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Parah Adamah
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Shabbat Shalom. My name is Maggie Parkhurst and my chazan here is our Cantorial soloist, Fran Chalin. Funny - I've lead services at BCC 3 times, but this is the first time I've shared the bima with one of our clergy. It is a custom here at BCC to turn and introduce ourselves to our fellow congregants, but before you do that, I'd like ask you to look around the room and think how we're all here to worship together, and how all of us, including you, are made in the image of God.

Those of you who have davened with me before know that instead of giving one long drash on the Torah portion, I like to explain the history and meaning the prayers from our siddur as we come to them. Tonight I am going to give a short drash on the parsha, so I'm going to limit myself to one set of prayers, the Psalms, the oldest prayers in our liturgy.

As you can see in your prayer book, the first 20-odd pages are mostly psalms. There are 150 Psalms, which make up their own book in the Bible. Tradition ascribes authorship of Psalms to King David, and while this may or may not be accurate, we do know even the latest of the Psalms was composed at least 2500 years ago.

Of all the biblical prayers, none have stirred the hearts of Jews and non-Jews as profoundly as the psalms. Rather than narrative like most of our canon, each psalm is a personal poem. Whether a psalm exalts God with "Hallelujahs," begs God for deliverance from disaster, or despairs of God's apparent abandonment, the psalmist is absolutely convinced that God is near and concerned with the fate of the pious. And from personal experience, I can tell you that when I'm sad or worried, praying some of the psalms in Book One will often help, if for no other reason than to know that I'm not alone in my suffering. For example, from psalm 25:

"My eyes are ever toward Adonai, for He will loosen my feet from the net
 Turn to me, have mercy on me, for I am alone and afflicted
 My deep distress increases; deliver me from my straights
 Look at my affliction and suffering, and forgive my sins.
 Protect me and save me; let me not be disappointed
 For I have sought refuge in You."

But the psalms aren't just for personal prayer. Some of them were sung by the Levites during the daily sacrificial ritual at the first Jerusalem Temple, while others were recited there during the 3 pilgrimage festivals and on Shabbat. When the Temple was destroyed and the synagogue became the spiritual home of the Jewish people, over half the psalms in the bible were incorporated into services. Some of the more familiar Psalms in the siddur are:

Psalm 51:17 (at the beginning of the Amidah)

Adonai, open my lips and let my mouth declare Your glory

Psalm 19:15 (at the end of the Amidah)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart

Be acceptable to you, Adonai, my rock and my redeemer

Psalm 19:8-9: (from the Torah service)

The teaching of Adonai is perfect, reviving the soul

The testimony of Adonai is sure, making wise the simple

The statutes of Adonai are right, rejoicing the heart

The Commandments of Adonai are pure, giving light to the eyes

Psalms 92-99 begin the traditional kabbalat Shabbat service, and Psalm 29:11 ends the service with:

Adonai gives strength unto His people (Adonai oze l'yamo yitein)

Adonai will bless His people with peace (Adonai yvarech et amo v'shalom)

And don't forget Hallel, Psalms 113-118, which many of us will be reciting next month around our Seder tables.

Other familiar Psalms include:

Psalm 91, traditionally said at bedtime (my God in whom I trust ... His faithfulness is an encircling shield. You need not fear the terror by night, the arrow that flies by day, the plague that stalks in the darkness), Psalm 121 (I lift up my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? - esa enai, elhecharim), Psalm 126 (Those who sow in tears will reap in joy), Psalm 133 (How good and pleasant it is when brethren dwell together - Henai ma tov u manayim), Psalm 137 (If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning). And then there's the enduringly popular Psalm 23 (Adonai is my shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me to lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, He restores my soul). Which brings me to the tricky issue of what to do with all those "He's" in the psalms. Despite my strong support for degenderizing the prayer book, I can't quite bring myself to do the same for psalms. After all, the prayer book is a human, fluid document, with generations of Jewish communities adding and removing texts to better meet their needs. But who has the chutzpah to change the Bible? Especially words that are a particular human being's prayer to God.

Besides, if I were going to change the Bible, I'd get to work on Leviticus before I went after Psalms. But when I need to pray psalms myself, I have a problem. I can't bring myself to call God 'He', and changing He to God not only violates the text, but it makes the prayer too impersonal. So I've reached a compromise, I keep the words as written, but instead of saying "He," I say "You." This is not such a big deal as you might imagine. In several places in the Torah, the reader must pronounce a word differently than how it is written. And in fact, many of the psalms call God both He and You in the same poem. This includes our famous psalm 23, which also reads, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." I'm not saying that's the way you should pray psalms - I'm just telling you what works for me. After all, psalms are personal prayers, very personal prayers, so you should pray them in whatever way makes you feel the most comfortable while still bringing you close to God.

(before the Shema) Some of you may recall that the three instances of God's name in the

Shema correspond to the three core Jewish beliefs: God created the world, revealed Torah, and promises us eventual redemption. Tonight, as you say the Shema and its blessings, focus on the aspect of God you are most comfortable with, and think about your relationship with that God. Speaking of comfort, this is the time when the Rabbi asks everyone to rise for the Barechu, and then instructs us to either sit or stand for the Shema, whichever is our custom. But why two customs for saying the Shema?

One side says that standing has always been the posture of reverence: we stand for the Barechu, the Kedusha, when we take the Torah from the ark. Our sages teach that reciting the Shema is accepting the Yoke of Heaven, and this would seem to require a standing position. But sitting is the normal posture of study, and the congregation sits while the Torah is read. Since the Shema's three paragraphs are selections from Torah, this side says, we should sit while the Shema is recited. Of course, both sides are right. Personally, I suspect that most people learned to say the Shema a certain way and for them it feels weird to say it differently. In any case, everyone agrees that you're supposed say the Shema with eyes closed, thus ensuring that only you will know whether you are standing or sitting.

TORAH DRASH:

At certain times of the year, usually at the festivals and new moons, extra sections of Torah are recited in addition to the regular parsha. Right now we are in the third of the four special portions read on successive Shabbats in the month of Adar. Nobody is quite sure how and when this tradition came about, but we do know that these added readings were established while the Temple still stood, since they are detailed in the Mishnah, in the third chapter of Tractate Megillah, which says: "If the first day of the month Adar falls on the Sabbath, they read the section 'Shekelim'; on the second Sabbath they read 'Remember what Amalek did'; on the third, the section on "Parah adamah - the red heifer"; and on the fourth, 'Ha hodesh.' On the fifth they revert to the set order." The first reading, Sheklim, describes the Israelite census and how everyone gave a half-shekel to help build the sanctuary. Nissan was when the Levites collected taxes to buy the korbanot (animals to be sacrificed) and other supplies the Temple required for the coming year, so it makes sense that they read this portion at the beginning of Adar to give everyone a month to prepare. Maybe it's no coincidence that we pay our annual income taxes at this time of year as well.

The section on Amalek is always read on the Shabbat before Purim, and since Rabbi Lisa drashed on that subject last week, I don't need to explain it to you. Next week, the Shabbat that occurs just before Rosh Hodesh Nissan, we will read the verses in Exodus chapter 12 that describe the Israelites' departure from Egypt, part of our preparation for the upcoming festival of Passover.

That leaves this week's special section, the one we read on the third Shabbat of Adar, the one about the Red Heifer, from Numbers chapter 19. It begins with the words, "And Adonai spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'This is the law (chukat haTorah) that Adonai has commanded. Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish.'" The Torah goes on to explain that after the High Priest has sacrificed this red cow, its body is burned and its ashes are used to purify anyone who has touched a corpse and thus become tameh, ritually impure.

I don't know how many of you have actually touched a corpse, but I can tell you that it's a very unsettling experience. About 30 years ago, when I was an intern at Hollywood Pres. Hospital, one of my chores was to draw the early morning blood samples. One of the patients on my list was an elderly woman who appeared to be unconscious. This wasn't unusual, and I also didn't find it unusual when I couldn't find a good vein on either arm to draw blood from. It was only when I returned to the first arm, which had fallen to the woman's side, and noticed that it was now dark purple, that I had an inkling that something was wrong. Still, the full import of the situation didn't register with me until the nurse I brought over pulled the bed sheet over the woman's head. At that point the only thing that kept me from fainting was the urgent need to find a sink and wash my hands. I had never heard of tumah, but I knew that somehow I had been tainted by contact with that dead body.

Now the word tumah, which is also translated as 'unclean,' doesn't mean contaminated or dirty in any physical sense. But feeling tumah exists and is contagious. A person who touches a corpse becomes so impure that he or she imparts tumah to any person they touch, who in turn imparts tumah to any person they touch, and so on. I think of it like cooties. Does everyone here remember cooties? OK - then you know. Nobody has ever seen a cootie, but you know that you get them by touching someone who has cooties, and that if you have cooties yourself, nobody wants to touch you and "catch" them from you. So when you hear the word tumah, think cooties.

Now back to our text. According to this chug, anyone who becomes tameh from touching a corpse, which is the most severe form of tumah there is, can only become tahor, pure, again, by being sprinkled with the ashes of this perfect red cow that the High Priest has sacrificed. Someone who touches a corpse and doesn't undergo this ritual will be cut off from the congregation of Israel forever. Interestingly, all the people who help prepare the red cow ashes become tameh in the process, but once they bathe in water, they are only unclean until evening.

Well, there are many weird and bizarre things in the Torah, but this is definitely one of the weirdest. So strange, in fact, that Rashi begins his commentary on this parsha by saying, "Because Satan and the nations of the world taunted Israel by asking - what reason is there for this thing? Thus the Holy One made it a chuk, a Divine enactment that no one may criticize."

According to the Midrash, even King Salomon had trouble understanding the section concerning the Parah Hadama, admitting, "I said that I will get wisdom, but it was far from me." We also learn that besides the ritual of the red cow, there are three other chukim haTorah, divine laws that cannot be explained by human reason: the law to marry your brother's widow, that of kilayim - not to mix wool and linen in a garment, and the Yom Kippur ritual of the scapegoat. Some say that kashrut is also a chukat haTorah, that there is no logical reason why pork should be forbidden while beef and lamb are permitted.

But what's so special about the ritual of the red cow that we read about it twice during the year, once at its regular time and again during Adar? My first thought was that it was related to this week's regular Torah portion, where the Israelites build and worship the golden calf. Rashi seems to agree, since in his commentary on this parasha, he gives the following parable: "It may be compared to the handmaid's child who fouled the king's

palace. Let the mother come and wipe up her son's excrement. Just as the Israelites became defiled by a calf, let its mother, a cow, come and offer atonement for them." He further explains, "Just as the calf rendered unclean everyone who busied themselves with it, so too does the cow make unclean all who busy themselves with it. And just as Israel was purified by the golden calf's ashes, so shall an unclean person take the ashes of the red cow for purification."

Thus the red cow's sacrifice is somehow an expiation for the sin of the golden calf. Surely it can't be a coincidence that both Torah portions concern cattle. But apparently it is coincidental, since there are plenty of years when the two texts are read at different times. In the Talmud tractate Megillah, where the rabbis discuss the Mishnah I read earlier, Raban Gamliel says that these four special parshiot are chosen because they get us thinking about Pesach, because they help us prepare for Pesach. He doesn't say how, but later rabbis suggest that this text was a reminder to those who had become impure that they needed to be purified before they could bring the Passover sacrifice to the Temple.

But that was ages ago. What meaning can we find in the Parah Hadama today, we who say we don't believe in tumah or cooties? But there are plenty of men, like those in the Torah, who think women are unclean when they're menstruating. And there are people who think it's disgusting for two men to kiss each other. And let's not go into all the folks who don't even want to be in the vicinity of someone with HIV, or cancer, or mental illness. One of Rashi's decisions I most admire has to do with whether a woman may attend synagogue when she is niddah (that is, while she's menstruating), something that was apparently frowned upon in Rashi's time. His response states clearly that "In our time we are all tameh from corpses, so a woman being niddah only affects the relationship between her and her husband. A niddah may attend synagogue, touch any ritual object, and, if she is accustomed to study Torah, she may study Torah." Rashi reminds us that these days we're all impure, that nobody is more pure or more holy than anyone else.

The Temple is gone, and even if we were to find a perfect red cow, there's no High Priest around to prepare its ashes and purify us, so we are all tameh from corpses, that most severe kind of tumah, and there is nothing we can do about it. I figure I've made thousands of people tameh from corpses all by myself in the last 30 years. When I think about it, it's actually rather liberating to realize that no matter what is wrong with me, no matter what stigma may attach to me, I'm already tameh from corpses and so is everybody else! Just as we are all made in God's image, we are all equally "unclean."

Maybe that's other reason we call Passover the festival of freedom.