

The Bread of Redemption
Parah/Ki Tissah, 5777
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This week my new car arrived. It is the world's first ever Matzah Mobile. In case you don't know me by now, I am super, super proud of it and I plan on driving it every day. I am looking for volunteers to ride around in it with me on the morning of Tuesday, April 4 as we give out Matzah to promote our free community Seder. Let me know if you would like to join me! (Special thanks to Hannah Gerstein for the inspirational idea of wrapping a car in a matzah!)

On Friday I visited with the Conference of Catholic Bishops. They showed me the picture of the Pope's recent visit to D.C. and they showed me the Pope getting into his special Pope Mobile. I said, "That's nothing. Wait till you see MY car!"

People have said to me, "Well, what are you going to do with the Matzah Mobile after Pesach?"

My friend Maraji told me to tell them, "It says on most Matzah boxes, "Kosher for Passover and all year round!" That's the Matzah Mobile." Hopefully, someone can design for us a bumper sticker that says, "Matzah Mobile: Kosher for Passover and all year round."

The spiritual message of matzah is of course great for Passover AND all year round.

What is Matzah? The Torah calls Matzah, *lechem oni* (Devarim 16:3), bread of affliction. The Talmud calls it the bread of a poor person, *ani* (Pesachim, 115b). The holy Zohar calls it the bread of faith (Raya Mehemna, Bo, 41a.) The Talmud also calls it, *lechem she-onin alav devarim harbeh*, bread that we say many things about (Pesachim, 115b).

This last statement of the Talmud is an invitation to give our own adjective to Matzah. And indeed, there are so many spiritual descriptions of the Matzah. In that spirit, I share with you my personal favorite: Matzah is the bread of redemption!

We can understand the relevance of Matzah all year round by looking at the two Torah readings for today.

There are four special extra Torah readings leading up to Pesach. This week we read, *parashat parah* (Bamidbar, 19).

Parashat Parah describes a mysterious ritual. The basic concept of the ritual is that if a person becomes ritually impure (*tamei*) as a consequence of their physical encounter with a dead body, then in order to become pure (*tahor*) they need to

undergo a ritual of having sprinkled over them with a hyssop on days three and seven a mixture that includes the ashes of a red heifer mixed with spring water.

About this riddle, the wisest of all men, King Solomon, said, “*amarti achakmah, be-hi rechokah mimeni*, I said will understand it, but it is distant from me” (Yoma, 14a). The law is mysterious and requires deep analysis in order to understand it in its entirety.

The most unique feature of this law is that while this ritual allows the *tamei* person to become *tahor*, it also causes most of the people involved in the preparation of the red heifer’s ashes to themselves become *tamei*.

So *tamei* becomes *tahor*, and *tahor* becomes *tamei*.

Here is what the symbolism of this aspect of the ritual means to me.

One who has come in contact with a dead body, or in broader terms, a mourner, is *tamei*. Another way to describe the word *tamei* is spiritual isolation; so in other words, the mourner will often, even today, feel isolated. The mourner has experienced a spiritual trauma. S/he has seen the death of a person. This can sometimes precipitate a tremendous spiritual crisis.

Life for the living just can’t resume as normal following a death. The Torah knows that the mourner or anyone dealing with the existential trauma of an encounter with death is isolated from the community by their singular experience and needs a purifying ritual in order to rejoin the community. The ritual of the Red Heifer is this purification process; on a basic level it is a mere ritual, but on an emotional level it is also a healing process that allows people to reenter the community.

Today we no longer have the ritual of the Red Heifer, but we do have reentry rituals for mourners. We have *shiva*, *shloshim*, reciting kaddish for eleven months, and a year of mourning. There is also the idea of washing one’s hands when leaving a cemetery. And recently many have taken upon themselves the practice of immersing in a mikvah after their shivah has ended. These are all either rabbinic laws or pietistic *minhagim*. On a limited level they somewhat address the longing for the spiritually powerful reentry ritual of the Red Heifer.

But these rituals are not simply a reentry process of the mourner. It goes much deeper than that.

Why was it necessary for those kohanim involved in preparing the Red Heifer to become *tamei*? For one person to become *tahor* why does another have to become *tamei*?

The answer is that the person becoming *tahor* does not simply become pure. S/he has actually risen to a higher spiritual level than ever before. By going through the

purification process one elevates oneself to a previously unimaginable spiritual position. As a result of the Red Heifer ritual it leaves the formerly *tamei* person on a higher spiritual level than the one who actually is doing the purifying.

If the person being purified wouldn't be on a higher level than the kohen, s/he wouldn't necessarily understand that the purification process actually worked. By making the kohen *tamei*, we are saying to the formerly *tamei* person, you have come such a distance that you are actually better than you ever were before; you are even better than the kohen who helped you get here.

Returning to our analogy of a mourner. A mourner often faces a spiritual crisis after suffering a loss. But through strict adherence to the reentry rituals the mourner also has a much more profound spiritual depth than ever before. As a result of their crisis the mourner often rises to a much higher spiritual level.

There is a similar idea that appears in the weekly torah portion, Ki Tisah.

This Torah portion deals with the greatest sin of the Jewish people, the sin of the Golden Calf. It goes without saying that a mourner has not committed a sin and by analogizing the Red Heifer to the Golden Calf we are in no way shape or form implying that. But we are saying that just like we can learn about the spiritual power of matzah by looking at the ritual of the Red Heifer, so too, we can gain insight from looking at the sin of the Golden Calf. Indeed, our rabbis directly connect the two passages and tell us that the ritual of the Red Heifer serves as an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, "*ba-ha-em le-khaper al ha-ben*, comes the mother to atone for the child" (Rashi, 19:22).

How could the Golden Calf have ever happened? The Jewish people had just finished crossing the sea, getting the Torah at Sinai through a direct revelation from Gd, and from that great spiritual height they committed this terrible sin. Moreover, the Torah highlights this fall by placing the commandment to build the mishkan right before the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah has been describing spiritual perfection through construction of the mishkan. From those heights we immediately shift and see this tremendous spiritual failure. How was it even possible?

The apologetic answer of most medieval commentators is to say that this was either an extenuating circumstance, e.g. they were tricked by Satan; or that actually the sin was not as bad as we might have thought, e.g. they just wanted a leader, not a real Gd; or that it wasn't done by the actual Israelites, e.g. it was done by the mixed multitude who ascended with them from Egypt. (See, for example, the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban.)

However, the Talmud takes an even more radical approach. That Talmud argues that God intentionally caused the Israelites to sin in order to teach us about the power of repentance.

“Amar R. Yehoshua b. Levi lo asu et ha-egel elah liten pitchon peh le-baalei teshuvah, the Israelites made the Golden Calf only in order to give encouragement to penitents” (Avodah Zarah, 4b).

The commentaries understand this to mean that Gd usually protects the righteous from sinning, but in this instance Gd removed the Divine Protection and thus the Israelites sinned (see Torat Chayim).

The reason that Gd withdrew Divine Protection from sin from the righteous Israelites is because through the story of sin and repentance that surrounds the Golden Calf, we learn that repentance is possible.

It is necessary to know that repentance is always possible because a fundamental tenet of our faith is that the penitent can achieve a deeper spiritual relationship with Gd than the one who has never sinned in the first place. As the Talmud states, *“be-makom she-baalei tshuvah omdim tzaddikim gemurim einam yecholim laamod, in a place where penitents stand, the purely righteous are unable to stand” (Berachot, 34b).*

The upshot of this Talmudic teaching is that God caused us to sin with the Golden Calf for God wanted to teach us that when we sin it is not the end of our relationship with God, but an opportunity to forge a stronger connection with God than we ever thought possible.

Here is an example of what that means to me.

Our synagogue works with prisoners. Volunteers from our congregation lead services and visits to prisoners. And people from our congregation write letters to the prisoners in jail. The prisoners often write back the most beautiful and spiritually powerful letters. They are filled with great spiritual insights and it is an honor to read these letters.

Before anyone writes to these prisoners, I warn them, whatever you do, do not google the prisoner. Do not try to read about what they did that got them placed in prison. That’s not the point of what this outreach is about.

One holy volunteer in our prison outreach once came to me really upset. This person said, “I made a mistake. I never should have done it but I googled one of the prisoners and found out what they did. Now I can’t get it out of my mind.”

How can it be that these prisoners have such profound spiritual ideas! Their sins are so great and yet their writings are so powerful!

This is a great paradox. They have often times done things which no human being has the right to forgive them for, but that doesn't preclude them having a genuine and powerful relationship with God.

This is the basic point of what God was teaching via causing the sin of the Golden Calf: No matter what we have done – even a sin as great as the Golden Calf -- that doesn't preclude an opportunity for spiritual redemption.

What does spiritual redemption look like? It doesn't look like Hollywood—like reconciliation and forgiveness. That's not always realistic. Rather, true redemption looks like genuine soul searching and a commitment to growing in our relationship with God.

We don't write to the prisoners to offer them forgiveness. We don't even write them to offer them a reentry path into life. There are other groups that do that. That is not our mission. We write to them only to help them in their quest to achieve spiritual redemption. We write to them simply to help them grow.

This is the link that exists between the Red Heifer and the sin of the Golden Calf. In both cases we are dealing with a demographic that has undergone a tremendous trauma – one that is through no fault of their own and the other one is often very much the fault of the criminal. But in both cases spiritual redemption is sought. And in both cases what spiritual redemption really means is that the person who has gone through this trauma has achieved as a result of the trauma a deeper relationship with Hashem.

Matzah to me is the bread of redemption. It is a food that we eat on Pesach to remind us to always look for spiritual redemption. It reminds us to always look for spiritual growth and that no matter we are in our lives, redemption is always a possibility.

Matzah is the bread we ate on our journey out of Egypt. It is the bread we offered on the altar in the Temple. It is a bread that symbolizes our Pesach seder, the holiday of redemption. But the images of our Seder night are supposed to continue to inspire us though out the year. The search for redemption is not a one-day process or just about a single holiday. It is a daily search to improve our connection to Hashem.

Matzah is a bread that reminds us that when we speak of true redemption, we speak above all of the bare minimum—that all of us, no matter where we are in life have the ability, opportunity, and responsibility to redeem our relationship with Gd.