

Shabbat Parah is the third of the four special Shabbatot that pertain to Purim or Pesach. The *parah* was the rare, “red” heifer, whose ashes dissolved in water were used to purify those who had had contact with a corpse. This “impurity” is spiritual, not physical, and is highly contagious. Our ancestors regarded death as the end of our human ability to act in this world, i.e., to be able to return to a state of purity. As Psalm 115:16-17 says, “Neither will the dead praise God, nor all those who descend to the grave.” Judaism does not view earthly life as a mere portal to a better afterlife. We live our earthly life fully, and celebrate it by observing our *mitzvot*, which include allowing the earthly remains of our dead to disintegrate and rejoin the earth. In this light, we understand why our ancestors viewed death as the highest form of impurity and devised such elaborate means to return those who came in contact with it to a state of purity. Now that Purim is over, our thoughts turn to Pesach, which for many of us entails equally elaborate preparations. And in our parashah Moses is receiving a flurry of detailed instructions concerning the offerings, including the attire of the priests for performing the sacrifices and for removing the ashes, and that which the priests may eat from whatever is left over from the offerings. Everything connected with these offerings is exceedingly holy, and therefore subject to the strictest measures to prevent contamination. “An earthenware vessel in which it [the sin offering] is cooked shall be broken, but if it is cooked in a copper vessel, it shall be purged and rinsed with water.” (6:21) Because earthenware is very absorbent, the food remaining in it must be burnt after the time limit for eating it has expired. “And the flesh of his thanksgiving peace offering shall be eaten on the day it is offered up; he shall not leave any of it over until morning.” (7:15) Rashi teaches that this law applied to all earthenware vessels in which sacrificial meat had been cooked. This is a prudent precaution aside from ritual, especially in times before refrigeration! In a lengthy discussion on kashering for Pesach, Talmud Tractate Pesachim 30b concludes, “Apparently they [earthenware vessels] absorb and are therefore prohibited, as they cannot be prepared for use on Pesach through cleansing, and the Torah testified about earthenware vessels, that when they absorb the flavor of a prohibited substance, they will never leave their defective status and they remain permanently prohibited. The Torah states that a person may cleanse other vessels by scouring and rinsing them, whereas it states that earthenware vessels are to be broken.” That is why many of us use special dishes for Pesach. Rashi points out a fascinating detail about the word *וּמִרְקָה* (purged): Its root *מִרְקָה* is the same as in the word used in Megillat Esther for “ointments” *תְּמִרְקָה יָהֵן*. Indeed, this root denotes polishing, shining, burnishing, rubbing, massaging, with connotations of purifying and cleansing. “And let the king appoint commissioners to all the provinces of his kingdom, and let them gather every young maiden of comely appearance to Shushan the capital, to the house of women ..., and let their ointments be given to them.” (Esther 2:3) We have no idea what was in these ointments, but after a year’s treatment with them, along with myrrh oil and perfumes, the women must have been exceedingly smooth-skinned and fragrant, transformed from the innocent girls they had been upon arrival in the harem into objects of sexual pleasure for the king. But Esther undergoes a far deeper transformation, from simple, obedient maiden to savior of her people. In essence, she is anointed, just like Aaron and his sons in our parashah, to serve a holy purpose. When the time comes, she transcends her role as compliant plaything of the king to discover her innate skills and use them to thwart Haman’s deadly plot. Just as Moses dresses Aaron and his sons at the end of our parashah in preparation for their investiture, Esther, having fasted for three days “clothed herself in royalty and she stood in the inner court of the king’s house ...” (Esther: 5:1) Tractate Megillah 15a explains: “This teaches that she clothed herself with a divine spirit of inspiration ...” In a sense, Pesach and Purim are the bookends of our relationship with HaShem. At Pesach, which falls in the first month of our year, HaShem is the main actor, while Moses, who has led the people and will continue to do so for the next 40 years, is only mentioned in our Pesach Haggadah once in passing. At this juncture we are totally dependent on HaShem, even Moses, whose courage derives from HaShem’s protection. Purim falls in the last month of our liturgical year, and chronologically a millennium later, at the end of the time of prophesy. Despite many setbacks and much tragedy, we have managed to develop an identity based on trusting HaShem without having to experience the overt miracles our ancestors needed. Esther and Mordechai, whose courage derives from their identity, are able to take the initiative, trusting HaShem to work in the background, just as we continue to do today. Midrash Mishlei 9 teaches that because of Esther, in the world-to-come all of the holidays will be nullified, except Purim and Yom Kippur, which will endure forever. Esther was initially as reluctant as Moses to take the initiative, but whereas Moses needed HaShem’s direct and tangible assistance, Esther understood that even if she should refuse, HaShem would find other means to save her people, and she accepted her responsibility with courage. Like Mordechai and Esther, and many others after them, we too must take the initiative and do all we can to oppose baseless hatred, prejudice and cruelty wherever and whenever we are given the opportunity. It is a *mitzvah* (same root as *tzav*), a commandment. *Aleinu* – it’s upon us!

Shabbat shalom!