

Understanding the Mystifying: The Red Heifer Commandment—and Every Other Commandment

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Our *parashah* opens with the “strange” rite of the red heifer. This was a central rite in biblical times in that it enabled people, exposed to dead humans, to regain ritual purity and go to the tabernacle/temple. However, by talmudic times, the understanding of the rationale and process of the rite was lost. Traditions then built up around this supposed mystery to argue that this inscrutability was deliberate.¹ In this framework, the Torah consists of rationally understandable commandments (often called *mishpatim*)—but also of totally incomprehensible *mitzvot* (*hukkim*), given to teach us to obey instructions simply because God said so, without visible rhyme or reason.² Later commentators pushed this approach to teach us that one obeys the Torah, no questions asked, simply because it is the word of God.

I maintain that this direction of interpretation was mistaken, that the red heifer rite was not an exercise in obeying the inscrutable. This ritual was, in fact, fully understood in biblical times.

¹ See Bemidbar Rabbah 19:7, especially the words of R. Yose ben Hanina and the colloquy of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and the idolator on the red heifer rite.

² See Maimonides’ discussion in his Guide of the Perplexed 3:26.



Furthermore, it is a fundamental principle of covenant that the commandments are given, not to train us to robotic conforming obedience in the service of God, but rather to improve people and their character traits.³ As such, they need to be explained rationally, and clarified in presentation, so that people will fully understand which improvements they should work on to become a better human being and partner with God, in living and applying the Torah to make a better world. The deeper truth is that the unfolding of covenant is the grand movement away from obedience—enforced by punishment—toward the human partner becoming a serious agent in defining the *mitzvot*, and accepting these disciplines, in order to live life on a higher plane.

The steps of the red heifer ritual actually offer an example of a rational commandment that was fully understood in its time. *Hukkat* opens with the challenge of overcoming the greatest state of ritual impurity: one caused by encounter with a dead human being. The human being is the highest form of life, therefore the human corpse represents the most intense anti-life.⁴ Contact with a corpse plunges an individual into an intense ritual impurity, which cannot be overcome by standard ritual purification (that is: mere immersion in a *mikveh*). Rather, one must be sprinkled by a liquid consisting of the blood of a pure red heifer, mixed with ashes of the cow, plus cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson yarn. If this is done on the third and seventh days, then the special purification rite is efficacious, so that the person—freed from death impurity—can enter the zone of holiness, the zone of life dominant, which is the holy tabernacle/temple (Numbers 19:11-12, 18-20).

³ See my prior essay on Parashat *Hayyei Sarah*, “The Torah Came to Make a Mensch: Reflections on the Discovery of Rebecca,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/torah-came-make-mensch>; and especially the teachings of Rabbi Israel Salanter, referenced there. See also Rabbi Avraham Isaac Hacohen Kook chapter 51 of his *Guide of the Perplexed of Our Time*.

⁴ See my prior essay on Parashat *Tazria-Metzora*, “Purity-Impurity: A Code of Life and Death,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/purity-impurity-code-life-and-death>.



To give but one illustration of the extent to which, by talmudic times, the Rabbis had lost understanding of the rite, one Rabbi said: Even Solomon, the wisest of all mortals, could not decipher the red heifer's meaning. Hence the King exclaimed: "I said that I would be wise but it (meaning: the red heifer rationale) was beyond me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23).⁵ All this became an ideological school that Torah is to be obeyed and there are no moral, intellectual, or other criteria that should be exercised in obeying it.

I stress the alternative school of thought. The Torah's instructions are given, not to glorify and obey God, but "to purify God's creatures."⁶ Therefore, the commandments had to be presented rationally so people would understand them, and be able to develop their character or behaviors to meet a higher standard of morality and spiritual meaning.

Thanks to modern critical scholarship—and the work of Jacob Milgrom in particular—we can recover the original meaning and rationale of the red heifer rite.⁷ Explains Milgrom: The red heifer is a *hattat*, a purification offering, which in this case decontaminates death impurity (Numbers 19:9). Blood—which is the carrier of life (see Leviticus 17:11)—is the decontaminant of death impurity. The blood plus the ashes of the all red cow—also symbolizing blood—is mixed with cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson yarn to create a liquid which purges the death impurity. Part of the blood is sprinkled toward the altar to purge the tabernacle/temple. The rest is sprinkled on the impure individual, moving them from the zone of being under death's influence to the zone of life. This makes them eligible to enter the tabernacle/temple, the zone of life dominant and growing. In symbolic language, this is the repeated, fundamental

⁵ Using the common attribution of the book of Ecclesiastes to King Solomon. See Bemidbar Rabbah 19:3.

⁶ Bereishit Rabbah 44:1 (= Vayikra Rabbah 13:3).

⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible series), in two volumes.



message of our tradition, that the human is to shake off death and act, work, and live on the side of life and in creating life in the world.

Milgrom also points out that the single anomaly that most bewildered the Talmud—that the ashes of the cow purified the impure but made the priestly handler ritually impure—is a characteristic of the *hattat* sacrifice **in general**. The death impurity is “absorbed” by the *hattat*, rendering the individual pure; but it itself is now imbued with the impurity, and so therefore renders its handlers impure. Thus, the priestly handler of the ashes must immerse overnight to become pure again.⁸

In short, Milgrom shows that the red heifer rite made sense in the symbolic language of the *hattat* system, and was part of a conscious ritual proclaiming the commitment of God and the holy tabernacle/temple to help the individual fight off the encroachment of death, and to turn them to the side of increasing life. This is in accord with the general thrust of all covenantal—one might say: halakhic—behaviors, to maximize life—and to minimize the death or decay element—in every life activity. This red heifer rite was not imparted to teach people to obey orders even when they were incomprehensible. On the contrary, this rite fits neatly into the overall goal of the commandments as a way of life, as an exercise in acting on the side of life.

The red heifer rite, then, can be used as a model of all covenantal-halakhic instructions, which are meant to guide the individual to live on the side of life. The individual needs to understand the logic of the instruction so they can choose life, and be a mature partner in the covenant of *tikkun olam*, of improving life and of the quality of life in the world. This clear

⁸ See Leviticus 16:28 and Milgrom's extended discussion of the *hattat* system in vol. 1, pp. 270-278.



rationale applies to every *mitzvah* in every society and culture. Each commandment must be articulated toward upholding life, and toward a greater human autonomy and partnership role. This is the way that *mitzvot* move us toward the goal of a final universal triumph over all the enemies of life—poverty, hunger, oppression, all forms of discrimination that deny the equality of the other, war, and sickness. An important part of religious instruction is to upgrade the individual human being to embrace life more, to be more loving, more helpful to others, more self-respectful, more patient and understanding, more capable of restraint, which gives room to others to develop and express themselves. Every instruction, then, is not only to be understood, it is to be articulated so that the individual feels that their choice makes a difference. Their choosing life and maximizing its quality is part of an effort by a universal community toward transforming the broader society and the whole world toward a fuller life. The greater the autonomy and individual choice, the greater is the dignity and surge of value of the individual, and the more capable they are to play a role as an active partner in applying the covenant to improve the world.

A person who absorbs the *mitzvah* in this spirit of participatory agency feels confirmed that they are an image of God—infinately valuable, equal, and unique—and therefore a legitimate and important partner in the covenant of *tikkun olam*. In turn, the partner is capable of applying the Torah's instructions to ensure that they maximize life in whatever culture is currently regnant. This also means that where applying the inherited patterns from past articulations will harm life or undermine the dignity of others, the partner has the authority to apply the norms in a way that enhances the dignity of life instead. Thus, in an egalitarian society where women are fully participatory on an equal basis and fully eligible for leadership, the inherited special-but-not-equal status of women in Jewish tradition can be upgraded to honor the fullness of women's image of God. Similarly, all other participants who traditionally



are rated less than equal—be they based on sexual orientation, or gender, or based on disabilities, or even on being non-Jewish—can be upgraded and articulated to honor the fullness of their life and their dignity as an image of God.

It should be stressed that in every area of life, having full understanding, having the capacity to choose and affirm the specific behaviors, having the sense, not of yielding to an inscrutable dominant power, but rather joining in partnership with a higher force to make a better life for all, increases the dignity and sense of higher purpose that gives life richer texture and deeper meaning and inspiration. This is, in fact, the lesson of the red heifer rite.

