



The Gospel of the Red Cow

Further Thoughts on Parashat Chukat

The Scriptures are filled with various imperatives of one kind or another. The Hebrew word *mitzvah* (מִצְוָה) generally means “divine commandment” (*mitzvot* is the plural form). The various *mitzvot* found in the Torah may be further divided into the subcategories of *chukkim u'mishpatim* (Deut. 4:5):

- **Chukkim** (חֻקִּים) are statutes given without a reason (i.e., fiats, edicts or divine decrees). As such they are sometimes called “supra-rational” decrees. The classic example is the *chok* (decree) regarding the Red Heifer, which, legend has it, defied even the wisdom of King Solomon. Other examples include dietary law (*kashrut*), the prohibition of mixing seeds or fabrics (*kilayim*), or the laws concerning family purity (*niddah*). These laws can seem irrational to human reason.
- **Mishpatim** (מִשְׁפָּטִים) are laws given for a clearly specified reason (i.e., logical laws). An example would be the commandment to give charity or the prohibitions against theft and murder. These *mitzvot* are inherently rational and appeal to the need for ethical unity (civil and moral life) within the community.

Note: *eidot* (עֵדוּת) are testimonials (from the root ‘*ed*, “witness”) that commemorate or represent something -- e.g., the commandments to observe Shabbat and the holidays, to wear tzitzit, eat matzah on Passover, blow a shofar, etc. Since they commemorate or symbolically represent something, the *eidot* occupy a sort of “middle ground” between the rationally understandable *mishpatim* and the supra-rational *chukkim*.

It is worth noting here that many of the sages believe that each of the 613 commandments given in the Torah should be regarded as if it were a decree given without a reason (i.e., *chok*). Using Torah jargon, all “*mishpatim*” may be reduced to “*chukkim*.” In other words, the rational acceptance of “religion” is ultimately not enough to touch the heart of faith. Someone who thinks it is “reasonable” to obey some commandment might later change their mind if their passions lead them to suddenly regard it as irrational. On the contrary, we should do every *mitzvah* *not* because it appeals to our reasoning or our liking, but simply because the LORD asks us to do it, and this demonstrates our love for Him.



The classic example in this connection is the Akedah (עֲקִידָה, “binding”), when Abraham offered up his “only begotten son” Isaac upon the altar as a burnt sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14). Abraham surely understood all the “commandments, decrees, and laws” of God (Gen. 26:5), but his faith led him to surrender his reasoning in complete devotion to the LORD. As Kierkegaard points out, Abraham’s “Fear and Trembling” represents the antithesis between faith and reason...

Similarly, the nation of Israel is praised for *unconditionally* accepting the Torah *before* understanding what was required of them. כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה / kol asher diber Adonai na’aseh: “All that the LORD has spoken, we shall do” (Exod. 19:8). Indeed, even *after* Moses had explained the extent of the Torah’s demands, all Israel said, kol asher diber Adonai na’aseh v’nishma: “All that the LORD says we will do *and* obey” (Exod. 24:7). This is not a form of irrationalism since the heart of the faith unquestioningly says “yes” to the LORD like a child who trusts his father... “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

In this Torah portion, the Jewish people are called an edah (עֵדָה), a “community” of God (Num. 20:1). This word comes from the noun עֵד, which means “witness.” The midrash compares the red heifer (i.e., *parah adumah*: פָּרָה אֲדֹמָה) to the Jewish nation. How so? Just as the commandment of the red heifer makes no rational sense, so does the continued survival of the Jewish people despite thousands of years of persecution. The existence of Israel is a miracle and a testimony of the faithfulness of God. In that regard, the nation of Israel exists simply by the decree (*chok*) of the LORD. Israel exists today because God wills it to be so, and that settles the matter.... The affirmation, *Am Yisrael Chai* (“the people of Israel live”) attests to the faithful love of God.

I mention the distinction between *mishpatim* and *chukkim* because our Torah portion this week begins with the words, *zot chukat ha-Torah* (זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה), i.e., “*This is the decree of the Torah*” (Num. 19:2). The context of this statement concerns the red heifer and the law of purification, so why doesn’t the Torah say, for example, “This is the decree of the purification process” (i.e., זֹאת חֻקַּת הַטְּהָרָה), or perhaps, “This is the decree of the red heifer” (i.e., זֹאת חֻקַּת פָּרָה אֲדֹמָה)? This is an intriguing question, since the plain sense of the phrase, “THIS is the decree of the Torah,” appears to make the ritual surrounding the red heifer “the seminal decree” of the entire Torah.... Indeed, this phrase is used only two times in the Torah (Num. 19:2, 31:21), both of which concern ritual purification.



Is there a link, then, between the decree concerning the purification from death and the entire meaning of the Torah? Is understanding the red heifer the “gateway” to the Torah? Does the Torah imply here that purification from the contamination caused by death constitutes the essence of all the commandments?

First notice that the Torah discusses the *halachot* (laws) of preparing the red heifer *before* indicating its purpose. It is only later on in the section that the issues of impurity (i.e., *tumah*: טָמְאָה) and purity (i.e., *tahora*: טְהוֹרָה) are connected with the red heifer ritual. Here we learn that the sacrifice of the red heifer was meant to create the “waters of separation” (i.e., *mei niddah*: מֵי נִדְדָה) for the community. The sages state in this regard: “God created the cure before the plague,” meaning that His love is the foundation of all things: עוֹלָם הָסֵד יִבְנֶה / *Olam chesed yibaneh*: “steadfast love built the world” (Psalm 89:2). Just as God created mankind only after He created the pathway of repentance (i.e., the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”: Eph. 1:4, Heb. 4:4, Rev 13:8), so the purification from death was likewise foreseen and provided. The “waters of separation” ultimately refer to our purification (i.e., identification) with the death of Yeshua (Rom. 6:3, 1 Cor. 10:13; Gal. 3:27).

As for this preeminent ritual of the Torah, the red heifer had to be a perfect specimen that was completely red, “without blemish, in which there is no defect.” It was not to be a calf, since the heifer must be at least three years old (i.e., an adult). The rabbis interpreted “without blemish” as referring to the color, that is, without having so much as a single white or black hair. This is the *only* sacrifice in the Torah where the color of the animal is explicitly required. Moreover, the parah adumah was never to have had a yoke upon it, meaning that it must never have been used for any profane purposes.



Unlike all other sacrifices offered at the *mizbe'ach* (altar at the Mishkan), the red heifer was taken *outside the camp* and there slaughtered before the priest, who then took some of its blood and sprinkled it seven times before the Tabernacle (thereby designating it as a purification offering). During the Second Temple period, the High Priest performed this ceremony *facing* the Holy of Holies while atop the Mount of Olives. Then the red heifer would be burned in its entirety: its hide, flesh, blood, and even dung were to be burned (unlike other Levitical sacrifices). Unlike other offerings, all the blood of the sacrifice was to be burned in the fire. This is extremely noteworthy, since blood was otherwise required to be poured beside the altar before being offered....



Hyssop, scarlet yarn, and a cedar stick would then be thrown upon the burning red heifer, the same items used to cleanse from sin or *tzara'at* (skin disease). In other words, the **blood** was assimilated into the ashes of the sacrifice, which were then gathered and mixed with **water** to create the “waters of separation” (i.e., *mei niddah*: מֵי נִדְּחָה) for the Israelite community. Note that the word “separation” (*niddah*) refers to menstrual impurity and harkens to Zechariah 13:1: “On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and from *niddah*.”



Anyone (or anything) that came into contact with a corpse (the embodiment of sin and death) was required to be purified using the *mei niddah*. The purification procedure took seven days, using stalks of hyssop dipped into the water and shaken over the unclean person on the third day and then again on the seventh day. After the second sprinkling, the person undergoing the purification process would be immersed in a mikvah and remain in a state of impurity until the following evening.

The paradox of the red heifer sacrifice suggests profound truth about the sacrificial death of Yeshua our Savior. The *kohen* (priest) who sprinkled the ashes of the red heifer became *tamei* (unclean) himself, even though the defiled person became *tahor* (pure). The picture of the priest here is one of *sacrificial love* - the giving up of one’s own spiritual purity so that another person can regain his purity... “Sprinkle me with hyssop, and I will be clean” (Psalm 51:7). Just so, Yeshua willingly became unclean on our behalf - through our contact with sin and death - so that we could become clean (Isa. 53:4, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:3, Eph. 5:2, Titus 2:14). Because of Yeshua, the impure become pure, even though He became impure through His offering. Because of Him, we have been cleansed from our sins “by a better sprinkling” than that which the Tabernacle of Moses could afford (Matt. 26:28, Heb. 9:14, 12:24, Eph. 1:7, 1 Pet. 1:2,18-19, Rom. 5:9; Col. 1:14, 1 John 1:7, etc.).

The “fall” of man implies that we have contact with death - both inwardly and outwardly. The sacrifice of Yeshua as our “Red Heifer” cleanses us from all *tumah* and lovingly makes us clean before the Father. The “water and the blood” is part of the “olah



sacrifice” of Yeshua for our redemption and purification before God at Moriah (John 19:34, 1 John 5:6). The water and blood flowing from His wounds are the means by which we are purified from sin and death... All this comes from the love (*chesed*) of God given in our Messiah and Savior.

By God’s supervenient decree, the Torah portion about the red heifer is read every year in the synagogue before Passover (Shabbat Parah). The early sages chose this reading for this time of the year because Jews were required to purify themselves before coming to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festival of Passover, though the connection between the sacrifice of the Lamb of God and the purification from death should be clear.

Note: It must be remembered that the Parah Adumah (“Red Heifer”) sacrifice is a PICTURE of the power of Yeshua’s sacrifice to cleanse us from sin and death. It is an IMAGE, a METAPHOR, a SIMILE. There are hundreds of these pictures in Scripture, and Yeshua Himself used them all the time: “I am the DOOR...,” “I am the TEMPLE...,” “I am the Bread of Life/Living Water...,” etc.

O LORD, cleanse me from my sin...

טְהַרְנִי	וּמַחֲטָאתַי	מֵעוֹנֵי	כַּבֵּסְנִי	הָרַב
ta-ha-rei'-nee	oo'-mei'-chat-tah'-tee	mei'-ah-voh-nee'	ka'-be-sei'-nee	he'-rev
טָהַר - v "cleanse" piel imp ms □□□ י - 1cs sfx	וְ - conj "and" מֵן - prep "from" חַטָּאת - n fs "sin, transgression" י - 1cs cstr sfx	מֵן - prep "from" עוֹן - n cpl "iniquity, guilt, perversity " נִי - 1cs cstr sfx עָוָה - v "twist"	כָּבַס - v "to wash purify" piel imp 2ms נִי - 1cs sfx	רָבָה - v "make much, increase, multiply" hiph imp 2ms הִרְבֵּה
cleanse me	and from my sin	from my iniquity	wash me	thoroughly

הָרַב כַּבֵּסְנִי מֵעוֹנֵי וּמַחֲטָאתַי טְהַרְנִי

"Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:2)