

PARASHAT CHUKAT

Numbers 19:1–22:1

Parashat Chukat begins by describing the ritual slaughter and sacrifice of the *parah adumah*, or “red cow,” by Eleazar the priest, and the ritual cleansing for those who touch a corpse. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, dies at Kadesh. Again the people complain that they have no water to drink. God tells Moses to take his rod and order a rock to bring forth water. Angry at the complaining people, whom he calls “rebels,” Moses strikes the rock with his rod. Water pours out. The people drink and water their animals. God informs Moses that because of his anger he will not be allowed to lead his people into the Land of Israel. Moses asks the king of Edom for permission to pass through his land. The king refuses, and the Israelites take another route. When they reach Hor, Aaron dies, and his priestly authority is passed on to his son, Eleazar. The people mourn Aaron for thirty days. Afterwards they are attacked by the Canaanites, whom they conquer with God’s help. However, the people continue to complain to Moses: “Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness?” God sends snakes among the people to bite them for their disloyalty. Moses begs forgiveness for them when they admit their wrongdoing. God tells Moses to place a *seraph* figure—a snake made of copper—on his staff. When the people see it, they will be healed. The Israelites are later attacked by the Amorites and the people of Bashan and Og. In each battle the Israelites emerge victorious, conquering towns and acquiring large territories.



OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Moses and Aaron are told that the ritual for preparing and cleansing water to remove the sins of the people is to begin with the slaughter and sacrifice of a *parah adumah*, or “red cow.” The animal must have no defect and must never have worn a yoke. After its slaughter, Eleazar the priest is to sprinkle its blood seven times in front of the sanctuary and then burn all its flesh. Ashes from the red cow are to be kept and added to water used to purify the Israelites.

• 2 •

Those who touch a corpse are unclean for seven days. On the third and seventh day they may

purify themselves with the water from the ritual of the red cow.

• 3 •

After the Israelites arrive at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, dies and is buried there.

• 4 •

The community is without water and complains to Moses and Aaron asking, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us here to die in this desolate desert?” Angry at the people’s ingratitude, Moses and Aaron pray to God, who tells them to gather the people together before a rock from which water will flow. When the people, whom Moses calls “rebels,” gather in front of the rock, Moses takes his rod and strikes the

rock. Water pours out. There is enough to satisfy not only the people but their flocks as well. However, Moses and Aaron are told that because of their anger they will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. The place of this incident is named Meribah, which means “quarrel.”

• 5 •

Seeking friendship, Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom to ask permission for the Israelites to pass through his land on their way to the Land of Israel. He promises the king that the Israelites will not take food or drink as they cross his territory. The king refuses, threatening to launch a war against the Israelites if they enter his land.

• 6 •

Moses is told by God to bring Aaron and his son, Eleazar, to the top of Mount Hor. There Moses removes and gives Aaron’s priestly garments to Eleazar. Aaron dies on the mountain, and the Israelites mourn for thirty days.

• 7 •

Moving through the Negev, the Israelites are attacked by the Canaanites. With God’s help, the Israelites defeat their enemies.

• 8 •

Near the Sea of Reeds the people complain again to Moses about their lack of bread and water. They question his taking them out of Egypt. God punishes their rebellious behavior by sending snakes to bite and kill them. Realizing what they have done, they plead for Moses to intervene. God tells Moses to fashion a *seraph*—a copper snake—and place it on his staff. When the people see the staff, they are healed.

• 9 •

The Israelites, attacked by the Amorites and the people of Bashan and Og, are victorious, conquering towns and acquiring large territories.

THEMES

Parashat Chukat contains two important themes:

1. The mystery and meaning of rituals.
2. The reason Moses and Aaron are not allowed to enter the Land of Israel.

PEREK ALEF: *The Parah Adumah: What Is the Meaning of This Strange Ritual?*

The ceremony of the *parah adumah*, or “red cow,” must have been an intriguing and important ritual to the early Israelites. According to the Torah, and later reports in the Talmud, the priests are to search for a cow with a perfect red coat—a perfect cow that has never worn a yoke or been used for work. Upon finding such a cow, the priest slaughters it outside the sanctuary, sprinkles some of its blood seven times in the direction of the sanctuary, and then builds a fire. He throws the cow’s remains into the fire along with a piece of cedar wood and hyssop tied together with a red string. After the cow has completely burned, its ashes are divided into three parts: one for use in purifying those who

have touched a corpse; one to be kept outside the sanctuary for safekeeping; and one for use in the future to be mixed with the ashes of another red cow. Some reports indicate that, from the time of Moses until the Temple is destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., only nine such red cows were used for this special ceremony.

And how did the purification ceremony using the ashes of the red cow work?

A ritually pure person would mix together a jar of fresh spring water with some ashes from the red cow. The water would then be sprinkled on a ritually impure person during the third or seventh day of impurity. At the setting of the sun on the seventh day, the person would become pure again. (*Yoma* 2a, 14a, 42b–43b; *Sotah* 46a; *Niddah* 9a; *Nazir* 61b; *Megillah* 20a; *Kiddushin* 25a, 31a, 62a; see also Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Ra-*

tionale, Bloch Publishing Co., New York, 1974, pp. 348–349)

This strange ceremony has puzzled many interpreters. Why, they have asked, do the ashes of a red cow contain the power to purify those who touch a corpse? Why is this ceremony so important? What is its meaning and power?

Apparently, non-Jews also were baffled by this ceremony of the red cow. The famed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, head of the Sanhedrin at the time of the destruction of the Temple, was once asked by a non-Jew to explain the ritual. “Do you really believe that some ashes from a red cow purify a person who has touched a corpse? Are you not practicing magic?” he challenged.

Rabbi Yochanan answered the man by comparing the ritual of the red cow to the commonly practiced ritual among non-Jews for curing an insane person. “Don’t you expose the mad person to the smoke of roots and sprinkle water upon him in order to cure him? Are not both ceremonies similar?” asked the rabbi.

Later, Rabbi Yochanan’s students, who had overheard the conversation, said to him, “Appealing to common sense, you provided the non-Jew with a simple answer. Now share with us the real meaning of the ritual of the red cow.”

Rabbi Yochanan responded by telling them that there is no explanation. The ritual is commanded by God. It is set out within the Torah law. That is what justifies its observance, not some rational interpretation. (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 4:7)

Rabbi Isaac, possibly a student of Rabbi Yochanan, agrees, claiming that even wise King Solomon could not fathom the reasons for the ritual of the red cow. This view is shared by Rabbi Joshua of Siknin, who explains that the ritual of the red cow is one of four “laws of Torah” for which there is no rational explanation. (*Talkut Shimoni* 759; *Numbers Rabbah* 19:5)



Ramban (Nachmanides)

In contrast, Nachmanides criticizes those who are satisfied with saying “there is no explanation

of this ritual” and offers an explanation of his own. Pointing out that most human beings, like Adam, make mistakes and are sinful, Nachmanides holds that their corpses are impure, and those who touch them become impure. In order to remove this impurity, water mixed with the ashes of the red cow must be sprinkled upon them. The ritual purifies them by removing from them the association with sin. (Commentary on Numbers 19:2)

Rabbi Joseph Becor Shor provides another interpretation for the ritual of the *parah adumah*. He explains that the ritual is meant to prevent Jews from sinning by contact with corpses. It is a natural tendency to cling to loved ones who have died and, occasionally, to want to caress and embrace their dead bodies, if only for a final time. Shor holds that, to warn Jews against this tendency or against the practice in some societies of worshiping the dead or wearing garments made from their skin or bones, the Torah declares contact with a dead body defiling.



Leibowitz

A sprinkling by waters mixed with ashes from the red cow is the only rite for purification from such sin. The ritual possesses both educational and purifying powers. It not only purifies from sin, but it also functions as a dramatic reminder that Jews are forbidden to touch or venerate the bodies of their dead. (See Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bemidbar*, pp. 233–235.)

Purifying polluted water

Analyzing the ritual of the red cow, research chemist Dr. Robert Kunin writes that “our biblical ancestors were well aware of water pollution and were also aware of technology capable of treating such polluted water. . . . A chemist analyzing this ritual carefully soon realizes that the mixture of ashes is a mixture of granular and powdered activated carbon and bone char—a mixture of virgin carbonaceous adsorbents capable of removing practically all known toxins, viruses, and pollutants, in-

cluding radioactivity. It should be noted that the components of the ash and the basic method of treating water as described in Numbers is essentially the only method currently approved by the United States government. ("The Mystery of the Red Heifer," Dor le Dor, Spring 1985, pp. 267-269)

Sforno

Obadiah Sforno offers a symbolic explanation. He points out that the priest takes cedar wood, identified with pride because the cedar tree stands tall, and hyssop, identified with humility because it is a fragrant low-growing plant, along with a red scarlet thread, identified with sinfulness, and throws all three into the fire consuming the red cow. The ashes, which combine *pride*, *humility*, and *sinfulness*, are then mixed with water for the purification ritual.

For Sforno, the power associated with the red cow ritual pulls the sinner back from the evil of pride toward the ideal of humility. The mixture of ashes and water provides a method for repentance. Specifically, if arrogance pushes one to neglect the laws of Torah by touching a corpse, that one then requires purification. The ritual for this purpose is composed of symbolic messages. By being sprinkled with the mixture of ashes from the red cow, cedar wood, hyssop, and a scarlet thread, the sinner who has allowed pride to rule is purified and reminded to pursue humility and more moderate paths of behavior. (Commentary on Numbers 19:1-10)



Hirsch

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch also maintains that the meaning of the ritual of the *parah adumah* is symbolic. Yet his interpretation differs significantly from that of Sforno. For Hirsch, the ritual represents "the proclamation of the public conviction of the possibility of freedom from sin,

the ability of mastering all physical temptations and allurements, proclaiming the fact of the moral power of the human will. . . ." In other words, human beings can correct their wrongdoing; there is a way out of the harm and hurt they do.

How does Hirsch reach such a conclusion?

He begins by pointing out that the red cow exemplifies the "animal nature" of human beings—all of the unmastered, uncontrolled powers each person possesses. Such powers, Hirsch argues, are expressed in behavior that is self-destructive and often abusive of others. For example, driven by uncontrolled anger, a person will lash out at loved ones, hurting them and damaging future relationships.

In slaughtering a red cow that has never worn a yoke, symbolizing our unrestrained powers, Hirsch explains, we achieve "full mastery over the animal." Uncontrolled inclinations and ambitions are put to the service of free will. In offering the red cow that has never worn a yoke outside the sanctuary, the ancient Israelites celebrate taking control of their "animal side" and freely choosing to direct the expression of its powers. They demonstrate that they are free to shape the moral decisions that affect their lives and society.

Yet, continues Hirsch, free-choosing human beings are subject to the same physical laws of disintegration and death as "the rest of the physical-organic world." Human beings are born and die. They "touch" death constantly, and doing so makes them impure. Hirsch states that it contaminates them and sets limitations on them—the limitations of the human animal.

The ritual of the *parah adumah* enables human beings to overcome such contamination and go beyond the boundaries of life and death. That is its meaning and power. Hirsch maintains that mixing the "ash" of the slaughtered red cow, which symbolizes the triumph over the animal within us, with the "living water" demonstrates that each human being is endowed with a "never dying immortal spiritual being. . . ." By controlling and guiding human powers for creativity, justice, and love, the human being defies death and achieves immortality. The ceremony of the red heifer celebrates our power to live beyond the mysterious doors of death. (Commentary on Numbers 19:1-10)

No person, however sinful, is lost. I believe that this ritual of the red heifer, strange though it may seem, preserving within it seemingly primitive elements, dramatizes effectively and vividly how the Jew and Judaism look upon human beings. Here is an instrument for cleansing the impure, for no person is hopeless . . . there is no person who has fallen so low, who has so completely expelled from [within] the image of God. . . . No person, therefore, has to stagger through life crushed and oppressed by the burden of guilt, to be perpetually and eternally doomed by one error or by a series of mistakes. There is an opportunity through religious belief to start anew. (Morris Adler, The Voice Still Speaks, p. 333)

In contrast to Hirsch's inventive symbolic interpretation of the ritual of the *parah adumah*, modern biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom maintains that this ancient ritual is meant to purge the individual and sanctuary of wrongdoing. It is a ceremony of ethical cleansing.

Ancient Jews, explains Milgrom, believed that acts of immorality affected more than just those involved in them. There are consequences of wrongdoing that infect and pollute the entire community. Milgrom describes three categories of such sins: individual wrongdoings committed inadvertently, communal sins committed inadvertently, and deliberate wrongdoings committed with design. In all cases, these sins have a contaminating effect, not only upon the guilty individuals, but also upon the community and sanctuary. Asking forgiveness through sacrifices and prayers, even repairing the wrong through apology or restitution, is not enough to purify what is soiled by wrongdoing.

For the ancients, says Milgrom, the ritual of the *parah adumah* alone has the power to remove or exorcise such sinfulness. "By daubing the altar with blood or by bringing it inside the sanctuary, the priest purges the most sacred objects and areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the person who caused their contamination by physical impurity or inadvertent offense." In other words, the person and the community corrupted by wrongdoing are restored to a state of purity and

can then go on without the burden of guilt. (Jacob Milgrom, editor, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 438–447)

As we have seen, Torah interpreters do not agree on the meaning of the *parah adumah* ritual. The significance of the selection and sacrifice of a pure red cow that has never worn a yoke and the unique mixture of ashes, combining cedar wood, hyssop, and the red thread with water, remains a mystery. Contemporary scholar David I. Kertzer seeks a solution by pointing out that purification rituals often "separate members from the rest of the world." They make them feel unique by unifying them "as a solidarity unit." (*Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, pp. 17–18)

Does the ritual of the red cow signify communal bonding, like induction ceremonies where one drinks or eats special foods or circumcision as a sign of the covenant? Such rituals can provide participants with a unique identity, distinguishing them from "the rest of the world."

Clearly, the ritual of the red cow functions as a means of reentry into the sacred community for one who has broken the taboo of touching a corpse. Separation from the community and the sanctuary is a serious matter. Wrongdoers, those who break the law or transgress appropriate practices of the group, feel banished; they require a way back into the comfort of community solidarity. A ritual like the *parah adumah* guarantees their return, their acceptance back into full-group membership and participation.

The original meanings of each element of the *parah adumah* ceremony elude understanding. One matter, however, is clear: All interpreters agree that the ritual sprinkling of the mixture of ash and water removes the sinner's contamination and allows reentry into the sanctuary of the people. In this way, this ceremony, like ritual circumcision and the laws of *kashrut*, preserves the "solidarity" and "sanctity" of the Jewish people. The ritual serves Jewish survival.

PEREK BET: *Decoding the Sin and Punishment of Moses and Aaron*

As the mysterious ritual of the *parah adumah* challenges commentators, so, too, does the harsh

punishment of Moses and Aaron described in this *parashah*.

The people arrive at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, dies and is buried there. Again the people “join against” Moses and Aaron, blaming the two brothers for bringing them to die in the desert. “Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place? . . . There is not even water to drink!”

Moses and Aaron turn to God and are instructed: “You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”

The two leaders assemble the people in front of the rock, and Moses speaks to them: “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” Then he raises his hand and strikes the rock twice with the rod. Water flows out for the entire community. The people drink and water their animals.

God, however, is not finished with Moses and Aaron. They are told: “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.” God gives the complaining Israelites water while publicly humiliating Moses and Aaron.

What have they done to deserve such severe punishment? How can these two devoted leaders of their people for nearly forty years now be sentenced to die in the desert, without ever seeing the Promised Land? And, if Moses, who held the staff and spoke to the Israelites, did something wrong, why is Aaron also punished?

These questions bother Jewish interpreters. How can a God of justice inflict such a sentence upon loyal leaders?

Some commentators are sympathetic to Moses. Early rabbinic interpreters see some justification for Moses’ actions. Not only do the people rally against Moses, they also taunt him as he stands before the rock. “You claim to be a miracle worker,” they tell him. “We know your tricks. You are standing before a rock that you have prepared for a magic display of your powers. If you want to prove yourself, move to that rock

over there, to the one chosen by us, not by you!” Furious at their insults, Moses loses his temper. He calls them *hamorim*, which means “rebels,” or “fools.” He strikes the rock, but only a trickle of water comes forth. The people laugh at him. Making fun of him, they say, “Moses, is this all you can do? Is this your big miracle? This is not even enough water for a few babies, and we need enough for thousands.” Embarrassment and anger swell within him. He pauses, then he strikes the rock again, producing a powerful gush of water.

These rabbinic interpreters reconstruct the situation: The people exasperate Moses. Embarrassed and ashamed, he loses patience. He becomes justifiably angry. However, the Israelites are also at fault, not just Moses. His punishment is only partially warranted. This also seems to be the conclusion of the Psalmist who, reflecting on this incident, writes: “They [the people of Israel] provoked anger at the waters of Meribah/and Moses suffered on their account,/because they rebelled against God/and he spoke rashly.” (*Numbers Rabbah* 19:9; also Psalms 106:32–33)

Other early rabbinic commentators disagree with this explanation. They point out that both Moses and Aaron are guilty of arrogance. Their instruction is to *speak* to the rock, not *strike* it. Instead, Moses publicly strikes it not once, *but twice!* In doing so, Moses implies a lack of faith in God to bring forth water. For this reason he is told, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.” (*Numbers Rabbah* 19:10)



Rambam (Maimonides)

Moses Maimonides claims that God punishes Moses because of his exasperation with the complaints and quarreling of the Israelites. Extreme anger is his downfall; intelligence and impatience condemn him. Instead of remaining even-tempered, Moses flies into a rage. He insults the people by calling them “rebels.” In doing so, he fails as a leader and as a model for their own behavior. Maimonides argues that Moses should

have exercised moderation by being more understanding of the Israelites' frustrations and more accepting of their criticism, including their baseless accusations. Instead, he allows anger to control him, insults the people, flies into a rage, calls them names, and forcefully shatters the rock. Such an extreme response, says Maimonides, deserves punishment. (*Shemonah Perakim* 4)

The sin was raising the rod

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that the sin of Moses grew out of his deep disappointment with the people. He is stunned that after forty years he still must carry his staff to prove his credibility. For that reason he speaks "in words of deep reproach . . . and in passionate agitation struck the rock." It was, Hirsch insists, "the impulsive vehement raising of the rod . . . in which the wrong consisted." (See commentary on Numbers 20:10-12 in *The Pentateuch*, L. Honig and Sons Ltd., London, 1959, pp. 368-370.)

On anger

Anger kills the foolish person. (Job 5:2)

Loss of temper leads to hell. (Jonathan ben Eleazar in Nedarim 22a)

Anger deprives a wise person of wisdom, and a prophet of vision. (Simeon ben Lakish in Pesachim 66b)

Anger begins in madness and ends in regret. (Abraham Hasdai, Ben ha-Melek ve-ha-Nazir 30: 1230)



Peli

Aaron does nothing

Pinchas Peli writes that Aaron is condemned because he watches silently while his brother flares out of control. He does nothing to pacify him, nor does he speak out to defend the Israelites. "Aaron could have pointed out to Moses

his error and requested him to stop. . . . Through not protesting, he became an accomplice and was penalized accordingly. (Torah Today, pp. 177-179)

Nachmanides takes issue with Maimonides' explanation. Accusing Maimonides of adding "nonsense to nonsense," Nachmanides points out that nowhere in the Torah text does it say that either Moses or Aaron is angry with the people. Quite the opposite, says Nachmanides. It is the people who are angry. Over and over again they complain about their situation, demonstrating a lack of faith in God.

As for Moses and Aaron, Nachmanides maintains that their sin lies in misleading the Israelites. They speak carelessly to the people. Gathering them before the rock, they declare, "Listen, you rebels, shall *we* get water for you out of this rock?" rather than "shall *God* get water for you out of this rock?" Their words imply that it is their power, not God's, that will cause water to gush forth.

This deliberate deception of the people, argues Nachmanides, is the serious wrongdoing of Moses and Aaron. They seduce the people, and perhaps themselves, into thinking that the water pours from the rock at their command or by their skill. Nachmanides concludes that Moses and Aaron deserve criticism and condemnation for two reasons: They take matters into their own hands, giving the impression that they have little confidence in God, and, by calling attention to themselves, they fail to "sanctify" God's power before the people. For these reasons they are not permitted to lead the people into the Promised Land. (Commentary on Numbers 20:1-13)

Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev, a famed chasidic teacher of the seventeenth century, extends Nachmanides' assessment. Always supportive of the people of Israel, he maintains that the two leaders are punished for *how* they express their criticism.

Levi Isaac explains: "There are two types of criticism. One makes use of kind, understanding words, uplifting others by reminding them that they are created in God's image and that their good deeds bring God much pleasure. . . . When

criticism is then given, it does not tear a person down but strengthens the will of the person to accept and fulfill the commandments of Torah." The second kind of criticism, says Levi Isaac, "is harsh. It demeans people, makes them feel bad about themselves, and means to shame them into fulfilling the commandments of Torah."

Moses and Aaron are punished because as leaders of their people they criticize with needlessly harsh words. They shame them by calling them *hamorim*, or "rebels." Instead of building up their pride, reminding them that they are made in the image of God, they rebuke them with a nasty slur and insult. Their lack of understanding and support for their people brings about their punishment. (See David Blumenthal, *God at the Center*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1987, pp. 118–119.)

Lack of humility leads to violence

In all the sins of Moses, whether we consider the murder of the Egyptian, the breaking of the commandments, or the striking of the rock, there are the common elements of anger and violence, of unbridled self-will, and of temporarily ignoring God. The sin of Moses at Meribah is thus characteristic of the man, one of a series, and serious. Why serious? Serious because civilization depends on humility. Without a sense of limits that flows from the awareness of a moral law and an ethical God, every brutality, every corruption, every atrocity becomes possible. (Rabbi Norman D. Hirsch, "The Sin of Moses," CCAR Journal, October 1965)

Modern commentator Aaron Wildavsky sees Moses' failure differently. "At Meribah," he writes, "Moses substitutes force for faith. In his hands, the rod reduces a divinely ordered act to a trickster's shenanigans. But the import runs deeper. If Moses' strongest leadership quality has been his ability to identify with the people, then the lack of faith at Meribah is a double one. Moses not only distances himself from God by doubting the adequacy of God's work but also distances himself from the people by assuming power that was God's."

It is ironic, says Wildavsky, that Moses, who

in this instant "rebels" against God's command, calls the people "rebels." In fact, "Moses was guilty of the worst form of idolatry—self-worship." When he says to the people, "Listen, you rebels, shall *we* get water for you out of this rock?" and then strikes the rock, he leaves the impression that he, not God, is responsible for the miracle of producing water. In doing so, Moses rebels against God. He assumes the role of God by suggesting through his behavior that the power to perform miracles is in his hands and in the rod. "Spiritually," concludes Wildavsky, "he has gone back to slavery, as if to replace Pharaoh." It is, then, for the sin of *idolatry*—self-worship—that Moses is punished. (*Moses as a Political Leader*, pp. 155–158)

As we have seen, there are a number of views about why Moses and Aaron deserve the punishment they receive. The Torah text seems to leave the matter unclear. For that reason commentators from every age have sought to solve the riddle. In all their explanations, however, they may have missed an obvious clue. Modern interpreter Rabbi Morris Adler suggests that the Torah text is deliberately vague because it means "to teach us by indirection, as it so often does, the great truth that the sins of leaders are not necessarily overt, blatant, obvious; that the important failings of great leaders could be subtle yet deep, unclear yet destructive."

Adler's thesis is a significant one. Few leaders, he points out, are corrupt criminals. Instead, they fall prey to "more invisible temptation." They seek the approval of the people by bending the truth, by blurring principle, by compromising their independent decision-making for financial support. They make judgments not on the basis of what is true but on how it will be received. Placing themselves on pedestals, they ask, "What are the newspapers saying about me?" and not "What is the right policy to support?"

"So," says Adler, "the Torah does not spell out the sins of the leader . . . but is purposely vague and uncertain. Maybe there was a moment of pride . . . of anger . . . a careless word . . . Maybe he failed to apply the wisdom of his mind to today and was satisfied with repetitions of insight taken from remote yesterdays."

Perhaps the message of this Torah portion is

that, just as we are unclear about what sin brought about the punishment of Moses and Aaron, so it is with most leaders—most people. It is not the gross and obvious sins that spell defeat but rather “the subtle and intangible and impalpable corruptions” that prevent them from entering the Promised Land. (*The Voice Still Speaks*, pp. 341–345)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Some commentators argue that ritual and religion are matters of faith and should not be subject to reason. “Some matters,” they say, “must be accepted on blind faith.” How does such an argument relate to the ritual of the *parah adumah*? How does this argument relate to other Jewish rituals? Is a certain amount of “blind faith” justifiable or dangerous? Is “blind faith” necessary for religion (and science) to flourish?
2. Several interpreters suggest symbolic meanings for the ritual of the red cow. Which makes the most sense? Which carries the most meaning? How do other rituals like circumcision, the Pesach seder, going to the *mikveh*, and wearing a *talit* convey powerful messages for modern Jews?
3. Biblical interpreter Samuel David Luzzatto observes that “Moses committed one sin, but the commentators charge him with thirteen and more . . . everyone invents a new offense for him.” Which of the many “sins” suggested by the commentators make the most sense? Why?
4. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin writes: “That Moses could not enter the Holy Land was not so much a result of his own failure as it was a result of the nation’s shortcomings.” How would you assess the pressure of the Israelites on Moses? Is Riskin correct in his assessment, or was Moses solely to blame for his wrongdoing? Would you blame society or the environment for the failings of individuals?