

"And the people dwelt in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there." (20:1)

Rashi cites the Talmud in Moed Katan 28a which explains the juxtaposition of Miriam's death upon the laws of parah-adumah. This combined message informs us that, just as korbanos effect atonement, so too, the death of tzaddikim effects atonement. This statement is perplexing. In Parashas Beshalach, Rashi asserts that the laws of parah- adumah were conveyed at Marah, or, at the latest, during Bnei Yisrael's second year in the desert. Miriam's death, however, took place during the fortieth year!

If the actual span between these two incidents was so long, why then does the Torah link them? Second, according to the Torah, parah-adumah itself does not effect atonement; only Chazal have alluded to the idea that the parah-adumah atones for the sin of the Golden Calf. If the Torah's intention was to convey the message of atonement, it should have linked Miriam's death to a korban which is offered specifically for the purpose of atonement.

Horav Elchanan Sorotzkin z.l. offers a profound response to these questions. The precept of parah-adumah is classified as a "chok," a mitzvah whose meaning is not accessible to normal understanding. Thus, it must be performed purely out of faith, simply because it is the decree of Hashem. The Midrashim focus primarily upon the difficulty in understanding the reasoning behind this mitzvah. They especially note its apparent paradox. The sacrifice of parah-adumah serves to purify those who are spiritually defiled by contact with a dead body. The one who performs this actual sacrificial rite, however, becomes tameh, impure, himself.

Indeed, Chazal state that parah-adumah is the primary chok which the gentile world finds most elusive to grasp, so that they ridicule us for it. Another aspect of parah-adumah which presents difficulty is its applicability to purifying only one specific form of tumah, that of tumaas meis, contact with a dead body. Why not include other forms of spiritual impurity, such as zav, zavah, which are main categories of tumah?

Horav Sorotzkin infers that the effect of death upon an individual encompasses two conflicting perspectives. It has the ability to "cleanse" one from the spiritual impurities of the past by arousing within him a spiritual awakening. Indeed, Chazal state that in the constant battle with the yetzer hora, evil inclination, when all else fails, one should invoke the day of death.

Confronting man's mortality has a most "humbling" effect. On the other hand, when confronted with the finality of death, some individuals go to the opposite extreme. They employ death as an excuse to "turn off" from Hashem, using their depressive state as a vehicle for disavowing themselves from Him. This attitude is magnified if tragedy evolves from a specific death. Consequently, confronting the issue of death can result in tumah, impurity, for some, and tahara, purification, for others. When a close family member passes on, some will be inspired to teshuvah,

to increased Torah study and mitzvah observance. Others will recite kaddish for the required period of time and immediately thereafter divorce themselves from any traditional ties, since the one who linked them to the past generations is now gone.

This ambivalent reaction can similarly occur after the death of a great tzaddik. The loss of leadership can generate depression and hopelessness; it can, conversely, inspire introspection and motivate one to accept greater responsibility in Torah endeavor. This is the relationship between Miriam's death and the parah-adumah's ability to purify one who has come in contact with a dead body. Both of those situations create ambiguity and spiritual uncertainty within a person. One should confront these occurrences with faith in Hashem, so that the encounter will have a constructive effect.