

Why the Red Heifer?

The ritual

This week's Torah portion, *Chukkat*, begins with a very mysterious commandment: The Red Heifer (or red cow, *parah adumah*).

When you touch a corpse, you become *tamei* – impure.

- That, by itself, is comprehensible: Death is to be feared and avoided, not something to look forward to, even to get the benefits of the World to Come.

- “Impure” is too pejorative. It simply means not allowed to serve as a conduit for God’s manifestation -- such as entering the Temple or eating sacrificial foods. There is no injunction in Judaism never to become “*tamei*” (impure). In fact, one can become impure by performing the mitzvah of tending to a dead person, or giving birth, or having a period. No wrongdoing is implied. It is not intended as punishment.

To get cleaned up, you must:

- Find a red heifer that is completely unblemished and never used as a beast of burden (an exceedingly rare animal).
- Slaughter it and burn it together with some cedar wood, some hyssop, and some crimson wool.
- Mix its ashes with spring water.
- Cleanse yourself with that water on the 3rd and 7th day after defilement.
- Immerse in a mikvah.
- You are then purified.

Torah text:

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “This is the statute of the Torah [*chukkat ha-Torah*] which the Lord commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid. [Have it slaughtered outside the camp, then burned. Its ashes

shall then be mixed with [spring] water and used for purification. Anyone touching a human corpse shall become unclean for seven days. On the third and seventh days, he shall cleanse himself with [the ashes]...” [Numbers 19:1-22]

Paradox!

The supervising kohen and his attendant who burned the heifer become impure until evening, after gathering the ashes. **So the red heifer purifies the impure and makes impure the pure.**

Laws and history of the Red Heifer

Talmud (in dedicated Tractate Parah) says a red heifer is valid only if:

- It is at least three years old (younger is a “calf”, not a “cow”). [Par. 1:1]
- It is natural-born (not by caesarian). [Par. 2:3]
- It has not mated with a bull sent to mate with it (but if the bull does it on its own, it is valid). [Par. 2:4]
- It has no more than one hair that is not red. [Par. 2:5; Av. Z. 24a]

Only nine red heifers were ever prepared:

- One by Moses,
- One by Ezra [1,000 years later],
- Seven since Ezra [in the next 500 years, until the destruction of the Second Temple]. [Par. 3:5]
- Rambam: The tenth and last will be prepared by the Messiah.
[Rambam, Yad, Parah Adumah 3:4]

So finding one today would be a harbinger of the Messiah!

The ashes could last a very long time, since large amounts of water could be added to them (no density specified in Torah). So after 70 CE, some were left, but none left now. (Why didn't they keep diluting?)

Consequences

Once impure, one cannot enter Temple. So Red Heifer required for attending Temple services and offering sacrifices. No Temple today, so no real problem in being impure. Rabbis declared everybody impure today (everybody assumed to have come near a dead body – in a cemetery, a hospital, etc. – and no credible records can prove one did not.)

Religious Jews want to rebuild Temple. But rabbis forbid Jews from visiting Temple Mount today, because they are impure. So to rebuild Temple, you must first find a Red Heifer to purify yourself. Candidates were found and disqualified in 1997 and 2002. Some try new technologies to produce a red heifer.

Rarity of red heifer gives excuse not to rebuild Temple?

Reasons far from obvious

Two types of commandments: *chukkim* and *mishpatim* -- statutes and ordinances:

- A "statute" (*chok*) is a commandment whose rationale escapes us (*kashrut*, *shaatnez*).

- An "ordinance" is one whose rationale is understandable (no murder, no stealing).

The most mysterious "statute" is the red heifer. Indeed, the portion begins with "This is the statute of the Torah", as if there was only one. By saying that, the Torah hints that it is the most inexplicable commandment. The Talmud comments:

Our Rabbis taught: ... "statutes" are... commandments... [such as]

- sha'atnez* [not wearing garments of wool mixed with linen],

- chalizah* [ceremony for a man's refusal to marry his dead brother's wife],

- purification [the leper and the Red Heifer], and

- the scapegoat [goat sent away on Yom Kippur for symbolic removal of the people's sins during Temple days].

Perhaps you might think these are vain things. Therefore, the Torah adds: "I am the Lord", which means the Lord has made it a statute and you have no right to criticize it. [Yoma 67b; also Numbers R. 19:5]

Why? Because God said so, that's why.

King Solomon, the wisest of men, understood all commandments except this one:

[King] Solomon [said]: "All these [commandments] I have fully understood, but as for the section dealing with the Red Heifer, I have investigated and inquired and examined, but I have been unable to fathom it. [Then] I said [in the Book of Ecclesiastes]: "I will get wisdom, but it was far from me." [Eccl. 7:23] [Eccl. R. 7:36]

Moses asked God why:

-[Moses] spoke before [God], "Lord of the universe, THIS is purification?" [How can ashes purify after contact with the dead?] The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: "Moses, it is a statute, and I have made a decree, and nobody can fathom my decree, as it is written, 'This is the statute of the Torah.'"

[Ecclesiastes R. 8:5]

-R. Jose b. Hanina taught: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "To you I shall disclose the reason for the Heifer, but to anybody else it is a statute."

R. Huna [added]: ... The things that are concealed from you in this world, you will see in the World to Come, like a blind man who regains his sight. [Numbers R. 19:6]

So at least there WAS a human being who understood!

Midrash says it's not what it looks: "It is not the dead that defile nor the water that purifies!":

[Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's students asked him for the reason for the red heifer.] He said to them: By your life! It is not the dead that defiles nor the water that purifies! The Holy One, blessed be He, merely says: "I have laid down a statute, I have issued a decree. You are not allowed to transgress My decree, as it is written: 'This is the statute of the Torah'." [Num. 19:2]

[Num. R. 19:8]

Questions

- What reason(s) can there possibly be?
- Why would God give us a law that no one can understand?
- Who would invent such a commandment?
- Why ask for something so rare?
- Why throw in a paradox?
- Why such an elaborate procedure? (See Talmud, Tractate Parah.)

Possible answers

-All commentators threw up their hands. (If King Solomon couldn't, how can I?)

-One rabbi ventured an explanation:

Rabbi Aibu explained: [The reason] may be illustrated by a parable. The son of a maid got the king's palace dirty. The king said: "Let his mother come and clean up his filth." In the same way the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Let the [Red] Heifer come and atone for the incident of the [Golden] Calf!" [Numbers R. 19:8]

So Red Heifer (mother) atones for the sin of Golden Calf (son).

-God wants trust. "If you trust me with the mishpatim, trust me also with the chukkim. I know what I am doing."

Why didn't God give reasons for the commandments?

Rambam:

If God revealed the reasons for all the commandments, they would find ways to disobey them... by saying, “this was prohibited”, or “this was commanded” only for such-and-such a reason. I can avoid the reason for which the commandment was given and ignore [the commandment itself].” In such a way, the entire Torah could be nullified. God therefore concealed the rationale [for the commandments]. There is not a single commandment, however, that does not have a reason and a purpose... [Rambam, end of Sefer Ha-Mitzvot]

Commentator: *Every* mitzvah is like the red heifer: We can never be sure we have ALL the reasons for a mitzvah.

Does this mean it is forbidden to look for reasons? No. Rabbi Akiva tells us [Eruvin 54b] it's a duty to look for reasons for commandments. Presumably, if you satisfy yourself that you know the reason, you will be even more inclined to follow a commandment.