

Parah: Metaher Temeim, Metame Tehorim

- Nisson Shulman.

The built-in contradiction, and yet we are required to seek significance in every mitzvah, and this one as well. Tahor and Tameh, in synch and out of synch with the Ribono Shel Olam's requirements of spirituality. The built in contradiction appears in almost every facet of nature, in medicine, in genetics, as well as in society. It is therefore a good reason for reading it before Pesach, since freedom can become spiritual, or destructive anarchic and evil.

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Today's special maftir reading, Parshat Parah, is one of the greatest mysteries in the Torah. The Divine command is that we sprinkle the ashes of a red heifer on a person who is in the process of changing from the state of tameh to the state of tahor. I have deliberately used the Hebrew terms because they do not translate easily. Usually, the term tameh is translated "spiritually or ritually unclean". In fact it has nothing to do with cleanliness, and this term gives a very different flavor to the word than the original Hebrew. How shall we define tameh and tahor? I suggest that tahor is that condition when our souls are in harmony with God's plan for the universe and for mankind. That is very different from saying spiritually unclean. Tameh is the opposite condition, that spiritual condition when our souls cannot fully resonate to the music of God's wish for mankind.

The concepts are not mysterious. Most, if not all belief systems have such ideas. It is not difficult to understand tameh as harmonious with God's plan, and tameh as out of harmony, un-synchronized with His plan.

Yet our sages said that parah aduma is one of the mysteries of the Torah, and they meant that the real mystery is the role and function of the ashes of the Red Heifer as they are used in the process of re-establishing that harmony, when a person goes from tameh to tahor.

Throughout our history this mitzvah has been the source of confusion and misunderstanding for Jews as well as Gentiles, and has caused - as Rashi points out - misunderstanding, criticism, rejections and even anti-Semitism, hostility towards Torah and Judaism.

The Talmud warns that this would happen, saying this mitzvah is a chok, a commandment beyond human comprehension, and will be rejected by the nations of the world.

But even when we don't understand God's purpose in a particular mitzvah on an absolute basis, we must still try to find out its meaning for ourselves, a significance that would make us better, more worthy people; otherwise the mitzvah fails in its purpose, to purify the human being. So it is important to try to apply that mitzvah of the ashes of the red heifer to our own life challenges.

Why is this mitzvah singled out for criticism? Because of the built in paradox, that the ashes are used to purify he upon whom they are sprinkled, but the one who does the sprinkling, himself becomes tame upon touching those ashes. Very strange: metaher temeim, umetame tehorim. The

very same ashes assist a person to gain harmony with God's plan, and cause another person to lose that harmony. The Hebrew description can literally be translated as: "It makes pure those who are impure, and makes impure those who are pure".

Why? How can this be? And so people mock, saying, "Surely it can either purify or contaminate, it cannot do both at the same time?"

I suggest this is exactly the lesson our Creator wanted us to learn. Most things, no matter how beneficial they may seem, have the potential for abuse and danger. This is the general case in nature and the physical universe, and it is the absolute rule in man-made science and technology. Thus, even fresh air can be harmful in certain situations, for instance, where sterility is required, and the sun's rays are necessary for life and growth and in excess can cause cancer. All medicines can be abused, and many of them can become addictive. The list of side effects, some harmful, on the side of the box of even the most innocuous medicine must scare off many who have eyesight sharp enough to read the small print. In the same way, the more potent the technology is, the greater the potential it has for damage to people and the environment.

On the other side of the coin, substances, which in nature are poisonous, can also be beneficial. Toxins of the snakebite become the anti-toxins of the cure. Vaccine against disease is based on that which creates the disease in the first place. Nuclear energy can have peaceful and medicinal uses, as well as the fearful uses of war, and even in the development of the guillotine there was an initial beneficial agenda. They were, after all, looking for a more efficient and painless way of amputating gangrenous limbs.

There is no scientific breakthrough so clearly given to weal and woe, depending on how it is used, as is genetic engineering.

"This technology has now made it possible to transfer genes to totally unrelated hosts.... Medical science now has the capacity to rearrange the genetic heritage of thousands of years."(Goldstein, R. "Public Health Policy and Recombinant DNA", New England Journal of Medicine 296: 1226-1228, 1977.)

Almost 25 years ago Dr. Fred Rosner wrote: "Potential advantages of genetic engineering include the mass production of proteins valuable to man; insulin, antibiotics, antiviral agents and numerous other drugs, chemicals and vaccines which might be synthesized in large quantities by the technology of genetic engineering; curing of patients with absent or defective genes suffering from such genetic disorders as Tay-Sachs disease, hemophilia, sickle cell anemia and their like, who might be given a replacement gene; Nitrogen-producing bacteria for agriculture can be cloned; the supply of metals such as uranium and platinum might be increased by cloning bacteria that concentrate trace elements of such metals; Pollution eating bacteria might be produced." Since then, that has all come true and been produced and used. Dr. Rosner concluded, however, that there are, in contemplating such activities, enormous hazards of research going wrong. Possibly worst of all is the fact that once created, the new bugs cannot be destroyed. (Jewish Bioethics, Fred Rosner and J. David Bleich, Sanhedrin Press, 1979.)

Cloning in man raises other moral and ethical issues. Many books such as Vance Packard's

"People Shapers" and Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" highlight where such scientific advance can go terribly wrong.

So Genetic engineering is certainly a very good example of metaher temeim umetame tehorim, which you can translate "healing the sick, but endangering those who are well", and this is not a mystery, but rather a valid warning to be applied to many aspects of life.

It surely can be applied to the impending "Second Gulf War". The intent of the United States and its allies, as expressed by President Bush, is to liberate, to free Iraq from tyranny, and to save its neighbors and the entire world from the threat of bio-terrorism. The "surgical operation" on Iraq, a country whose leadership has defiled it, made it tame, can fulfill the hopes of the allies so that a domino effect can begin, introducing liberty, freedom and democracy to that area of the world. Indeed, we hope – and pray – that it has already begun. We ourselves surely pray that it will also bring peace to Israel and all our people. That surely, if it should come true, is metaher temeim.

I suggest that this thought is one of the reasons that this portion is read on a special Shabbat before Pesach. Physical freedom was given to our ancestors in exchange for spiritual commitment to God. We have a responsibility to use our freedom wisely and in God's service; else it can become destructive, anarchic, as we see before our eyes in Eastern countries, which were not primed and made ready for their sudden burst of freedom. Freedom, too, can defile the pure just as it purifies the defiled. The Torah wants us to enjoy our freedom, but in harmony with God's plan, tahor, not tame. That is why a tameh person cannot eat of the Pascal offering.

May the inspiration of the para aduma help us draw closer to God's plan for the universe, for man, and for ourselves; to overcome tameh existence, and achieve tahor existence; to live according to God's plan for man in this world. Amen, ken yehi ratzon.

[submitted by Nisson Shulman]