

Drashah Hukat 5770

Somewhere along the way during college, I acquired a “beanie baby.” It was a red cow. Some might have thought of it as a “Chicago Bull,” but I knew better. It was clearly a *parah adumah*, a red heifer, like the one spoken of in this morning’s Torah reading, the one whose ashes would be transformed into an antidote for the ritual impurity imparted to a person who has come into contact with a dead body. Even in college, I was already developing what I’ll generously call a rabbinic sense of “humor,” and I thought this was a pretty great gag, if a bit esoteric. Each year, on this Shabbat, and on Shabbat Parah, when the section on the red heifer comes up again as a special reading on one of the four *shabbatot* leading up to Passover, I would bring my red heifer with me to shul, as a visual aid. (Like I said, rabbinic sense of humor.)

A true story: One Sunday during my senior year of college, I headed off to the library for some study time. Still tired from staying up late with friends the night before, I forgot to turn off the timer that had controlled the lights in my room over Shabbat. In the dormitory where I lived, we weren’t permitted to put holes in the walls. Rather, we were supposed to use molding hooks, and the walls in our rooms had grooves cut into them to

facilitate our use of the molding hooks. My bed had no headboard, so instead of clipping my reading lamp to the bed frame, it was suspended above me, clipped to a couple of molding hooks in the wall. At some point while I was at the library, my timer kicked in, turning on my lights, including my reading lamp. And at some point after that, the clip holding it to the molding hooks slipped, and the reading lamp fell, still lit, onto my bed, which shortly caught fire. Thank God my suite-mates were home that afternoon. They smelled the smoke, went into my room, and extinguished the fire. When I returned home and surveyed the damage—which was thankfully curtailed by my roommates’ quick action—I found that my bedding was destroyed, along with a few small things that had been left on the bed, including my red heifer. I will admit to being a little disappointed that it had not been turned to ash by the fire in my room. Made entirely of synthetic materials, my red heifer merely melted.

While it was my felicitous choice of stuffed animal that sparked my interest in the ritual of the red heifer, it is the ritual itself, in all of its perplexity, that has kept me engaged all these years. And perplexing it is. Chapter 19 of B’midbar, Numbers, begins with God speaking to Moses, giving him a חקק, a law without explanation, to transmit to the people of Israel. In order to return people defiled by contact with a dead body to a

state of ritual purity, the Israelites have to take a perfectly red cow, with no blemish, and give it to the priest. He subsequently takes the cow out of the camp (unusual—all sacrifices are performed not just inside the camp, but inside the sacred space of the *mishkan*), slaughters it, and has it burned in its entirety. The ashes are then deposited in a safe place, accessible for when the need arises. When the need arises, some of the ashes are mixed together in a vessel with *mayyim hayyim*, literally “living waters” (more on that later). A ritually pure person will then take the concoction, dip a branch of hyssop into it and sprinkle it over the affected person and home.

This is a ritual without any explanation, any justification, intuitive or divinely revealed. While many of the laws given in the Torah fall into this category of defying reason, this is an extremely elaborate ritual to accept without any question. Our Sages were similarly puzzled by the lack of explanation, and imagine even Moses questioning God, trying to understand what the ritual of the red heifer is all about. The midrash (Kohelet Rabbah 8:5) describes the scene of God transmitting this section of the Torah to Moshe. Hearing that this bizarre ritual is the solution to the impurity that comes with contact with a corpse, Moshe responds incredulously, “Master of the Universe, this is purification?!” The Holy One answers, “Moshe, this is a *hukkah*, a law, a decree that I have made, and no earthly creature can fully

comprehend my decrees.” The answer to our confusion, says the midrash, is simply to accept that this law is beyond our understanding. We do not need to understand why it is, we need only to show our loyalty to God in performing it as instructed.

This response, “don’t try to understand laws that are non-rational; their value lies in our obedience to them despite our lack of comprehension,” is often employed when trying to resolve some of the more perplexing laws of the Torah with our need for reasons and justification. Some things are greater than we are, and we don’t always need to understand. This is a tall order—it is in our nature as people to try to understand things, especially if we’re being asked to do them.

Yet, the ritual of the red heifer eludes me. At the same time, when I look at this part of the Torah with a slightly more global perspective, I find meaning, if not in the intricacy of the ritual itself, but in its context. What follows in our Torah reading after the laws surrounding the red heifer is a lot of death. First, Miriam dies, then Aaron, then many of the Israelites from the bites of the serpents sent against them. Looking at the ritual of the red heifer in this way, I see it as preparing the Israelites, preparing us, for what is about to happen. Death is unavoidable, traumatic, and beyond our comprehension. It is real, and it must be dealt with. In laying out the

elaborate preparations for the red heifer, the Torah is providing us with an outlet for the powerlessness we feel in the face of death. The actions prescribed in the ritual of the red heifer, allow us to focus on something other than the trauma of death. Through their total incomprehensibility, we understand that by performing this ritual, we will not find comprehension, but we will find comfort.

Still, I must admit that I do not understand how the ritual of the red heifer works, or why it is mandated. It just is, and that has to be enough. This is something that is difficult for me to accept, but this view is backed up by the field of cultural anthropology, which teaches us that the power inherent in many rituals, going back to ancient times, is in their mystery, their not being rationally comprehended. Mircea Eliade, the 20th century religious historian, describes this phenomenon as a creation of cosmic time. “Any ritual whatever,” he says, “unfolds not only in a consecrated space...but also in a ‘sacred time,’ ‘once upon a time,’ that is, when the ritual was performed for the first time by a god...” Essentially, ritual transports us to a mythic space and time, outside of our normal experience, and beyond our full understanding. To attempt to grasp the ritual more thoroughly by searching for justifications would be to miss its point entirely.

This view of ritual, I believe, can be meaningful. For example, think about when we take the lulav and the etrog at Sukkot. We can look at these objects, and understand that on one level they reflect an ancient fertility practice that stayed with us as the Jewish tradition developed. We can see on a different level that by shaking the lulav and etrog all around, we are making a powerful statement about our faith in a God who is omnipresent. At the same time, at least for me, part of the meaning I find in taking the lulav and etrog is in taking the lulav and etrog. I do it because that's what we do on Sukkot, and the physical act of performing that ritual, without any explanations attached, is a moment of true connection for me.

This takes me back to the *meyyim hayyim*, the living waters, I mentioned earlier. Mention mikveh here. In its most contextual understanding, this phrase refers to a body of moving water—a stream or a spring. Thus, the ritual that purifies people after contact with death involves the use of a moving body of water, symbolic here both of life, to which the affected person is returning, and to the inevitability of death. This phrase, *meyyim hayyim*, is used in a number of ways in our tradition, beyond its contextual meaning. The prophet Jeremiah describes God using this terminology, as a באר מים חיים, a well of living water. A midrash takes this idea one step further, suggesting that a number of things in our tradition are

known as חיים, living—God is only one of them. Among the others: Torah, as it says עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה; the people of Israel; righteousness; acts of lovingkindness, and finally, water, quoting the verse from our Torah reading. Each of these concepts is an essential component of a life of *mitzvot*, a life of connection to the Jewish tradition. Each of these can live within us, if we are willing to allow ourselves to take that leap and connect to them whether we fully understand them or not.

The ritual of the red heifer is not operative in our time. We no longer make sacrifices, and the idea of ritual impurity has largely disappeared from our religious consciousness. But the power of this ritual still exists today in the form of *mitzvot*, our sacred actions, some of which make intuitive sense, and some of which are beyond us. Still, the lesson of the red heifer is clear—if we embrace these *mitzvot*, this tradition, we too will find connection, we too will be like the living waters, the מים חיים.

L'Chaim!