

5779 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Chukat / פרשת חקת

The City of Life

The beginning of this week's parsha teaches about the laws of tumat meit (ritual impurity through contact with a corpse) and the path back towards purity via the ashes of the parah adumah (red cow). Even as the laws of tumat meit and how to treat a corpse are universal, they have a unique resonance in Yerushalayim. For example, the Gemara cites a tradition that "one cannot leave a dead body over night in Yerushalayim unburied,"¹ a practice that is largely practiced today. Similarly, Avot de-Rebbi Natan teaches that human bones are not supposed to travel through the city and with the exception of the Kings of the Davidic line there is a prohibition against creating a cemetery in the city.² Why is this? What is unique about Yerushalayim such that it has an aversion to the bodies of those who have passed on?

The midrash³ relates that when God taught Moshe the laws of ritual impurity (tumah), Moshe was able to intuit that each form of tumah had a path towards purity. However, once God taught Moshe about the tumat meit, Moshe's face darkened as he could not fathom how such a person could become pure. It was only after God taught him about the ritual of the parah adumah (red cow) that Moshe was calmed. This midrash raises the following question: What was it about tumat meit that made it difficult for Moshe to conceive of a possibility of purity?

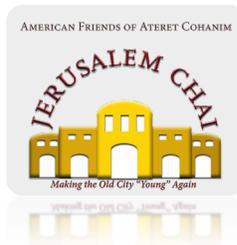
The Lubavitcher Rebbe⁴ explained that while all forms of impurity have negative connotations, tumat meit represents the actual antithesis of holiness and godliness. God is known as "the living God" and therefore things that are connected to God do not die. Moshe wondered how someone who was just in close proximity to death and the antithesis of life which is associated with God, can ever rebound. The answer is the mystery of the parah adumah which is beyond human comprehension.

¹ Bava Kamma 82b.

² Avot DeRebbi Natan perek 53.

³ Bamidar Rabbah 19:4.

⁴ Likkutei Sichot 4, parshat Chukat, se'if 3.



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This connection between God and life, explained the Rebbe, undergirds Yerushalayim's aversion to the dead. One cannot have a cemetery in Yerushalayim nor even have a corpse stay overnight in the city due to Yerushalayim being the epicenter of holiness and the home of God in this world. Therefore, in the face of the "living God" death does not exist. Yerushalayim is a miniature World to Come in which God's overwhelming presence will cause the dead to be revived and the living to live eternally. We are not there yet, but Yerushalayim reminds us that we hope and pray for such a reality.