

^{19:1}The LORD said to Moses and Aaron ...

1. וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן—*Hashem spoke to Moses and Aaron*. The precept of the red cow [*parah adumah*] is classified as a *decree* (v. 2), a *mitzvah* whose meaning is not accessible to normal understanding **and must be performed purely on faith, because HaShem has commanded it**. Nevertheless, there is a wide variety of commentaries that provide us with some insight into this mitzvah: Midrashic [*drash*], rational [*peshat*], symbolic [*remez*], and Kabbalistic [*sode*].

On the whole, the Midrashic interpretation of the sacrifice of the *parah adumah* is concerned only with broad themes. As *Rambam*¹ taught regarding all sacrifices: one can only expect to understand their general concepts, but not the details of their arrangements (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3,26).

The Midrashic interpretation [*drash*] focuses primarily on the difficulty in grasping the reason behind this *mitzvah*, especially its apparent paradox. The sacrifice of the *parah adumah* serves to purify those who had become impure through contact with a dead body, although the one who sacrificed it himself becomes impure. King Solomon himself, with all his wisdom, did not succeed in this task and had to admit, *that which is far off and very deep, who can find it out?* (Eccl 7:23). And our Sages interpret this to mean that **all those matters that appear mysterious in this world will be clarified in the Word to Come** (*Bamidbar Rabbah*, 19) ...

In the final analysis, however, the procedure of the *parah adumah* remains perplexing. When asked about it by a Roman nobleman, R' Yochanan replied that just as certain medicines or herbs can cure illness, so too the ashes of the *parah adumah* when prepared according to the laws of the Torah can cause contamination to disappear. The Roman was satisfied with this answer but R' Yochanan's students were not. He then explained that it is not the dead body that creates the contamination nor is it the ashes of the *parah adumah* that purify.

The laws of spiritual purity and impurity are decrees from Hashem who tell us: I commanded this law and I instituted this decree. Man has no right to transgress My laws (*Bamidbar Rabbah*, 19) ...²

¹ Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (RaMBaM) (c. 1135-1204), also known as Maimonides was a medieval Sephardic philosopher and one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages. He worked as a rabbi, physician, philosopher and astronomer. He died in Egypt but was buried in Tiberias.

² Rabbi Ellie Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), pp. 220-221.

a. **The differences between in the “procedure” involving the burnt offering and the red heifer are striking:**

1) With the burnt offering:

- It had to be male.
- It was presented at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting
- The priest was to place his hand on the burnt offering in identification of the act of atonement.
- It was to be sacrificed at the altar.
- The blood was to be sprinkled on the altar, not burned with the animal.
- The animal was to be skinned and cut in pieces.
- Special attention was to be given to burning the head and the fat.
- The various parts were to be cleansed and washed before being burned.

2) With the red heifer:

- It had to be female.
- It was taken outside the camp to be killed.
- The priest had to be present, but there was no identification made with it.
- A bit of its blood was sprinkled from the priest's finger toward the tabernacle seven times.
- The rest of the animal was to be burned in its entirety, without the draining of its blood or the cleansing of its dung.
- Its ashes were used for cleansing.
- The priest who officiates at the burning of the heifer and the one who does the actual work at his command are ceremonially unclean for the rest of the day—both may be considered clean after washing their bodies and their clothes.
 - Since they are unclean, they are not to handle the ashes after the fire has died down (v. 9)—a third person, one who is ritually clean, is designated to gather the ashes and then to place them in a place outside the camp that is ceremonially clean.
 - The ashes cannot be brought into the camp—but they are holy.
 - Only a clean person can touch them—but in touching them—that person himself becomes unclean.

b. Hebrews 9:11-14,19-28

¹¹But when Messiah came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, **he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle** that is not made with human hands, **that is to say, is not a part of this creation**. ¹²He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but **he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption**. ¹³The blood of goats and bulls **AND THE ASHES OF A HEIFER SPRINKLED ON THOSE WHO ARE CEREMONIALLY UNCLEAN SANCTIFY THEM** so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴How much more, then, will the blood of Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! ...

¹⁹When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves ... and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. ²⁰He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." ²¹In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. ²²In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²³**It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these**. ²⁴For Messiah did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; **he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence**. ²⁵Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶Otherwise Messiah would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages **to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself**. ²⁷Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸so Messiah was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

1) Revelation 13:5-9 (cf. 1Pet 1:19-20)

⁸All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, **the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world**. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.

c. Isaiah 55:6-11

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸"For **my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways**," declares the LORD. ⁹**As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts**. ¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹**so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it**.

1) Romans 11:33-35

³³Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! **How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!** (Job 5:9; 11:7)

2) 1Corinthians 13:11-12

¹²For **now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known**.

3) 1John 3:1-3

²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and **what we will be has not yet been made known**.

2. The Rationalist commentaries (*peshat*) interpret the *mitzvah* of the *parah adumah* using a different approach. Regarding the underlying paradox in this *mitzvah*, they hold that there is no point in trying to resolve that which we are unable to ...³

Rambam explains that **the *parah adumah* is called a sin-offering [*chataf*] because it is a means to remove a person's *tumah*, which is analogous to sin**. After having become contaminated through contact with a dead body he is not permitted to enter the Sanctuary and eat of the holy things until his *tumah* is removed ...

Rambam continues his discussion of the *parah adumah*, linking it closely to the Tabernacle. He notes that the Tabernacle was intended to inspire awe and respect (Lev. 19:30). Familiarity would diminish those effects and so the Torah restricted access to the Tabernacle. One way of achieving this was to prohibit people who were contaminated from entering it. This had the desired effect since only rarely were

3 Ibid., p. 222-223.

people found in the spiritually pure state [*taharah*]; the purification procedure was difficult and lengthy ...

3. Many commentaries interpret the commandments pertaining to the *parah adumah* along symbolic lines [*remez*] ...⁴

R' Hirsch⁵ is not surprised that reasons for the *parah adumah* escape us. Despite the fact that this is clearly a prominent commandment due to its extensive and detailed ritual, it deals with issues ... which ... are inherently difficult for the human intellect to grasp ...

The two colors that represent the spectrum of human abilities are red and white. Red represents the physical—the animal drive which is devoted to the will to live. White, on the other hand, is the image of purity, of the Divine. **Whereas the physical reality represented by the color red is ultimately perishable because it lacks the spiritual element, white encompasses all colors in a perfect harmony, and is eternal.**

When confronting death, man experiences a spiritual risk, for at that moment physical reality seems to take over and become all-powerful. Death presents man with the problem of his transience, his limited powers, his weakness. It is at that time, when man confronts death and the force of nature represented by the color red, that the *Kohen*, dressed in all white, comes forth to reduce the red cow to ashes. In so doing, he shows that the spiritual will always survive over the physical, that there is never an abdication of the spiritual in the face of death.

4. The Kabbalistic interpretation [*sod*] identify the *parah adumah* with the physical forces that reign outside the Tabernacle, especially the kingdoms which have enslaved Israel over the centuries. As the *parah adumah* was reduced to ashes, which were then used in the ceremony to convert impure to pure, so will these external forces be brought under the power of good ...⁶

The *parah adumah* was red, **a color associated with Esau**. It had never been subjected to a yoke, demonstrating the freedom from moral constraints; it was perfect in its coloration, providing an allegory of total bestiality ...

The prophet Malachi (3:21) declares: And you shall tread down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under your feet. These ashes represent contamination. When the waters of purification are poured over them, the contamination of the ashes is changed to purity and

(judgement) ... is overcome ... by love. Just as water extinguishes fire, so are the savagery and wickedness of the nations extinguished by the beneficial waters that Israel provides (Zohar 3:54b).

- a. Yoma 10a

R. Judah said in the name of Rav: **[Messiah] son of David will not come until the kingdom of Edom [Rome] will have spread its power over the whole world** ... as is said, "Therefore will He give them up, until the time that she who is with child hath brought forth; then the residue of his brethren shall return with the children of Israel" (Mic. 5:2).

- b. Daniel 2:36-45—"an enormous dazzling statue ..."

⁴²As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so **the people will be a mixture and will not remain united** ... ⁴⁴**In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.**

- c. Daniel 7:23-27—"Four great beasts ..."

²⁴**The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom.** After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. ²⁵He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time. ²⁶**But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever.** ²⁷Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.'

5. Figurative/Allegorical ('Spiritualizing') Interpretation.

- a. Genesis 24:1-67—Eliezer's encounter with Rebekah.

1) Origen⁷ held that the spiritual meaning of Rebekah's coming to draw water for Abraham's servants and cattle is that we must come to the wells of Scripture to meet Messiah.

⁴ Ibid, p. 223.

⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) was a German Orthodox rabbi best known as the intellectual founder of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* school of contemporary (or "Modern") Orthodox Judaism.

⁶ Rabbi Ellie Munk, *The Call*—, p. 224.

⁷ Origen of Alexandria (184-254) was an early Christian scholar, ascetic, and theologian. He was a prolific writer who wrote roughly 2,000 treatises in multiple branches of theology, including textual criticism, biblical exegesis and biblical hermeneutics, homiletics, and spirituality. He was one of the most influential figures in early Christian theology, apologetics, and asceticism.

b. Matthew 14:13-21—Yeshua feeds the five-thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish.

- 1) Clement⁸ taught that the five (5) barley loaves with which Yeshua fed the multitudes indicated the preparatory training of the Greeks and Jews that preceded the wheat harvest. The two (2) fish indicate the Hellenistic philosophy—the curriculum of study and the philosophy itself.

c. Matthew 21:1-11—The triumphal entry.

- 1) Clement taught that the ass represents the letter of the Old Testament, and the colt, upon which Messiah rode, the New Testament. The two apostles who brought the animals to Yeshua are the moral and spiritual senses.

d. Joshua 5:13-6:27—The fall of Jericho.

- 1) Israel's capture of Jericho **unmistakably pre-figured** the victories achieved, under God, by the Gospel. The priests blowing the trumpets of rams' horns pictured the servants of God preaching his Word. The forbidding of 'the people' to open their mouths signified that the rank and file of Christians are to have no part in the oral proclamation of the Truth—they are neither qualified for nor called to the ministration of the Word. Nowhere in the Epistles is there a single exhortation for the saints as such to engage in *public* evangelism, nor even to do 'personal work' and seek to be 'soul winners.' Rather are they required to 'witness for Christ' by their *daily conduct* in business and in the home. They are to 'show forth' God's praises, rather than tell them forth. They are to let their light shine. The testimony of the life is far more effectual than glib utterances of the lips. Actions speak louder than words. (Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua*).

²"**This is a requirement of the law** that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke.

1. זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה—*This is the decree of the Torah*. The general reference to the Torah rather than to the *parah adumah* in this introductory verse prompts an interesting interpretation by our Sages. They note that the word חֻקַּת, decree, is derived from the verb, חָקַה, *to engrave*,

and so they interpret: חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה, ***the Torah must be engraved [into the heart of the Jew]. What is written can be erased, but what is engraved endures forever. When the Torah is engraved into a person's heart, it will always be with him, even when it is not understandable to him ...***

a. Jeremiah 31:31-33

³¹"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. **³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt**, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. **"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.**

³Give it to Eleazar the priest; **it is to be taken outside the camp** and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the tent of meeting. ⁵While he watches, the heifer is to be burned—its hide, flesh, blood and intestines. ⁶The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. ⁷After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. ⁸The man who burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening. ⁹"A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin. ¹⁰The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. **This will be a lasting ordinance** both for the Israelites and for the foreigners residing among them.

1. ³Give it to Eleazar the priest; *it is to be taken outside the camp ...*

a. Hebrews 13:11-14

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹²**And so Yeshua also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³LET US, THEN, GO TO HIM OUTSIDE THE CAMP**, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴**For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.**

2. *"The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer.*

⁸ Titus Flavius Clemens, also known as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), was a Christian theologian who taught at the Catechetical School of Alexandria. As his three major works demonstrate, **Clement was influenced by Hellenistic philosophy to a greater extent than any other Christian thinker of his time**, and in particular by Plato and the Stoics. Among his pupils were Origen and Alexander of Jerusalem.

a. **The fire of the burnt offering was augmented with cedar, hyssop, and scarlet stuff (perhaps scarlet-colored wool).**

- 1) These elements were also employed in the purification ritual of the leper (see Lev 14:40).
- 2) They help us see the cleansing association that the resultant ashes are to have in the Hebrew consciousness.
- 3) Psalm 51:1-12; 4) Isaiah 1:18; 5) 1Kings 6:16
- 6) Leviticus 14:1ff - the Kohen takes a rod of cedar wrapped in hyssop and bound with red wool, and uses it to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed bird onto the *Metzora*.

Rashi points out that hyssop is a lowly plant and that the Hebrew word for red wool—*Tola'at*—also means worm, a lowly creature. This reminds the *Metzora* that his origin is *adama*, and that he is lowly. However, the tall, mighty cedar plays a role as well. Hyssop and cedar must balance each other out. The cedar must stand tall and mighty—so must Adam. But Adam must also recognize his lowliness, his fragility—like the hyssop.⁹

b. Hebrews 9:19

3. ¹⁰*The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. **This will be a lasting ordinance** both for the Israelites and for the foreigners residing among them.*

- a. The celebration of Passover (Exo 12:14, 24)
- b. The celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exo 12:17)
- c. The menorah is to be kept burning before the Lord (Exo 27:21; Lev 24:3)
- d. The Aaronic priesthood (Exo 28:43; 29:9)
- e. Not eating fat or blood (Lev 3:17)
- f. The ritual associated with the slaughter of the red heifer (Num 19:10, 21)
- g. The offering of the First-fruits (Lev 23:14).
- h. The observance of Yom Kippur (Lev 16:29,31,34)
- i. The celebration of Shavuot (Lev 23:21)
- j. The celebration of Sukkot (Lev 23:41)
- k. The burnt offerings offered twice Daily, three times on Shabbat, and during the celebration of the New Moon and the Festivals.

⁹ David Silverberg, www.vbm-torah.org, PARASHAT TAZRIA.