

## **Holy Cow!**

**Korach/Chukkat 5783**

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“I’ve always had a special feeling for the Hebrew people.”

This was how Dr. Ty Davenport began his remarks on Sunday, in his brother Bryan’s capacious living room, to a crowd of some 100 members of the Dallas community.

We were all there to see the red angus cows they raise; judging by the enormous and well-appointed house, and the Maserati out front, they are quite successful. Ty told us that the decision to raise red cows was one he made in 1991, and it was based on what he called a revelation. “The only colored cows mentioned in the bible are red ones!” He decided to switch to red angus cattle almost exclusively.

The mission statement of the Temple Institute in Jerusalem states that

*The Temple Institute is dedicated to all aspects of the Divine commandment for Israel to build a house for G-d's presence, the Holy Temple, on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The range of the Institute's involvement with this concept includes education, research, activism, and actual preparation. Our goal is firstly, to restore Temple consciousness and reactivate these "forgotten" commandments. We hope that by doing our part, we can participate in the process that will lead to the Holy Temple becoming a reality once more.*

An essential ingredient in restoring service of the Temple is reinstating the purifying ritual of the *Parah adumah*. Where can one find these red heifers, though? The Temple Institute essentially cold called the membership list of the Red Angus Association, and in Bryan and Ty, they finally found willing partners. In 2022, several Rabbis, including Rav Yosef Tzvi Rimon, inspected his calves to determine if they were fit. Five of them passed the test. They were completely red, with no more than two hairs of any other color; they had never been haltered, had never carried anything else and had never been impregnated. These cows were sent to Israel, no easy feat because the importation of animals is complicated under the best of circumstances and, when sending to Israel in particular, even more so.

This is quite aside from the political and religious implications of a red heifer. The mishnah tells us that there have been nine *Parot adumot* born between the days of Moshe and the destruction of the second Beit HaMikdash. The first one was processed by *Moshe* himself; the second was done by the prophet *Ezra* in the days of the First Temple, and during the entire era of the Second Temple, the ashes of seven other red heifers were used.

The Rambam (Parah Adumah 3:4) writes that the tenth will be offered by Moshiach:

וְהַעֲשִׂירִית יַעֲשֶׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמְּשִׁיחַ מִהָרֶה יִגְלֶה אִמּוֹן בֶּן יִהִי רְצוֹן:

Davenport and certain segments of the Evangelical community are quite aware of these sources. Sometime before next Pesach, a group of Evangelical Christians intend to slaughter these animals on Har Hazeitim, reduce them to ashes and use them to help reinstate sacrifices. These five animals are being kept in Shiloh under high security and a watchful eye, to ensure that nothing is done to them, or by them- both of which would cross the very low threshold of rendering them unsuitable. As he was telling us all about his revelations surrounding the red heifer, you could tell he was getting warmed up; he began talking about how he studies the Jewish calendar and takes lessons from events that occurred on each day, and how we should be doing the same. It should have been no surprise that, in short order, he brought up how the Messiah, Yeshua ben Yosef, will appear... It was then that I texted Rabbi Feigenbaum:

*Is anyone listening to what this meshuggeh is actually saying?!*

Rabbi Feigenbaum replied,

*Nope, except me who is getting really uncomfortable.*

This past week, I've been reflecting quite a bit on Sunday's event. Of course, the timing is fortuitous. We are one Parsha off from Israel until we reunite at Mattot-Mas'ei, so this morning, we didn't read Parshat Chukkat, the Parsha that

speaks about the Parah Adumah, in the diaspora- but our brothers and sisters in Israel did. With God's help, I will be in Israel next Shabbos, where they will read Balak, so I won't have the opportunity to speak about Chukkat here together with you when we read it. I do think, though, that there is an important connection between these two *Parshiyot*.

If you think about it, the placement of Parshat Chukkat is somewhat strange. The Mitzvah of purifying those who came in contact with a corpse by sprinkling of the ashes of the *parah adumah* was actually given before the Mishkan was built and dedicated. After all, it was essential to be pure when offering sacrifices. This is why we read Parshat Parah annually before Rosh Chodesh Nissan, too- to commemorate the process of purification necessary to go on *aliyah leregel*, to ascend to Jerusalem. Why, then, is it mentioned now?

This is a question discussed by many commentators, with many different answers provided. The Abarbanel, for example, explains that this took place at the end of the 40 years in the desert. The Israelites needed to purify themselves before entering the land of Israel, as they had dealt with the corpses of all those who died for participating in the sin of the spies. This morning, though, I'd like to suggest a different explanation, one related to the parsha we *did* read this morning.

The Midrash Tanchuma sets the scene, commenting on the juxtaposition between Korach's rebellion and the Parsha of Tzitzit that closed last week's Torah reading:

טלית שכלה תכלת, מה היא שיהא פטורה מן הציצית. אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה, חֲנִיכָת בְּצִיצִית. אָמַר לוֹ קֹרַח, טלית שכלה תכלת אינה פוטרת עצמה, וארכבעה חוטין פוטר אותה. בית מלא ספרים, מהו שתהא פטורה מן המזוזה. אָמַר לוֹ: כל התורה בלה מאתים שבעים וקמש פרשיות שיש בה, כלן אין פוטרות את הבית, ושתי פרשיות שבמזוזה פוטרות את הבית. אָמַר לוֹ: דברים אלו לא נצטוו עליהם, ומלבד אתה בודאם. הָדָא הוּא דְכַתִּיב: וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח.

*“Now Korah [...] took.” What is written above the matter (in Numb. 15:38)? “Speak unto the Children of Israel and tell them to make tassels (zizit) for themselves.” Korah quickly said to Moses, “In the case of a prayer shawl (tallit) which is all blue, what is the rule about it being exempt from [having] the tassel?” Moses said to him, “[Such a prayer shawl] is required to have the tassels.” Korah said to him, “Would not a prayer shawl which is all blue exempt itself, when four [blue] threads exempt it? In the case of a house which is full of [scriptural] books, what is the rule about it being exempt it from [having] the mezuzah (which contains only two passages of scripture)?” [Moses] said to him, “[Such a house] is required to have the mezuzah.” [Korah] said to him, “Since the whole Torah has two hundred and seventy-five parashiot in it and they do not exempt the house [from having the mezuzah], would the two parashiot which are in the mezuzah exempt the house?” [He also] said to him, “These are things about which you have not been commanded. Rather you are inventing them [by taking them] out of your own heart.”*

Rav Soloveitchik often referred to Korach's rebellion as a "common sense rebellion,"

Listen to the way Rav Soloveitchik described Korach's rebellion:

*Now, we know that every rebellion against authority needs an ideology to arouse the fervor of the people and sustain its momentum. It needs a slogan or a motto which projects a noble ideal to replace the intolerable status quo. The rallying cry which Korah chose was "common sense." He proclaimed that all reasonable people have the right to interpret Jewish law according to their best understanding: "For all the community are holy" (Num. 16: 3). In down-to-earth logic, the lowliest woodcutter is the equal of Moses.*

In other words, according to The Rav, Korach used rational, reasonable, populist and egalitarian arguments to convince the populace that Moshe was the wrongful bearer of Jewish tradition, and that Aharon had arrogated too much prestige and responsibility to himself and his family as the Kohanim. I'd like to suggest that, in the aftermath of a common sense rebellion like Korach's, the mitzvah of *Parah Adumah* is the most appropriate antidote. If Korach's arguments were eminently rational, the response is a *chok*, the mitzvah with no known reason- and not just a *chok*, but the one called the *chukkat haTorah*, the quintessential one in the Torah. The lesson of the placement of the *Parah Adumah* right after Korach's rebellion is

that the key to a meaningful relationship with God is to make space for uncertainty, and to allow for the possibility that we might not have the answers- or that the answers that we have, when we are convinced we are right, might be unsatisfying to others. Shortly after I sent the text to Rabbi Feigenbaum about Dr. Davenport's biblical rantings, Rabbi Klein said to me, "You know, initially, I thought he was insane. But maybe this really is the *Parah Adumah* and I'm the crazy one." I reflected on that, and thought that maybe Rabbi Klein is right. And I still do think that; what do I know? Maybe the 10th *Parah Adumah* is being raised 30 or so miles from my house. But then I realized what made me so uncomfortable about Ty Davenport's presentation, what was fundamentally different between him and Rabbi Klein. Despite many colleagues and congregants who have fully embraced the Evangelical Christian community as partners, I have made no secret of my fundamental cynicism about their "friendship," despite (or maybe because of) their professed love for the Jewish people and their vociferous support of Israel. But I recognize that not every Evangelical Christian is the same, not every one of them is out to convert us now, or hasten our conversion by funding messianic and apocalyptic initiative that will bring about what they call the Second Coming. But Ty Davenport seems to be exactly one of those people, which is why I was so uncomfortable with how comfortable everyone seemed to be feeling with him. Indeed, it was his complete certainty about everything he was saying- that we *are* in the End Days, that the difference between them and us can be reduced to the identity of the

Messiah (about which he said, “When he comes, let’s check his passport and see if he’s been here before”) and that we are ready to begin offering sacrifices the moment these cows are reduced to ash- that I found so ironic, and that made me so nervous. The Parah Adumah is supposed to teach us theological humility, to live a religious life and have a relationship with God when we don’t understand what He wants from us, and why.

In truth, it isn’t just a relationship with God that needs uncertainty, and a lack of understanding, to succeed. The noted and popular marriage therapist Esther Perel wrote<sup>1</sup> that she seldom resorts to cliches in her practice, but one of the most effective in breaking marital standoffs is the classic- “Would you rather be right, or would you rather be married?” A relationship cannot be sustained when two people are simply trying to win arguments against one another. A real relationship is built when each person can listen to what the other wants, what they are thinking, what is really behind what they are saying- and that each one acknowledges the possibility that they might be wrong, and don’t have all the answers. Korach’s certainty that he was right, and his reasoned arguments to support his position, won him a handful of followers and stirred up some trouble- but ultimately, it was all about scoring points. That’s why he ended up being swallowed up by a divinely ordained abyss; people like Korach are beyond exhausting and often spiral into a bottomless pit of self absorption. Those who submit to the irrationality of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.estherperel.com/blog/letters-from-esther-42-would-you-rather-be-right-or-be-married>



*parah adumah*, even if it makes no sense to them, become purified. May we learn the cautionary tale of Korach, and the lesson of the *parah adumah*. Let us be right less often, and uncertain more so- and may our relationships, with God and with man, be enriching, nourishing and wholesome.