

A Midrash for Monday

written by Ozer Bergman

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A gentile once posed the following question to Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai. "Some of the things you Jews do seem like voodoo. You take a cow and burn it, grind it and gather its ashes. If one of you becomes *tamei* (ritually impure) by being in contact with a corpse, you sprinkle on him two or three drops and tell him, 'OK. You're *tahor* (ritually pure).'"

Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai asked him, "Have you ever been depressed?"

"No."

"Have you ever dealt with anyone who was depressed?"

"Yes."

"What did you do for him?"

"We burnt some incense in the the patient's room and splashed some water on it to fill the room with steam. That cured him."

"Hear what your saying!" said Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai. "It's similar to being *tamei*. 'I will also remove the [false] prophets and the *tamei* spirit" (Zechariah 13:2). We sprinkle on it the [red heifer's ashes] and it's gone."

After the gentile left, his students asked him, “Rabbi, you could satisfy him with a flimsy answer. What are you going to tell us?”

He answered, “I swear to you! It is neither the corpse that makes *tamei* nor the waters and ashes that purify! It is a Divine fiat from the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”

(Rendered from *Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat #8*)

One of the messages of this Midrash is that much of the simple mechanics of ordinary life can provide clues as to how the Divine will operates on the spiritual underpinnings of Creation. The answer Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai gives his students seems to be only the *final* stage of a longer discussion to which we are not privy. Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakai is telling them—and us—that at a certain point, investigation must end, there is no more “Why?” to be asked. That’s just the way it is, just the way God wanted it.

This is, in a sense, the answer to death, and the answer to why a benevolent God allows pain and evil. At some point—and for each of us that point is different—we must simply fall back on faith, that His way of doing things will work out. False prophets and evil *will* one day be removed and the world will be a much better place. Swiftly and soon. Amen.

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