

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 25

Vayera, Sicha 2

The Context:

In his negotiations with G-d regarding the fate of Sodom, Avraham prefaced his plea by saying, "Behold now I have commenced to speak to G-d, although I am dust and ashes. (Bereishis 18:27)

Commenting on this statement of humility, the sages said: "As reward for that which our Patriarch Avraham said: "And I am but dust and ashes," his children merited two mitzvot: The ashes of the red heifer (see Numbers, chapter 19) and the dust of the sota [who was administered to drink a mixture including dust from the Temple floor]. (Sotah 17a) .

The Question:

There must be a thematic connection between Avraham's statement and these two mitzvot. What could that be?

Additionally, Avraham personified kindness and generosity, while the red heifer and the Sotah ritual both reflect Divine judgment and censure — being that they deal with

the impurity of the deceased, and of the adulterous woman, as well as their estrangement from the community/the husband. Why would these mitzvot be identified with Avraham?

The Explanation:

Kindness can emerge from two perspectives: from largesse, a sense of self-satisfaction that leads to magnanimity; or from genuine selflessness and lack of entitlement. Because they have effaced themselves and their needs so thoroughly, and see others as inherently deserving, they give freely.

Avraham's kindness was born of this second perspective — complete selflessness. This is why Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his own spiritual and material well being to provide others with spiritual direction and material provision, because when one's kindness is motivated by selflessness there is no boundary to the kindness. On the other hand, when kindness is born out of the giver's power, influence, and prestige, there is a limit to the kindness, because there is an identity to protect and preserve.

This is the thematic relevance between Avraham and the two mitzvos of the red heifer and the Sotah.

The red heifer ritual was performed by a kohen on behalf of an individual who had contracted impurity from a corpse. When the kohen sprinkled the prescribed mixture incorporating the ashes of the red heifer on the person, they were restored to ritual purity, but the kohen who performed the procedure contracted impurity himself. Thus, the kohen personifies selfless kindness and love, being prepared to contaminate himself in order to purify a fellow Jew.

The sotah ritual, too, reflects the same value. In order to restore harmony between a husband and wife, G-d commanded for His own name to be erased into the drink

that was mixed with dirt from the Temple floor to test the woman's innocence and bring her back to her husband.

Thus Avraham, through employing the attribute of self-censorship and severity in service of his kindness, merited to bequeath mitzvos to his children which mirror the same process. The red heifer, for example, represents the transformation of severity, (the cow, brute animal strength, spelled in Hebrew with the letter hei, alluding the five powers of severity), into ashes, which, in Hebrew, substitutes an alef, alluding to the unity of G-d, in place of the hei, the five forces of severity. In other words, the red heifer illustrates how severity can become reduced to ashes of humility, which fuels a new, selfless kindness.
