

Sat. 22 July 2002
The Red Cow and Faith: Chukkat/Balak
Congregation Adat Reyim
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The Red Cow and Faith

The church father known as Tertullian wrote: "It is to be believed because it is absurd."¹ I have not come across anything so anti-intellectual in Judaism. To some degree the opposite is the case. The men of the Great Assembly (who existed about the time of Tertullian, circa 200 CE) made part of the daily Amidah a request for knowledge and understanding. Edmund Fleg, in his essay "Why I Am a Jew," states that Judaism requires "no abdication of the mind."² However, within Judaism there are rituals which the rabbis do not understand and which they admit make no sense. The most mystifying of these absurd rituals is read in the opening verses of today's Torah reading – the ceremony of the red heifer.

There is much narrative in the two parshot we read this Sabbath, Chukkat and Balak: both Miriam and Aaron die; Moses strikes the (note use of definite article) rock and gets water for Israel; Israel arrives at the steppes of Moab, the location from which Joshua will invade Canaan; Balak asks Bilaam to curse Israel and the adventures Bilaam has on his trip from Midian to Moab; Bilaam attempts to fulfill his agreement to curse Israel; and Pincus (son of Eleazar son of Aaron) executes an Israelite man and Midianite woman with one thrust of his spear. However, the verses that open today's reading are not narrative. Rather, they describe the most puzzling of the mitzvot: purification via the red heifer.

Nowhere else in the Tanakh is there a direct reference to this rite. Numbers 31³ implicitly assumes the practice is well understood and will be followed, but nowhere else is this ceremony even in the background, let alone explicitly mentioned.⁴ The verses describing the red heifer are a special reading before Passover, giving the name to Shabbat Parah. Perhaps we read these verses about purification as a reminder that we should be purifying our houses and ourselves for the upcoming holiday.

Let me read Everett Fox's translation⁵ of the opening verses of today's reading, which describe the ritual.

Hashem⁶ spoke to Moshe {and Aaron}⁷, saying:

This is the law of the instructed-ritual that Hashem has commanded saying:

Speak to the children of Israel, That they may take you a red cow, wholly-sound, That has in it no defect, That has not yet yielded to a yoke; you are to give it to El'azar the priest, It is to be brought forth, outside the camp, and it is to be slain in his presence. El'azar the priest is to take (some) of its blood with his finger and is to sprinkle toward the face of the Tent of Appointment, some of its blood, seven times. Then the cow is to be burned before his eyes; its hide, its flesh, and its blood along with its dung, are to be burned. The priest is to take wood of cedar, and hyssop, and scarlet of worm, and is to cast (them) into the midst of the cow burning. He is to scrub his garments, the priest, and is to wash his body in water, afterwards he may enter the camp; but the priest will remain tamei until sunset. And a (ritually) pure man shall collect the ashes of the cow, depositing them outside the camp in a pure place. It shall be for the community of the children of Israel in safekeeping, as waters kept-apart, for it is decontamination. The collector of the cow's ashes is to scrub his garments, remaining tamei until sunset. It shall be for the children of Israel and for the sojourner that sojourns in their midst, as a law for all ages: he who touches a dead body of any human person, (shall be deemed) tamei for seven days. Should he decontaminate himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day then he is pure, ...

These twelve verses raise many questions. The Midrash supplies answers to the majority of these questions. The one question that is not answered will be the focus of most of my talk. However, let me first discuss the questions for which the Midrash supplies answers.

Why a cow and not a bull, ox, or sheep? Israel sinned with a calf, so purification is to be made with a cow, which may be no older than 3 years old. After all, a mother is responsible for cleaning up after her child.

Why red? Blood is red, and a major purifying agent in all animal sacrifices is blood.

When was this mitzvah given? It was given the same day Aaron received the direct revelation prohibiting him and his sons from drinking intoxicants before entering the tabernacle. Eleazar supervised the slaughter and burning the next day.

Why Eleazar and not Aaron? Because Aaron acquiesced to Israel's request to make the golden calf; he did not deserve the honor of burning the cow.

So what attribute makes this ceremony so mysterious? Sforno⁸ explains it as follows:

The crux of the mystery is its property of contaminating the pure and purifying the contaminated.⁹ Even Solomon, the wisest man that has ever lived,¹⁰ admitted that when it came to understanding the red cow: "... it was far from me."¹¹ Perhaps this is the reason that both Moses and Aaron were given this mitzvah together; since both heard the revelation, each brother could confirm that the other heard it as he did.

The passage concerning the red heifer has been used as evidence of the unreasonableness of Judaism. For example, the Qur'an¹² says that the people of Israel treated this mitzvah as a joke and only reluctantly submitted to Allah's will. The commentary in my copy of the Qur'an is that the people of Israel play fast and loose with their own traditions and rituals. The Roman pagans also used the red heifer to attack Judaism. Consider the following story:¹³

A heathen said to R. Yohanan ben Zakkai: The rites you perform in connection with the red heifer smell of witchcraft! ... Said R. Yohanan b. Zakkai to him: ... Have you ever seen a man possessed by a demon? He answered yes. – What did you do for him? We bring herbs and make them smoke beneath him, and throw water on him and the demon is exorcised. He answered: Let your ears hear what your mouth has spoken. The spirit of defilement is the same as your demon. We sprinkle on it the waters of purification and it is exorcised.

After the heathen had left, R. Yohanan's disciples said to him: him you have put off with a straw, but what answer will you give us? He replied to them. The dead does not defile nor the waters purify, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said: It is a statute I have laid down and I have decreed that you are not authorized to violate my decree.

R. Yochanan's statement that we cannot abrogate God's decrees is the conclusion reached by all the Jewish discussions I have reviewed. Indeed, according to the Midrash, there are four Torah laws which, while they cannot be explained, must be followed,¹⁴ the other three being levirate marriage,¹⁵ sha-atnez,¹⁶ and the ritual of the scapegoat.¹⁷

At least Jewish tradition permits speculation and discussion about concepts that are not understood. Tradition states we may question, but we need to accept that, as expressed by the prophet Isaiah,¹⁸ "As high as the heavens over the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts over your thoughts." Thus, the tradition states that we have a loving father telling his children what is good for them, even though the children do not understand why it is good for them.

I find the idea that the children Israel must accept ceremonies and rituals that are magical condescending. Today, since the Temple does not exist, the question about whether to perform or not perform the red heifer ritual is moot. However, the general question of why should one live one's life performing actions whose purpose is not understood is a valid one. As Jews we are to abstain from wearing specific combinations of fabrics, avoid tasty foods, wrap leather boxes on our arms and forehead weekday mornings, and do many other actions that have no obvious purpose and for which there are no harmful consequences when ignored by other peoples.

It is a puzzlement. I want to follow God's rules as interpreted by Judaism, yet I want to be honest to myself, logical in my thinking, and modern. For many of Judaism's rituals I feel, as Franz Rosenzweig must have felt when, in the early part of the 20th century, he replied to Martin Buber's inquiry as to whether he laid teffelin, "No, I do not yet perform that ritual." With education, role models, and practice, much of traditional Judaism has become part of my life and I may accept more of the mitzvot in the future. I am not a Mr. Spock, where only the rational has a role in my life. Still, I may never get to the point that Nechama Leibowitz had reached when she wrote:¹⁹ "Let us not be among those who seek for rational explanation for those things to which the laws of reason do not apply."

Let me conclude with an interesting aside. Earlier in this talk I used the translation by Everett Fox because I wanted to let you hear in English some of the word play the Torah has in the Hebrew. As Fox points out, much of the Torah was read or recited out loud. There is much alliteration in the Hebrew of Numbers 19. In discussing the mystery of the red cow and what meaning it has for us today, we should be aware that style also matters.

END NOTES

¹ Quintus Septimius Tertullianus c.160-240, Bartlett: Familiar Quotations, 1980 edition, which references De Carne Christi.

² Edmund Fleg, Why I am A Jew, French, translated by Louise Waterman Wise, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1929, page 77. Quoted in the Reform Siddur Gates of Prayer, page 705.

³ Numbers 31:19 - 24.

⁴The Torah a modern commentary, W. Gunther Plaut. UAHC, 1981, introduction to portion Chukkat.

⁵ The Schocken Bible: Volume I, The Five Books of Moses, Everett Fox, 1995. Numbers 19:1-12. My changes or additions are in square brackets. The curly brace is not in the Fox translation but is in the Hebrew.

⁶ Fox has instead of Hashem YHVH.

⁷ The Hebrew has Aaron receiving the revelation as well as Moses. Fox's translation does not list Aaron for some reason, so I put "Aaron" in braces.

⁸ Obadiah Sforzo (1475 – 1550), Italian physician.

⁹ Quoted by Nechama Leibowitz in Studies in Bamidbar, Chukkat 1.

¹⁰Tz'enah ur'enah, parsha Chukkat, ArtScroll Judaiscope Series, Mesorah Publications, 1984.

¹¹ Ibid, quoting Kohelet 7:23.

¹²The meaning of the Holy Quar'an , translation and commentary by 'Abdullah Yusuuf Ali, Amana Corporation, 4th edition, 1992, Sura 2:67ff.

¹³ from The Torah – A modern commentary, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, UAHC, 1981 reference Midrash Tanchuma Chukat 26, the translation used is from Nechama Leibowitz, op. cit.

¹⁴ Numbers Rabah 9:5 quoted by Plaut, op cit., in gleanings to Numbers 19:1 – 22.

¹⁵ Deut 25:5ff.

¹⁶Deut 22:11.

¹⁷ Lev 16:5ff.

¹⁸Isaiah 55:9.

¹⁹ Nechama Leibowitz, op. cit.