

Rabbi's Column

A lesson can be learned from Hukat, this week's portion, that is very appropriate for today's headlines - and might, if ever implemented, reduce those headlines (I can always hope).

The Torah portion begins by describing how to create a ritual impurity negation potion. Take a red heifer, and put it through a lot of steps on the way to creating the potion. At each step, the Kohen involved becomes themselves ritually impure until nightfall.

The reasoning behind any of this is never explained, and is usually considered pretty unexplainable.

Nevertheless, while I have no clue why a red heifer was chosen (as opposed to, say, the classic purple cow of childhood silly verses), I do have an idea behind why the Kohanim involved all become ritually impure in the preparation of a purifying potion.

When a bureaucrat or other functionary has the authority and ability to change another person's status from "not completely acceptable" to "completely acceptable", it is easy to begin presuming that the people who are currently "not completely acceptable" have more wrong with them than just not currently being "not completely acceptable." This causes haughtiness and snobbery, as well as aspersions of various kinds being cast onto the ones who are approaching for help.

I maintain that a possible reason for the effects of the red heifer is to prevent some of this snobbery. If in the course of doing their job, some of the priesthood becomes "not completely acceptable", then that should lessen if not completely remove any temptation to become a spiritual snob.

What if we were to make use of that, in a fashion, in today's society? Which positions put one group of people in charge of another group of people for awhile? Perhaps one of the criteria for continuing to be in charge is the possibility of becoming one of the people needing assistance? Maybe making something a requirement (in the same way that continuing education often is) instead of just a possibility? Would it change the nature of prisons and courtrooms, for example, if in most prisons a random 10 percent or so were actually other officers of the court, doing their regularly scheduled stint as a prisoner? Would it help if that person in the busy DMV office had to experience other official bureaucracies where they are not as well known and apply some of the customer service help they wish they had received? Would it help to have law enforcement experience, at least for a little bit, life as a minority somewhere, as well as life in various kinds of communities?

There are many good, practical reasons why these things have not yet happened. May it be God's will that nothing else happens that makes me think that as a matter of preserving lives, it is about time some of them did.