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This year, as often happens, there is an interesting coincidence on the Jewish calendar. The weekly parshah, Ki Tisa, which includes the episode of the Golden Calf, coincides with a special reading leading into the Passover season. That second reading concerns the Red Heifer (*parah adumah*) and so this Shabbat is known as Shabbat Parah. This Shabbat, it is all about the cows.

Each of the cows in these two readings serves a different function. The Golden Calf was created in reaction to the anxiety the Israelites felt when Moses went up onto Mount Sinai to receive the law from God. When Moses did not return immediately, the people went into a frenzy, demanding that an idol be created to which they could direct their prayer and before which they could celebrate. Idolatry was, of course, one of the primary aspects of pagan belief that God was trying to lead the people away from. But in Moses' absence, the Israelites ceased feeling connected to God and yearned for a replacement. The Golden Calf was a focal point for a people whose relationship with God was still tenuous and poorly formed.

The Red Heifer, on the other hand, is a symbol of a people deeply connected to the Jewish idea of God. At a time when ritual impurity was a serious issue for those connected to the sacrificial rites of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Red Heifer served a critical role. When someone came into contact with a dead body, it was only through the application of the Red Heifer's ashes and water to them that they could be ritually purified. In a later age, the kohanim, and Jews generally, were so concerned about the purity of the Temple in Jerusalem that they went to extreme lengths to guard against anything that would impair that purity.

These two readings show how a cow can either facilitate our relationship with God or sever it, depending on the use to which it is put. The same can be said about our use of cows today for food: If we treat these animals humanely, even when they are being slaughtered for consumption, we sanctify their use as food. When we do not, allowing them to be treated cruelly and permitting their waste to impair our environment, we desecrate God's world and God's name. Just as with the cows of old, it all depends upon how we use them.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Pivo