

Shabbat Parah/The Ritual of the Red Heifer

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This week's Torah reading includes a special section from the book of Numbers for Shabbat Parah, one of the four special shabbatot preceding Passover. It details the rite of purification after having come into contact with a corpse. The ritual is referred to as the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, as it involved the burning of an entire heifer on which every single hair was red. Even two black or white hairs disqualified the animal! The ashes were then mixed with water and sprinkled on those people and vessels needing purification from coming into contact with the dead. Once so purified, people could reenter the Temple and participate in sacrificial services.

This portion is read in the weeks before Passover to alert those who had become ritually impure to tend to their purification in order to be able to come to Jerusalem and offer the paschal sacrifice on the upcoming festival.

The details of this ritual defy rational explanation. In fact, it is used by commentators as an example of laws that are to be observed simply because God commanded them, and not because of their inherent logic or reason. The Midrash (Numbers Rabbah 19:3) imagines Solomon, peerless in wisdom, being confounded by this one. More colorfully, the Tosafot (BT, Avodah Zarah, 35a) describe the mitzvah of the Red Heifer as a lover's kiss—something to be experienced, not explained.

Not completely satisfied with a “just do it” approach, some teachers, ancient and new, have tried to shed light on the meaning of this unusual tradition. The Midrash, for example, extends the scope of the ritual to purify moral impurity as well, especially idolatry. It suggests that this red heifer comes to atone for the sin of the golden calf. Calves coming from cows, it puts it this way: “Let the mother come and repair the damage the offspring has caused” (Numbers Rabbah 19:8).¹

Another attempt sees in the text an important psychological insight: the complete burning of an entirely red heifer represents the burning or destruction of any notion of perfection. It teaches us that perfection is impossible. While we are mandated to fulfill our obligations to God, to community and to humanity, to slaughter the perfect cow is to symbolically slaughter the notion that any of us can be perfect in these enormous undertakings. This message of the burning of the Parah Adumah is that

just as God doesn't seek perfection from us, it is not perfection that any of us should seek from others, or from ourselves.

Moreover, perfection is a fairly subjective term. What constitutes perfection for me is not necessarily identical to what another might define as perfection. There is no universally held standard as to what it might look like to be the "perfect" Jew, the perfect "friend", the "perfect" spouse, the "perfect" family, the "perfect" [insert any other social/spiritual/professional role].

What life has taught so many of us (and what so many more need to learn), is that diversity and difference are not aberrations of an ideal vision of the world to be tolerated by others; they are precisely the essence of the world itself.

It is a lesson taught by nature. It is a lesson taught by science. It is a lesson taught by the Torah itself, as the Talmud explains the story of creation wherein all humanity descends from a single ancestor, Adam, who was created with the breath of God and in the image of God: A person stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike. But the King of Kings, the Holy One, stamped each person with the seal of Adam and not one of them is alike (BT Sanhedrin 4:5).

This is one of the central texts of our tradition that serves to underscore our embrace of difference as a core Jewish value. No single lifestyle, faith community or social ideology bears any greater or more authentic stamp of God than any other.

As the "perfect" cow is slaughtered and destroys any false sense of our own perfection, also destroyed is the notion of any single definition of perfection towards which any of us might strive.

And so, as perfection goes up in smoke, so does arrogance, close-mindedness, and chauvinism. What remains with the lingering aromas (cedar wood, hyssop and "crimson stuff" were thrown into the fire!) and smoldering embers is a healthy whiff of humility.

Religious ritual has often been used to delineate who was "in" and who was "out". One could see the rite of the Red Heifer as no different: it determined who could come into the Temple and who had to stay outside. But reading it as we have above, the rite becomes one that dismantles barriers, and welcomes people, all people, into

the temple of God: our beautiful and diverse world. The pure red heifer becomes a gorgeous speckled one. Or, in the words of Edward Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out:
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

Shabbat Shalom.