

Parashah One Hundred and Fourteen

Numbers 19:1–20:13; Ezekiel 36:16–36; Matthew 6:19–24

notes by Tim Hegg

The Red Heifer - (Parashah חֻקַּת, Chukat)

The law of the Red Heifer is a חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה (19:2, a statute of the Torah), a category of laws which the Sages defined as beyond the comprehension of mankind. The majority of the laws contained in the Torah are quite apparent in terms of their purpose and significance. Those laws that are specifically called חֻקוֹת (*chuqqot*), “statutes,” however, often elude explanation. Indeed, the law of the Red Heifer is considered by the Sages to be one of the most mysterious. Thus, the Midrash interprets the saying of Solomon (Ecc 7:23) as referring to the Red Heifer: “I said I would be wise, but it is far from me.” And of Job: “Who can draw a pure thing out of an impure one?” (Job 14:4). Herein lies the primary difficulty in the minds of the Sages: “how, on the one hand, can the ashes of the Red Heifer purify those who are defiled, while at the same time render those who administer the ashes unclean?”

We receive a hint at what HaShem expects us to see from this passage by the fact that three elements are added to the fire in which the hide of the Red Heifer is burnt. In 19:6 the instructions are: “The Kohen shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson thread, and he shall throw them into the burning of the cow.” What do these represent?

First, it should be emphasized that the ritual of the Red Heifer deals specifically with defilement by a corpse (19:11f). That is, the uncleanness which this *parashah* has in mind is that which derives from close contact with death. Death, then, is the issue confronted here, and we should understand that in the economy of HaShem, death is the very opposite of His being and character. He is the God of the living, not of the dead (Matt 22:32). To deal with death and its consequences is the apex of God’s salvific work. For death, which entered the universe through sin, is the very enemy HaShem intends to overcome through His deliverance and salvation. All aspects of His salvation, whether individual (as in the case of Daniel, for example) or corporately (as in the Exodus from Egypt), only foreshadow and reveal His ultimate purpose, i.e., to overcome death and give life.

Life (of which God is the source) is marred by death. Wherever death rears its ugly head, there the consequences of sin in the world are manifest, and the glory of HaShem is, in that instance, clouded or in some ways overshadowed. Is HaShem really the Creator? Is He actually in control of His universe? Is He not the source of life? Then if all these are true (and they are), death is the greatest enigma in the whole universe, for it stands in exact opposition to the Creator Himself.

It is for this reason that corpse defilement is spoken of in such stark terms in the Torah. This was certainly understood by the Jewish community of the 1st Century, which considered the laws of purities pertaining to corpse defilement as some of the most important laws of the Torah. So important were the laws pertaining to corpse defilement that the Sages added a great many “fences” to guard against their possible neglect and subsequent transgressions.

Our *parashah* gives two instances whereby a person may become unclean by a corpse: (1) touching a corpse or any part thereof, or (2) being in an enclosure (room) with a corpse. The Sages added that close proximity to a corpse also rendered a person unclean (where “close” was defined as within the distance of one’s shadow) as well as coming into contact with any other person who was unclean through corpse defilement. Thus, tombs were white-washed so that they would be clearly marked in order to warn those passing by to give plenty of space lest they be defiled. Leg-

end has it that the muslims situated a graveyard directly in front of the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem in hopes of preventing the Jewish Messiah from entering the City, for being a Kohen, He would not defile Himself by passing over the graves.

But what is the symbolism of the ashes of the Red Heifer in terms of the ceremony for being cleansed from corpse defilement? First, the fact that it was red must undoubtedly speak of blood. This was to point us to the fact that ultimately it is only by blood that death could be overcome. This is at the heart of the mystery of the *statute* (הַקָּטָן) of the Red Heifer. Death will be overturned by death.

Second, the heifer must be entirely red without any blemish. This must symbolize a life of absolute purity, a life in which there is not even the slightest admixture.

Third, the Red Heifer is slaughtered outside of the camp. While other sacrifices required the burning of the animal outside of the camp (e.g., the bull of consecration, Ex 29:14; the bull and goat of the Yom Kippur sacrifices, Lev 16:27), only the Red Heifer is *slaughtered* outside of the camp, meaning that the blood of the Red Heifer was not poured out or dashed upon the altar. Instead, its blood was sprinkled or thrown toward the front of the Tabernacle (19:4) by the High Priest seven times. (According to the Sages, in the time of the Temple, the Red Heifer was slaughtered outside of the city walls of Jerusalem, *Sifre* on Num 19). Thus, the blood of the Red Heifer was only symbolically related to the *Mishkan*—it never actually was taken within the parameters of the *sanctum* itself. Its having been slaughtered outside of the camp as opposed to the normal procedure of slaughtering sacrifices within the courtyard of the *Mishkan* can only symbolize that it is a sacrifice set apart from all the others.

Fourth, the carcass of the Red Heifer is burned outside of the camp along with all of the meat, remaining blood, bones, entrails—all of it, in its entirety, is burned outside of the camp. This must symbolize a whole burnt offering, but since it is burnt outside of the camp with nothing of it being placed on the altar, it must emphasize two things: a) the burning is a whole burnt offering, i.e., directed to God and no one else, and b) it is despised, set apart as a ritual unto HaShem, but not by the will of the people or by their efforts.

Fifth, the addition of cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread thrown into the fire are all symbolic of purification. Cedar wood is aromatic, and bespeaks the “soothing aroma” by which other offerings are described. That the offering is a soothing aroma to HaShem symbolizes His full acceptance of it (note the sacrifices in Isaiah 1 are a “stench” to Him). Hyssop was used as a symbol of purification (cf. Ps 51:9). It was used as the “brush” for applying the blood to the doorpost at Pesach, and is used as well for purification of the *tzar’at*, the one with a skin disorder (Lev 14:4-6). The scarlet thread is symbolic of the Yom Kippur choosing of the goats, one to be sacrificed and the other let go in the wilderness. A scarlet thread was wrapped around the neck of the scape goat (*l’azzazel*). Moreover, wool dyed with scarlet was used both in the garments of the High Priest and the coverings and veils of the *Mishkan*. Thus, in each case the application of these symbols to the fire was to reveal that the death of the Red Heifer would effect purification for those defiled by death, and that God, the God of the living, would render life to them in exchange for the death of the sacrificial animal.

Sixth, the one who gathers the ashes must himself be ritually clean, but upon gathering the ashes he becomes unclean. That is, symbolically the priest who performs the ritual as well as those who aid him in the burning of the carcass of the Red Heifer become unclean. This is the only sacrifice that makes the High Priest himself unclean, symbolizing that he takes upon himself the

uncleanness of the corpse defilement, that is, of death. He bears the uncleanness of death.

Seventh, the ashes of the Red Heifer are mixed into water, and the mixture is called מֵי נִדְחָה, “waters of abandonment” (translated “waters of purification” by most translations). The verb נִדְחָה (*nadah*, always used in the Piel in the Tanach) means “to exclude, be expelled,” and the noun נִדְחָה (*niddah*) describes “a woman in her menstruation” and came to be used of that which was “impure” or even “that which is abhorrent” (cf. Ezek 7:19–20). Like a woman whose flow is a small death, and thus a ceremonial defilement, so the waters which would purify the one defiled by death are described as partaking of death itself. Here is the bottom line: death can only be conquered by death.

Why? Why death to conquer death? Because God is not only the all-merciful One, He is equally the all righteous One. He cannot overlook sin, or by His pure mercy simply erase it and pretend it does not exist. *Sin requires payment, because sin has robbed God of His glory. Until payment is made, God’s justice is not satisfied.* This sums up the whole of the sacrificial system, for HaShem was in every way foretelling the coming of Messiah Who would 1) be a Lamb without blemish or spot, 2) be slaughtered outside of the camp, having been foreshadowed by the sacrificial system, but standing apart from the priestly sacrifices themselves, and having been despised as unworthy, 3) would bear upon Himself the sins of His people, thus becoming the sin bearer and defiled by the sins of others, 4) would be a sweet aroma unto the Father, Who would receive the sacrifice as payment for sin, and 5) Who would cleanse (remove the defilement of death) all those who are sprinkled by the cleansing water of His death, the waters of purification.

He is the sweet aroma in the nostrils of HaShem; He is the purifying hyssop for all who have been contaminated with death; He is the scapegoat, marked by the scarlet thread and taken away into the wilderness, bearing the sins of His people. It is by Him that death has been conquered, and He won the victory over death through His own death. Here is the answer to the riddle! Life out of death—it is the picture of Messiah, who through death, would conquer death for all who come to Him for salvation (cf. Heb 2:14).

The remainder of the *parashah* relates the death of Miriam as well as the second time that the people of Israel complained about the lack of water during their wilderness trek. Thus, a span of time has elapsed (38 years) between the two sections of our *parashah*, for now the nation is preparing to enter the Land, for they travel north to the wilderness of Zin which is in the southern regions of the Land.

The death of Miriam and her burial is given in one sentence only without any further details about a period of mourning. While she had been forgiven for her rebellion against Moses, she died without entering the Land. It may be that such a short notice is given to connect Miriam’s failure to enter the Land with the sin of Moses and Aaron, who likewise die before the nation comes into the Promised Land. Aaron’s office of High Priest is passed to Eleazar, symbolically represented by the clothing of Eleazar with the sacred vestments of Aaron (20:28). In the case of Moses and Aaron, however, the nation mourns their deaths (20:29; Deut 34:8), whereas in the case of Miriam, no such notice of mourning is given.

Once again, the people “assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron,” for the lack of water is viewed as their neglect. In making such a complaint, the people once again fail to acknowledge that God was the source of the water. What is more, as we shall see, Moses and Aaron themselves fail to give God the full credit He deserves as the supplier of life-giving water for the people.

The complaint of the people incorporates the picture of death. “Why then have you brought the

LORD's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here?" (20:4). The wilderness was bleak, for it lacked both the sustaining food for the nation as well as water. Even though the spies had returned with evidence that the Land was marked by its abundant produce, the people cannot see past their present dilemma. Instead of placing their hopes upon the promises of God, they allow the immediate problem to color their entire perspective. They judge that the Land is a wilderness waste because in their short-sightedness, they refuse to see with eyes of faith.

The lack of water was, indeed, an emergency. No one can live long in a desert without water. But it was not a problem too big for God, something Israel should have known. For already God had demonstrated that He could provide water miraculously for the nation. In fact, the language of our *parashah* is most curious, for it speaks of "the rock" from which water would flow (הַסֵּלֶה, 20:8). In the midrash, the Sages teach that the rock from which the water sprang forth in the first instance (Ex 17:6f) followed the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness, and that when Miriam died, the water from the rock ceased to flow (Mid. Rab. *Numbers* 1.2). Apparently this later midrash incorporated an earlier story of which Paul was aware, for he incorporates it into his teaching:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Messiah (1Cor. 10:1-4).

Paul's point in utilizing the well-known story was that in the same way that God miraculously supplied water during the wilderness wanderings, so the life-giving water of salvation flows from Messiah. Moreover, we may see in Paul's words here a significant point of his theology, namely, that all that God has done for His people throughout history is connected to and dependent upon the ultimate blessing of salvation through His Son, Yeshua.

A fanciful perspective in the later midrashim could actually connect to Paul's use of the legend of the rock as a foreshadowing of Yeshua (if, once again, the midrash is based upon a more ancient story or interpretation). In Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 3.13, it is taught that when Moses struck the rock as recorded in our *parashah*, it first brought forth blood and only afterwards came the water:

it is written: Hear now, you rebels (Num. 20:10). He smote the rock and brought forth blood, as it is said: Behold, He smote the rock, that waters gushed out – וַיִּזְוּבוּ, *vayazuvu* (Ps 78:20), and the word '*vayazuvu*' is an expression used of blood, as it is said: And if a woman have an issue (וַיִּזְוּבוּ, *yazuvu*) of her blood (Lev 15:25). For this reason did he smite the rock twice, because at first he brought forth blood and finally water. (Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 3.13)

Paul's use of the rock as illustrative of Yeshua would fit well with this rabbinic notion, for when Yeshua was struck, both blood and water likewise came forth (Jn 19:34).

As the people gather in complaint against Moses and Aaron, the situation rises to a level of danger: we may presume that Moses and Aaron feared for their lives in the face of the angry mob. They therefore come to the tent of meeting, fall upon their faces, and seek divine intervention. Such a response is a fitting paradigm for all leaders of God's people.

Having sought the help of the Almighty, He responds to them by appearing in the glorious cloud of His presence. Moreover, He gives them the solution: they were to take the rod of Moses, and in the sight of all the people, speak to the rock so that its water (מִיַּיִן) would come forth for the people. Aaron and Moses would be the instruments for “bringing forth the water” (וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם) (מִן־הַסֵּלֶע), but the supply of the water would be from the miraculous hand of God. In other words, Moses and Aaron were, once again, simply to act as mediators on behalf of the people, in order that they would see God’s provision.

Yet when we listen to the words of Moses and Aaron we gain an insight into the sin that brought God’s wrath. Moses took the rod as God had commanded, and gathered the people according to God’s word. He then struck the rock and said: “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? (20:10). It is clear that God had indicated Moses and Aaron would be the means by which the water would come forth from the rock, but in Moses’ words, it may appear as though he led the people to believe that it was by his own power that the water came forth, rather than reminding the people that the water was the gracious gift of God Himself. It may well be, then, that it was in this way that he failed clearly to sanctify God in the eyes of the people. For he failed to emphasize God’s role in supplying the people’s needs, leaving the people with the impression that it was his own actions that had brought forth the needed water.

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me (acted in faithfulness toward Me), to treat Me as holy (set apart) in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them” (20:12)

This is always a danger for those given authority within the community of God’s people, that in the course of their duties they might lead the people to think that their own appointed work is the source of blessing for the people rather than God Himself. On the contrary, leaders among God’s people must constantly point the people to God as the sole source of blessing, extolling His greatness and mercies, and not doing anything to detract from this core reality. This is just as much true today as it was in the days of Moses. For as Yeshua is the head of the body, and thus is the One through Whom God’s blessings flow, leaders in His *kehilah* must constantly and consistently point the people to Him. It should be the goal of all leaders within Messiah’s assembly to strengthen the people’s dependence upon the Almighty, not upon themselves. Paul makes it clear in Eph 4:15–16, that the growth of the body is directly supplied from Messiah:

but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Messiah, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.