

This is the law when a man dies in a tent. Everyone coming into the tent and everything in it shall be tamei, ritually unclean, seven days... and Miriam died there and was buried there...and when all the people saw that Aharon had died, they wept for Aharon for thirty days. (19:14; 20:1,29)

The *parsha* addresses a number of pertinent issues, among which are the laws of *tumah* and *taharah*, ritual contamination and purity, following contact with death and the deaths of the righteous; namely, the death of Miriam *HaNeviah* and Aharon *HaKohen*. Life is filled with ambiguity, and death is the greatest paradox of all. This notion is perhaps underscored in the Torah's order of the purification process for one who has come in contact with the deceased. On the third and seventh day, the ritually unclean person is sprinkled with a solution of pure water mixed with the ashes of the *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow (Heifer), which had been burned with cedar wood, hyssop and wool dyed with a red extract derived from certain worms. Paradoxically, the purifying waters render the *tamei* person clean, yet renders the clean man who prepares it *tamei*. This is only one of the many anomalies of dying, the interface between the life of this world and the life one merits in the world of Eternal Truth. This is but the beginning of the paradoxes which challenge us as we confront our own mortality. Death provides no distinction between those who were as noble and lofty as the cedar in life, and those whose life, its endeavor, and activities were as low as the hyssop. They both meet the same physical end, in the ground, a place of worms.

Is death really the end of life? *Chazal* teach us that physical death is a perception that the living, because of their mortal existence, often misconceive. They posit that the righteous, who live a life of the spirit, are actually more alive in the next world. The wicked, however, who live a life of physicality, addicted to sins of the flesh, are not truly alive – even in this world. The primary focus of the Torah's laws concerning the mourning and purification practices is for the purpose of teaching the living the true meaning of life. This is what Shlomo *Hamelech* alludes to when he writes in *Sefer Koheles* (7:2), *Tov laleches el bais avel mileches el bais mishteh, b'asher hu sof kol ha'adam, v'ha'chai yitein el libo*, "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to a house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living should take it to heart."

The **Bostoner Rebbe, zl**, asks a powerful question, one which I think each and every person must honestly ask himself. Regrettably, it is the obvious answer from which we all shy away. When a person passes from the world, we often hear the question asked by those who were close to him, "Oh, why did this man die?" We are clueless about Hashem's ways, and, to some, simply asking the question expunges some of their emotions. It is almost as if they lay the "blame" for this person's death at Heaven's threshold. Yet, how seldom do we hear when a child is born, "Why was this baby born?" This is probably because we do not want to know the "why" of birth. After all, it entails responsibility.

Surely, life and death are linked with one another. How can we hope to discover the purpose of death until we discover the purpose of life – and live it accordingly? *Parashas Chukas* – if learned properly – gives us a glimpse, a hint of how to proceed in life. We derive life's lesson from death: If you are as haughty as a cedar become as humble as a hyssop, then you are able to purify yourself – as well as others. One should not attempt to help others until his own life is in order.