of all impurity.

■ Blue

Though the heavens have no color, our eyes perceive that the sky is blue. The Torah describes the heavens as the epitome of purity: **בְּעֵצָם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר**, “*as clear and pure as the essence of the heavens.*” (Sh’mot 24,10)

The blue color of the ocean also comes from heaven, for the oceans simply reflect the sky. We can thus say the following: One who immerses in the blue waters of a *mikveh*, which are connected to rain water, which is connected to the earth, in which springs gush with pure water and which is largely covered by the great oceans – is as if he has immersed in the purity of the heavens.

It is fascinating to note the list of various colors of the impure skin afflictions in the Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora. The list includes many colors – white, red, yellow, green – which symbolize impure and leprous afflictions. But one color is notable in its absence: blue. This is because blue is a color of purity, the color of the skies and of the waters of the oceans, rivers, and brooks.

■ The Drive for Spirituality

We have described *tum'ah*, impurity, as a “lack of life drive.” We added that the encounter with death leads to a sense of emptiness and despair, and that this represents impurity. What we do with the ashes of the Red Heifer is in order to reawaken the will to live that lies fallen, buried deep inside and below the person’s consciousness.

We can categorize this drive for life by dividing it into two parts:

- A physical drive to take action and accomplish. This is the dynamic flow of natural life.
- A spiritual drive for an even deeper, more sublime, and purer sensation of physical daily life.

The complete purification awakens both parts: The ashes of the Red Heifer revive the physical drive, while the spiritual drive is jump-started via the immersion in the pure waters, and is strengthened by the onset of a new day.

These two drives – the physical one below, and the spiritual drive above it – together make up a complete person. The process of purification from the *tum'ah* of death must pass through all these stages, leading to the re-appearance of genuine joy that heralds the re-linking of the man with Hashem.

We can now understand another secret revealed to us by the holy *Arizal*: The reason why we do not have prophecy or Divine spirit (*ruach hakodesh*) today is chiefly because of the lack of the ashes of the Red Heifer, and from the resulting inability to attain total purity. Without total purity, we are not permitted to enter the Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple.

■ The Re-Connection

We must remember that death first came to the world when Adam and Eve defied the Divine command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Doing the opposite of G-d’s word means to detach oneself from G-d and to be independent of Him. This divorce from eternal life and the source of heavenly purity is the number-one cause for the appearance of the concept of *tum'ah* in the world. It is for this reason that sins and iniquities are also called *tum'ah* in the Torah.

It follows, then, that re-connecting to the “natural” reality – G-d’s works – means being “incapable of accepting impurity.” But the moment that some parts of the world are made available for man’s use and become detached from their natural sources, they can again receive *tum’ah*. Let us look at several examples:

1. When animals are alive, they cannot acquire the status of “impure.” This is because they do not have Free Choice, but rather simply fulfill G-d’s will automatically. In this sense, they are directly connected to the Divine plan, without being “disturbed” by human intervention or involvement.
2. Natural materials of the world cannot become impure until they have been processed into materials or tools that can serve man.
3. Fruits and vegetables cannot become impure while they are still attached to the tree or the ground. Only once they are detached from their place of growth and are rinsed with water for human use, can they then acquire the status of “impure.”
4. Most buildings that are attached to the ground cannot acquire *tum’ah*. Only once they stand on their own, detached from the ground, can they become ritually defiled.

All of the above returns us to our starting point, namely, that natural waters attached to the ground are the basis of purity. This enables us to understand the fundamental importance of “reconnecting to the source.” Each and every mitzvah that we fulfill renews and rejoins the connection between us and G-d - the source of pure eternal life - and implants within us more joy-filled life, replete with strivings of the purest essence.

