

Ashes, Ashes We all Rise Up

In Parshas Tzav, we learn about the Terumas HaDeshen, which is the mitzvah of removing the ashes from the Mizbeach. This week we also read Parashas Parah, which intricately details the halachos surrounding the Para Adumah -- utilizing its ashes for the purification of the people.

Distinctly, the Terumas HaDeshen (literally, raising of the ashes) is often mistaken for the similar mitzvah of Hotza'as HaDeshen (literally, removal of the ashes). While both involve handling ashes, their purposes and symbolism significantly diverge. The Terumas HaDeshen, a key part of the daily service in the Mikdash, entailed selecting completely burnt ashes from the innermost part of the Mizbeach. These ashes, purified of any residual matter, were placed beside the Mizbeach, contributing to its foundational structure.

In contrast, Hotzaas Hadeshen, not a daily ritual, was essential for the maintenance and cleanliness of the Mizbeach. It was performed when the accumulated ashes hindered the placement of wood, whereupon they were ceremoniously removed and taken to a designated area outside the Machaneh, preserving the Mizbeach's purity and functionality.

'Deshen,' primarily referring to ashes in our Parashah, intriguingly takes on varied connotations throughout the Torah. In some contexts, it signifies luxury or specialty, starkly contrasting its literal meaning. This thematic duality is particularly evident in Parashas Parah, where the ashes (Deshen) of the Para Aduma are used for purification, yet render the pure impure upon contact. This paradoxical nature of Deshen suggests a profound quality where opposites coexist seamlessly.

Transitioning into the deeper symbolism, the Terumas HaDeshen, seemingly a modest aspect of Avoda in the Mikdash, embodies profound holiness. This echoes a recurring theme in the Torah where the most profound holiness often lies in what appears insignificant.

What is the idea behind the mitzvah of Terumas HaDeshen? Why is this part of the Avoda of the Mikdash?

The Beis Yaakov of Izhbitz gives a beautiful explanation for this mitzvah.

He explains that this mitzvah reflects the human condition of imperfection. When an individual brings a Korban, it's not just a ritual act; it's an admission of personal flaws and a commitment to realign with the ratzon Hashem. The process of offering a Korban, consumed by the heavenly fire upon the Mizbeach, is a symbolic fusion of the human with the ratzon Hashem.

Yet, as humans, our beings harbor aspects resistant to spiritual refinement. These resistant parts, when subjected to divine fire, are rejected and fail to ascend, resulting in residual ashes. These ashes, embodying rejection and evoking introspection, mirror our deepest imperfections and existential queries: Is there anything more hopeless than ashes?

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Therefore, Hashem, in His abundant mercy, commanded that these ashes be placed beside the Mizbeach. This act transforms the ashes from mere remnants to a vital component of the Mizbeach, as they are absorbed into the foundation of the Mizbeach itself.

This also serves as a catalyst for Tefilla. Within these ashes is this great yearning to be close to Hashem. This duality of ashes, representing both rejection and yearning, symbolizes our continuous strive for spiritual alignment. It is a daily reminder of the value in acknowledging and embracing our imperfections as part of our spiritual journey.

Of course, this was a holy task, linking the Chol to the Kodesh, the flawed to the perfect.

While the concept of the Para Aduma is enigmatic and called a Chok, rendering it beyond human comprehension, its symbolic essence provides guidance. The Para Aduma, through its process of purification, enables us to participate in the Korban Pesach -- thus we read it right after Purim.

The human condition, marked by imperfection, is beautifully encapsulated in the mitzvah of the Para Aduma as well. The Para Adumah was burnt completely in a special ceremony, together with Eizov (hyssop) and Erez (cedar). The Bais Yaakov expands on this theme explaining the significance of these components. Eizov represents our humble acknowledgment of our dependence on Hashem, while Erez symbolizes our inherent worthiness and significance in the eyes of Hashem, as the children of Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov.

The burning of these elements, along with the Para Aduma, culminates in the creation of purifying ashes. These ashes, mixed with water, become a metaphor for Divine intervention and rejuvenation. The mixture gathers our imperfections, our spiritual exhaustion, transforming them into elements of purity and holiness. Through this process, the ashes facilitate a dual purpose – they cleanse us of impurity while reminding us of our inherent human frailties. Though our imperfections are now lying in ashes at the foundation of the Mizbeach, they are rejuvenated and brought to perfection through the Parah Adumah.

With such ashes which both cause one to become pure and impure, we become perfectly aligned with Hashem. The ashes are the place of imperfection, but it is also the place of recognizing our imperfections thus becoming pure once again.

As we step into Nissan, the month of Geula, these ashes remind us of our continuous evolution and spiritual rejuvenation. With the Kapara of the Para Aduma, we step into this special time, fully attuned to and in harmony with Hashem, ready to experience the spiritual renewal that Nissan brings.

Food for thought: How do our own imperfections, our own ‘ashes,’ contribute to our personal journey towards spiritual growth and alignment with Hashem?