

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Chukas

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The beginning of this week's Torah portion details the laws relating to the parah adumah (Red Heifer), the ashes of which were included in a mixture required to remove the tumah (spiritual impurity) received through contact with or proximity to the dead. Unlike other forms of spiritual impurity which can be removed through immersion in a mikveh (ritual bath), the impurity brought about from death required the Red Heifer.

Since the destruction of the Temple, it has not been possible to prepare the ashes of the Red Heifer. Nevertheless, even in modern times we have retained some customs which remind us of the nature of death and its association with spiritual impurity.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 4:18) cites that it is necessary to wash one's hands (without making a blessing) three times from a vessel, alternating between the right and left hands after leaving a cemetery or being in the same room as a dead body. The 13th century Jewish legal work attributed to Rabbi Aharon ben Yaakov HaKohen of Narbonne, writes that we wash our hands on exiting the cemetery as a direct remembrance to the process of purification with the Red Heifer (Kol Bo chapter 114)

While this tradition cannot offer the same spiritual purification of the Red Heifer, it demonstrates that while it is a great mitzvah to accompany the dead to their final resting place, the mere association with death leaves a negative mark on us quite separate from the pain of bereavement itself.

We are advised to consider our mortality. Death is an inevitable feature of life and there is no greater reminder of how transient our lives are than being present at a funeral. Yet allowing these thoughts to consistently permeate our consciousness would bring us to despair.

We wash our hands at the gates of the cemetery to help us re-enter the world of the living. We must be mindful of our mortality without obsessing over it, but use it to spur ourselves to focus on life and how we can live it to the best of our abilities.

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