

Miriam died there and was buried there. (20:1)

Though widely separated chronologically, the passing of Miriam *HaNeviah* is juxtaposed upon the laws of the *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow. This teaches us that, just as the offerings effect atonement for the nation, so does the death of a *tzaddik*, righteous person. This is an important lesson which should have been taught in *parshas ha'korbanos* at the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*. Why of all the forms of sacrificial atonement is the *Parah Adumah* singled out to be the standard bearer of atonement and the lesson most closely identified with the death of *tzaddikim*?

The *Panim Yafos* (Horav Pinchas Horowitz, zl, Rav of Frankfurt and author of the *Haflaah*) writes that, while *missas tzaddikim*, the death of the righteous, protects as it atones the sins of the wicked, it is not a positive portent for the righteous, decent, upstanding person. For as long as the *tzaddik* is alive, he serves as a protector, a shield for the generation. It is through him that Hashem sends His beneficence. Thus, when a *tzaddik* passes from this world, it is both good (for the *reshaim*) and bad (for the *tzaddikim*). We find that when Eliyahu *HaNavi* left this world, the level of *nevuah*, prophecy, received by the remaining *Neviim* decreased noticeably.

Thus, since *missas tzaddikim* has its (both) positive and negative points, it is a perfect fit for the *Parah Adumah*, which purifies those who are spiritually contaminated while it contaminates those who are pure.

In this context, let us attempt to explain why the death of a *tzaddik* atones. The passing of a *tzaddik* in its own right atones only if his death brings about a spiritual and moral awakening. If life goes on with business as usual, no atonement will occur as a result of the passing of that *tzaddik*. When a great, holy person dies, the survivors are inspired by the life that he has led. Unfortunately, we do not delve enough into the lives of our own leaders – when they are alive and well. When the *tzaddik* is alive, he usually conceals his greatness. No *tzaddik* is on a promotional tour to garner accolades for himself. Thus, it is not uncommon that we discover so much more about the *tzaddik* once the “biography” comes out, after the *tzaddik* has passed away and many of his purposely hidden virtues surface.

Learning about the great and mighty, the holy and erudite, inspires us to emulate them. Furthermore, we learn that their lives were not always beds of roses. They, too, had challenges –which they overcame. They had obstacles in their path – over which they triumphed. One does not have to become the victim of his challenges. On the contrary, his challenges can become the stepping stones upon which he climbs to achieve greatness.

The sinner realizes that he, too, could have been a *tzaddik*. The *tzaddik* confronts challenges similar to those that topple the *rasha*. Life is filled with ups and downs. The *rasha* rides the “ups,” but falters when it comes to the “downs.” The *tzaddik* views the ups and downs as windows of opportunity to determine his values and goals. He then builds upon them.

The *Parah Adumah* rite presents us with a similar scenario. A person who is originally impure has *Parah Adumah* ashes/water sprinkled on him, and he becomes spiritually clean. The individual who has occupied himself with the preparation of the ashes and water and the entire procedure that precedes it becomes ritually defiled. One becomes pure; the other becomes impure. Two individuals can attend the same school – the same class, have the same *rebbe* – one makes it, and the other does not. Why? Many reasons are possible, but the simple answer is attitude. One views life's roller coaster of ups and downs as insurmountable challenges. The other looks at them as stepping stones of opportunity. Atonement comes when one realizes that it is up to him to change his life. No one will do it for him.

I came across what I believe is a powerful and inspirational quote which is very appropriate to this Torah thought. At any given moment you have the power to say, "This is not how the story is going to end." Obviously, everything is ultimately up to Hashem, and this includes the "end of the story," but the message to be conveyed is: one does not have to become a statistic. We can learn from the lives of those *tzaddikim* who persevered and labored amid poverty and deprivation to achieve their goals. One thing is worse than not making it: not even trying. The failure at life is the individual who refuses to accept the challenge, who allows hardship to sway him from even competing. He truly does not have a chance, because one cannot win unless he actually enters the race.