

SHABBAT PARAH

Numbers 19:1–22; Ezekiel 36:16–38

notes by Tim Hegg

Shabbat Parah, or Sabbath of the (Red) Heifer, is an important reminder of the upcoming festival of Pesach. In ancient times, the slaughter of the Red Heifer and the mixing of its ashes with water for purification, was done in advance of the Pesach, of all the pilgrimage festivals the one drawing the largest crowd. Some estimates say that as many as 150,000 people flooded the environs of Jerusalem during Pesach! Thus, just before Shabbat HaChodesh, the Shabbat which precedes the month of Nisan, a Sabbath is designated to recollect the ancient ritual of the Red Heifer.

All of this ultimately has to do with the necessity of preparation. Because God is a God of order and not confusion, scheduled events must be prepared for in advance. We all know what happens when we come to scheduled events for which there has been insufficient preparation—this is a recipe for disaster! There was undoubtedly a great deal of preparation being done by the priests and their helpers as they anticipated the many sacrifices they would process in one day, as well as the preparation of shop keepers and inn keepers as they looked forward to the lucrative holiday season and money which would be exchanged for their goods and services. Yet Shabbat Parah has yet another preparation in view, the preparation of the individual to come to the celebration cleansed of ritual defilement.

Common ceremonial impurity was dealt with simply by immersing oneself in a *mikvah* and waiting until the sun set. Then the person was ceremonially clean. Corpse impurity, however, was another matter. To become ceremonially clean after touching a corpse or being in an enclosure (“tent”) with a corpse, required being sprinkled with water mixed with the ashes of the Red Heifer on the third day and on the seventh day, followed by immersion and waiting until the sun set. Then ceremonial purity was achieved (Num 19:11ff).

According to the Mishnah (m.*Para* 3.11), in the late 2nd Temple period, the ashes of the Red Heifer were kept by the priests in Jerusalem.

And they divide it [the ashes] into three parts. One is placed in the Cheil (לַיִל), and one is placed on the Mount of Olives, and one was divided among all the [priestly] watches. (m.*Para* 3.11)

According to the Tosefta,

[From] this which is divided among all the [priestly] watches did the Israelites sprinkle. [With] this which was put on the Mount of Olives did the priests mix [the purification-water]. And this one which was placed in the Cheil did they keep, as it is said, “And it shall be for a testimony of the children of Israel. It is for water of purification of impurity” [Num 19:90]. (t.*Para* 3.14)

While it may be that priests organized occasional missions to purify houses outside of Jerusalem,¹ since the ashes for mixing the water of purification were kept by the Jerusalem priests, one who was corpse-impure could achieve ceremonial purity only by traveling to Jerusalem.

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (Trinity, 1992), p. 218.

But this presented a further problem. According to Num 19:13, 20, the person who is not purified from corpse impurity is to be “cut off from the midst of the assembly.” While the obvious meaning of these texts is that the penalty of *karat* applies to someone who defiles the “sanctuary” (i.e., Tabernacle) by entering while impure, the rabbinic perspective was (apparently) that someone who remained corpse-impure for more than seven days was required to bring a sacrifice of two lambs, one of which was a whole burnt offering and the other given to the priests. The sacrifice of the lambs was to be given in place of being “cut off.” This legislation is mentioned by Josephus:

The law permits those also who have taken care of funerals to come in [to the city] after the same manner [after seven days], when this number of days is over; but if any continued longer than that number of days in a state of pollution, the law appointed the offering two lambs for a sacrifice; the one of which they are to purge by fire, and for the other, the priests take it for themselves. (*Ant* 3.262)

It may have been that someone living a distance from Jerusalem, who became corpse-impure, could undergo a *mikvah* and that this allowed them to remain in the city, awaiting the time when travel to Jerusalem could effect complete ceremonial purity for corpse defilement.² We know, for instance, that Mary and Martha, four days after the death of Lazarus, were still residing in their home, that is, they were not expected to dwell outside of the city (Jn 11:17-19).

Given these data, it is clear that people living a distance from Jerusalem may have remained in a state of corpse-impurity until such time as they were able to travel to Jerusalem and undergo the water of purification ritual. This meant that the pilgrimage festivals occasioned the administration of the water purification rituals to a great number of people.

Though the ashes of the Red Heifer, mixed with water for purification, rendered the body ceremonially clean (cf. Heb 9:13), this mixture had no ability to cleanse the soul. The ritual itself was given, not only to maintain the sanctity of the Sanctuary, but also to serve as a reminder that one’s intentions in worship must also be pure.

The ritual of the Red Heifer, therefore, was something that could be done out of mere duty, without any heart agreement. In other words, it was an act that could be done apart from faith. Yet such an act accomplished its intended goal, namely, rendering the individual fit to enter the Temple courts. In other words, while the mere act itself accomplished the cleansing of the flesh, the cleansing of the heart or soul was strictly between the worshipper and God. And, the cleansing of the soul is entirely a matter of God’s mercy and in no way connected to one’s works or good deeds. The commandment of the Red Heifer, then, was simply the mechanism by which one was afforded the opportunity to make one of two choices: go through the ritual without a spiritual communion with God, or accept the ritual with a heart of faith and recognize in it a picture of the ultimate cleansing from sin, something that looked by faith to God’s means of forgiveness, that is, the sacrifice He would offer in the death of His own Son, Yeshua.

And so it is with every *mitzvah*: each commandment stands like the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the *Gan Eden*. Each commandment presents to us the opportunity to obey from the heart or to simply go through the motions. Each commandment presents a test for us, whether we will walk by faith or by sight.

This very issue was at the center of Yeshua’s teaching while He walked upon this earth. He did

2 See Hannah K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis* (Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 175–76.

not, in any way, relegate the commandments of His Father to some second-class position. Far from it—He taught that the commandments were of extreme importance. But what He preached against with true divine power was the mere “going-through-the-motions” kind of “obedience” without regard to the issues of faith that each act of obedience required. For Yeshua, doing the deed without faith was nothing more or less than performing a ritual, for it centered attention upon the doer, not upon God Who had given the commandment.

Once, however, a person views the Torah from a heart of faith, there is the immediate recognition that it is impossible to keep the commandments 100% of the time, and that therefore one’s relationship with God is a matter of His mercy, not man’s works. In other words, obeying the commandments from a heart of faith extols God’s mercy and grace—it puts the lime-light upon Him. As such, it does away with pride. Whenever an individual or group begins to portray the attitude of “why don’t you keep the commandments like I/we do,” it may be an indication that the ritual, rather than the lesson it is given to teach, has taken center stage. This is why Paul speaks of the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5). This key phrase of the Apostle Paul is an interesting one, indeed, for he writes that he received his apostleship in order to “bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake.” The Apostolic gospel, therefore, centered on this very issue, that obedience of God’s Torah was an outcome of true faith, not the doing of certain ceremonies. In short, Paul was simply taking the life message of Yeshua and giving it to the Gentile world.

Indeed, it is always a caution when we begin to neglect an emphasis upon God’s grace and mercy. Whenever a group or an individual begins to pay more attention to their success and less to God’s strength and mercy that granted such success, disaster is crouching at the door. And yet, in our flesh, we have a strong tendency to sing our own successes. Why? Because admitting that our success is really His requires us to die to ourselves—something we don’t do naturally. We’d rather forget that we’re just dust and that our life span is like a mere whisper in the drone of eternity.

The Red Heifer

The Sages categorize the law of the Red Heifer as חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה, by which they mean a law or commandment which is beyond the comprehension of mankind. Many of HaShem’s laws are easily reasoned by human thought, as to why they were given. But the law of the Red Heifer is considered by the Sages to be, in many of its aspects, a mystery. Thus, Midrash Rabbah 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?” (Jb 14:4). Herein lies the primary difficulty in the minds of the Sages: “how can the ashes of the Red Heifer purify, on the one hand, those who are defiled, while at the same time, on the other hand, making those who administer the ashes unclean?” Attempting to find an answer to this conundrum, the Sages suggest the example of a righteous child who descends from unrighteous parents, but this, admittedly, is not a very satisfying explanation.

We receive a hint at the truth HaShem expects us to see from the Torah’s teaching on the water of purification (Num 19) when we discover that three elements are added to the fire which burns the hide of the Red Heifer. In Num 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 defile-

ment by a corpse (19:11f). That is, the uncleanness which this *parashah* has in mind is direct 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 (Mt 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 deliverance, 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, which lasts for only a period of time, 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!), the death is the greatest enigma in the whole universe, for it stands in exact opposition of 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 corpse defilement and all of its attended impurities as one of the most important laws of the community. So important was the law of corpse defilement that the Sages added a great many "fences" to guard against its being disregarded. Our *parashah* simply gives two instances whereby a person may be defiled by a corpse: touching a corpse or any part thereof or being in a room where a person dies. The Sages added that any one who was close to a corpse (close enough to have one's shadow touch a corpse) or touched any other person who had been close to a corpse was equally defiled. Thus, tombs were white-washed in order to be very visible, and to warn those passing by to give plenty of space lest they be defiled. For this same reason the muslims have designated the space in front of the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem as a cemetery, reasoning that the Messiah, a Kohen, would not defile Himself by passing over the graves, and thus (so they reason) prohibiting Him from entering the Eastern Gate as the prophet Ezekiel foretold.

But what is the symbolism of the Red Heifer and its purification of the one who has been defiled by a corpse? First, the fact that it was red must speak undoubtedly of blood. It is only by blood that the defiled may be made clean. Death will be overturned by death.

Second, it must be entirely red without any blemish. This must symbolize a life given for the defiled one, a life which is itself undefiled.

Third, the Red Heifer is slaughtered outside of the camp and its blood sprinkled toward the front of the Tabernacle (19:4), indicating that symbolically it was to be considered as applied to the mercy seat, even as the blood was on Yom Kippur. Its having been slaughtered outside of the camp as opposed to the normal procedure of slaughtering it within the courtyard of the Mishkan can only symbolize that it is a sacrifice despised by the people but effectual, nonetheless.

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 and not on the altar as all the other sacrifices were, 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 sym-

bolic 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* (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*). Thus, in each case the application of these symbols to the fire was to reveal that 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 pure, but upon gathering the ashes becomes unclean. That is, symbolically, the priest who performs the ritual takes upon himself the uncleanness of the worshipper who comes for cleansing. He bears their uncleanness.

Seventh, the ashes are mixed into water, and the mixture is called מֵי נִדָּח “waters of separation” or “waters of defilement” (translated “waters of purification” by most translations). “Impurity” is here *nidah*, the word used of a woman in her monthly cycle. 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 would themselves partake of death. 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 and despised as unworthy, 3) would bear upon Himself the sins of His people, thus becoming the sin bearer, being 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 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. And this is the truth He wants us to rehearse once again as we approach the Pesach season.

Preparing for Pesach

So now, as we remember the ancient ritual of the Red Heifer, and the purity it symbolized, how are we to prepare for Pesach, this appointed time of HaShem that He has set apart to meet with us in special ways? How should we prepare for what He intends to do in us?

The removal of leaven from our houses is ill-framed if it does not remind us ultimately of the need to remove the leaven from our hearts. As individuals, we should begin that heart inspection for the leaven, for the “sin which so easily entangles us” (Heb 12:1). None of us can claim exemption from sin, and from those sins that most often entangle us. So now is the time to seek God’s

way of freedom from these chains of bondage. Pesach is *z'man cheruteinu*, “the time of our freedom” and thus a time to seek new victories over those weaknesses of soul with which we contend.

This time of preparation is a time when God calls us to purify ourselves in anticipation of the Pesach feast—an appointed dinner with Him! Are there matters of division between us? Let us seek to forgive and be forgiven. Have we hurt others, engaged in *lashon hara*, failed to love our neighbor as we should? Now is the time to begin the mending—to find ways of reconciliation as we purify our hearts for the appointed time.

Perhaps there are activities in our lives from which we need to turn. They may have become so common as to seem “natural” and right, but the Spirit of God has warned us, sometimes by just subtle “nudges,” that these are not good and should be left behind. Now is the time to begin the unwrapping of the cords that bind these activities to us, and to let them go.

Have we wearied of the burdens and the toil of daily living to the point that we have almost given up thinking that there could be a “land of freedom?” Have we become so used to the voice of the slave master and the chains we wear in this “Egypt” that we can almost not envision ever being free? Then this is the time to recognize that our redemption is drawing near—the time of our freedom is close at hand. Pesach celebrates this vision—get ready for it!