

Parashat Parah: The Perplexing Red Heifer's ritual

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The *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) ritual (Nu. ch.19) is regarded as *the* most perplexing of all the mitzvot. Its mystery begins with the very opening words of the section: *Zot chukkat Ha-Torah* – ‘This is the statute of the Torah.’

Perhaps we should commence with a comment on the translation of *chukkat* by the word ‘statute.’ This is misleading, however, as the English legal term ‘statute’ has a precise definition, namely a written law passed by a legislative body, such as an act of Parliament. The rabbis understood its meaning, however, in terms of ‘a divine decree’ that is imposed on Israel notwithstanding that it may appear to have no logical basis or explanation.’¹

Now, commentators query why it states, ‘This is the statute *of the Torah*’ and does not say, as expected, ‘This is the statute *of the heifer*.’

They suggest that the mystery of how its combination of both rare and commonplace components (the totally red heifer on the one hand, and the cedar wood, hyssop, and a crimson worm, on the other) could possibly serve, even symbolically, to dissipate impurity is *the* chief mystery of the entire Torah. And in that way, they explain the introductory reference to the latter.

This explanation might appear unconvincing, however, as, surely, a ritual that equally challenges our logic is that of the ordeal of the Sotah – the woman suspected of adultery (Nu. 5:11-31) – which is similarly administered by a priest and which comprises the employment of bitter waters into which a curse is washed and which purges like the compounds employed together with the ashes of the Red Heifer. So it is difficult to identify the unique mystery of the latter as residing in its prescribed components and their ‘combination of both rare and commonplace components’.

Another explanation for the Torah’s employment of the term ‘This is the statute *of the Torah*’ – in preference to ‘the statute of the heifer’ – is offered by the 18th-century Moroccan sage, Rabbi Chayim ibn Attar. He suggests that the Torah is, in effect, using the Red Heifer ritual as a paradigm to establish an overriding principle. And that is, that, although many mitzvot can readily be rationalized logically, such as that of honouring parents, resting on Shabbat, etc., we should nevertheless approach and observe *all of* ‘the statutes of the Torah’ from the perspective of the Red Heifer, namely that God prescribed them for us, and not because of their appeal to our logic.²

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To return to our suggestion for the Parah Adumah ritual: It has been observed that, in a number of its details, it has points of contact with the rituals of Yom Kippur.³ Thus, we read in the opening Mishnah of *Yomah*, that, to prepare himself for the many rituals of the day, and to familiarise himself with their laws, ‘**Seven days** before Yom Kippur the High Priest was taken from his own home and made to stay in the *Lishkat Parhedrin*, the Temple’s “Counsellors’ **Chamber**.”

Parallel to this, we find, in the Mishnah that, ‘**Seven days** before the burning of the Red Heifer, the priest who was to burn it was taken from his home to **a chamber** that was opposite the north-eastern corner of the Temple building’.⁴

Another similarity occurs in the Mishnah’s description of the dispatch of the Yom Kippur goat to Az’azel: ‘And they made a **causeway** for it...crying out, “Bear [our sins] and be gone! Bear [our sins] and be gone!”’ (Yoma 6:4). Compare this with the Mishnah’s description of the Red Heifer ritual: “They made a **causeway** from the Temple Mount to the Mount of Olives...”⁵

We are entitled to assume, therefore, that, in Temple times, the *Parah Adumah* ritual was also perceived as a gesture of atonement, clearly for some underlying sin associated with death and bereavement. As such, this may well foreshadow our *Tzidduk Ha-Din* affirmation, wherein, before the interment, the close mourners are called upon publicly to proclaim the “justice of God’s action,” with its implication that they are expressing remorse for any instinctively rash thoughts or sentiments that may have crossed their minds or lips regarding the unfairness of the loss inflicted upon them.

The *Parah Adumah* thus served a dual purpose: It granted the mourners remission from an otherwise additional burden of stress they may have suffered for having denied the justice of God’s actions, and, additionally, it afforded them the opportunity to meet the priest in his role as a counsellor and comforter. Thus, at the same time as administering

the ritual, he would seek to comfort the bereaved and offer reassurance and guidance to help relieve them of their emotional and spiritual turbulence.

However, the priest himself would not come away emotionally unscathed from that encounter, as any social worker, counsellor, psychologist, rabbi, family member or friend, who has had to listen to another's unburdening of his or her grief, guilt, domestic abuse, mental suffering, or religious doubt, will know.

The increased risks to those who take on that burden have been researched in recent years and the resultant conditions have been variously dubbed Compassion fatigue, Secondary traumatic stress, and Vicarious trauma.

Compassion fatigue is defined as the numbing of one's emotional response mechanism to the extent that one finds it far more difficult to feel and express the required empathy. Secondary traumatic stress is felt by the counsellor as a direct result of ongoing and intense exposure to the traumas suffered by the client. The former begins to internalise them and experience the same or similar symptoms. At its most extreme level, this may then morph into Vicarious trauma whereby the counsellor suffers a measure of cognitive impairment, lack of confidence and/or inability to trust others, to the extent that (s)he becomes an indirect or vicarious victim of the trauma by reliving its events and details, especially through dreams. In a large proportion of cases, it may be stated that intense contact with the traumatised has the effect of traumatising.⁶

Hence our suggestion that this may explain the paradox of why, although the Torah states that the bereaved, through contact with the dead, who was generally a close

relative, emerged from the heifer ritual spiritually, and, we would suggest, also psychologically, ‘pure’ – by which we mean at one with him- or herself and liberated from any state of brooding over their loss in readiness to embrace life and joy – the officiating priest is rendered *tamei*, ‘impure.’ This may be understood as emotionally and spiritually troubled at having had to absorb the doubting, guilt and turmoil of a troubled fellow Jew.⁷

NOTES

1. See *Rashi* on Nu. 19:2.
2. See R. Chayim ibn Attar, *Sefer Bi'ur Ha-Chayim ad loc.*
3. See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Halakhah: Its Sources and Development* (Israel, Masada Ltd., 1986), p.51.
4. Mish. *Parah* 3:1.
5. *Op. cit.* 3: 6-7.
6. See C. R. Figley, “Compassion Fatigue: Toward a new understanding of the costs of caring,” in B. H. Stamm (Ed.), *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, & educators* (2nd ed., pp. 3–28). Lutherville, MD: Sidran Press (1999).
7. I originally published this interpretation in *The Jewish Chronicle*, 28 Sept. 1990, p. 21, and an expanded version, under the title, “Ancient heifer and modern rabbi,” in *Hamesilah* (United Syn. Publication), Rosh Hashanah 5751 (Sep. 1990), pp. 6-7. For further (downloadable) reading on this theme, see my www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk > Torah Thoughts > “*Parah Adumah* and the logic of mitzvot,” 05 March 2021, and “*Parah Adumah*, reward for mitzvot, and cruelty to animals and men,” 24 March 2022.

Shabbat shalom,
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