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# GROWTH

## At The

# SHABBAT TABLE

## PARSHAT CHUKAT – BALAK

### Ashes and Water

The parah aduma, perhaps the most enigmatic commandment in the entire Torah, served as the means by which one who had become spiritually impure through contact with a corpse was purified. The red heifer was burned, its ashes collected and mixed with water, and this mixture was then used to cleanse the most severe form of ritual impurity.

What is the significance of this unusual combination?

R' YY Jacobson shared something beautiful. Ashes symbolize an ending. When something is consumed by fire, all that remains are its ashes — the final remnants of what once was. Water, by contrast, represents beginnings. Life itself emerges from water: every fetus develops within the waters of the womb, and most of the human body is composed of water. Throughout the Torah, water repeatedly symbolizes birth, renewal, and life.

Perhaps this is the deeper message of the parah aduma. The individual who encounters death is purified through a mixture of ashes and water, of endings and beginnings. The Torah teaches that an ending is never merely an end. Even in moments of loss, finality, and pain, the possibility of renewal remains. Though every ending carries grief, it also contains within it the seeds of a new beginning.

*"The deepest exile is that even when  
the door to the jail is open, you're  
afraid to leave your cell and embrace  
the vulnerability of freedom."*

(R' Mordechai Burg)

### Facing the Serpent

*During his wedding, the groom asked everyone to close their eyes, take a deep breath, and think about the person who had helped them most through life's difficult moments. "Now," he said, "lean toward that person." The bartender barely escaped the ensuing stampede. [1]*

In Parshat Chukat, we read one of the most cryptic and dramatic stories narrated in the Torah. Moshe had hit the rock and lost his share in the Promised Land; his brother Aharon had passed away. The Jews complain yet again of the food and water in the desert, displaying a lack of trust and appreciation for their Creator repeatedly, and they are plagued with an outbreak of deadly snakes. Finally, they beseech for repentance, to which G-d commanded Moshe to make a reddish, fiery copper serpent hanging on a pole that brought healing when looked upon.

It's interesting to note the process of recovery outlined by the Torah. Initially, verse 21:8 just describes "looking" at the snake as the remedy. However, in verse 21:9, the wording seems to indicate that it was necessary to specifically "gaze" at it. Especially since the entire healing stemmed from the concept of directing one's eyes and heart heavenward and had nothing to do with the actual copper or pole, why was it necessary to stare at the copper serpent for recovery?

I once heard a profound insight [2]. The directive to look at the copper snake for healing was not just a practical instruction for that plague alone; it was a message being conveyed for generations. In essence, the Torah is conveying: *If it was the snake that afflicted you, then it will be looking the snake right in the eye that will heal you.* Only through facing the source of the pain can the pain be healed.

An alcoholic once told his friend that he had always thought he could drown all his pain and problems with alcohol. "Only later on did I come to realize that the problems can float," he quipped.

The Torah is essentially giving us a timeless piece of advice. All of us inevitably reach a point in life, or many points in life, where we encounter struggle, adversity, pain, or trauma, and the natural human instinct is to flee from it – sometimes physically but more often emotionally. The thoughts and challenges can become overbearing to the point where we feel we have to dissociate from everything entirely.

However, as with the story in our Parsha, this doesn't result in true healing. It just gives more time for the snake's venom to penetrate more space and continue infusing toxicity. The only way for true healing to take place is to directly confront the source – to not only take a brief "look" but to really stare it in the face. Whether it involves mending a strained relationship through open and difficult conversations, or sitting patiently with the intrusive thoughts and emotions that unsettle us, true healing requires the courage to face our struggles directly. What we run from hardly ever remains behind; unresolved pain has a way of resurfacing until it is finally met with honesty, patience, and understanding.

[1] Anecdote shared by R' YY Jacobson. [2] From R' Eliyahu Maksumov.