

THE RED HEIFER: WHAT GOD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it . . . (Devarim 10:1)

There is a restaurant in Jerusalem called The Red Heifer, known for its steaks, etc. It is an ironic choice of names for a restaurant it occurred to me, since the Red Heifer was one "sacrifice" not even the kohanim benefited from. They were not allowed to eat from its meat or even keep its skin. When it came to the Red Heifer, or Parah Adumah, steak was not on the menu.

Instead, the Red Heifer was completely burned, including its dung, because, unlike with respect to other Temple "offerings" it was the ashes that were necessary. The ashes were used in a special mixture that was sprinkled upon someone who had become defiled by the dead, in order to purify them once again.

To date there have only been nine such Red Heifers eligible for use in this service. One of the signs that will herald the Messianic Age will be a tenth, since we will once again need to be purified from our state of defilement in order to visit the Temple that will have returned. Restaurants don't count.

The reason for this deviation in the weekly reading of the Torah is because, in Temple times, we would have had to sacrifice a Pesach offering on the 14th of Nissan. To do that, and to be included in those who could eat from it at the Seder, one had to be purified of all spiritual impurity, especially from contact with the dead. To commemorate this we at least read about the procedure even if we can't perform it.

There is a lesser known reason for the special Maftir in advance of Pesach, but an extremely important one nonetheless.

As Rashi explains, the Red Heifer represents a kind of spiritual antidote for the ills of the golden calf. The episode of the calf was a turning point in Jewish history from which we have still not recovered. This is why, as Rashi explains in Parashas Ki Sisa, that every punishment the Jewish people have received since then has incorporated punishment for the golden calf as well.

This is because everything we have done wrong in history since the incident of the calf is rooted in it. What happened then at the base of Mt. Sinai, as Moshe Rabbeinu remained above on the mountain receiving Torah, spiritually handicapped all of us, making us vulnerable to every other sin we have committed since then. Had we not sinned with the calf we would have received the first tablets and entered the Messianic Era.

What then was the damage and what was the fix?

As with respect to all Torah, there are four levels on which to explain what occurred that fateful day and why. There is Pshat, the "simplest" and most obvious explanation, there is Remez, "hinted" meanings, there is Drush, or "exegetical" explanations, and finally there is Sod, Kabbalah's take on the subject matter.

On the level of Pshat the golden calf was a poor excuse by the Erev Rav to return to the idol-worshipping ways of Egypt. As the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains at the beginning of Parashas Beshallah, Pharaoh had given the Erev Rav the mission of agitating the Jewish people along the way so they would return to Egypt at the end of the three days that Moshe had told Pharaoh about. Using Moshe Rabbeinu's misperceived delay the Erev Rav did exactly what Pharaoh had asked of them.

On the level of Remez, their words hinted to a deeper level of religious attack. When they proclaimed:

"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (Shemos 32:4)

their intent became clear: weaken Jewish commitment to Torah and mitzvos. They were really saying, "Did you leave one form of slavery to enter another? You left Egypt to become a free people to do what you want whenever you want to do!"

A calf frolics all day long without concern about carrying any kind of yoke or of having to work for someone else. Its large eyes portray an innocence that only lasts while it remains a calf. In an effort to "freeze" that stage of life, the Erev Rav cast the calf in gold to become a symbol of the carefree life of eternal youth.

Midrashim, there are plenty. The most prominent ones, perhaps, speak of how the golden calf emerged from the oven on its own, and alive. The gold came from the people, from the men willingly and the women forcefully. The black magic was courtesy of Yunnus and Yumbrus, two sons of Bilaam and leaders of the Erev Rav.

The piece d'resistance? That was the special metal plate that Moshe Rabbeinu had used to recover the coffin of Yosef from the Nile river where the Egyptians had sunken it after his death. They knew that the Jewish people wouldn't leave Egypt without it as they had promised Yosef, so they hid it there to prevent the exodus.

What they did not know was how Moshe Rabbeinu, at the right time, would inscribe a metal plate with a Name of God on it, as well as the words, "Arise Ox!" (since Yosef is compared to an ox). Then, after throwing it into the Nile river, it would mystically elevate the coffin and enable it to be retrieved.

However, what Moshe apparently did not know was that after witnessing the spectacle a Jew

named Michah retrieved the Kabbalistic plate and took it with him out of Egypt. When they threw the gold into the furnace to make an idol Michah threw the plate in as well. True to the words on the plate an ox arose in the form of a calf. True to the black magic that accompanied the procedure, the metal calf emerged bleating and moving like a real one.

Question: How can something used for such a holy purpose be used for exactly the opposite?

The great Shlomo HaMelech addressed the issue:

"This corresponding to this did God make." (Koheles 7:14)

This verse is usually used to explain that for everything God made on the side of holiness He created a counterpart on the side of impurity. This does not only mean that whatever you find in the world being used for good there is something like it being used for evil. It also means that the same thing can be used for both good or evil, depending upon the person using it, and why.

This was a very important part of the message of the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It wasn't as if some fruit had "good" knowledge and other fruit had "evil" knowledge. It was that, based upon the person doing the eating and the reason for it, the knowledge that resulted would be either good or evil. It had the potential for either kind of knowledge, and it was the person eating from the tree who determined which one became reality.

We have a great example of the same idea in our day and age: the Internet, a modern version of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. For many today it is either an angel or devil incarnate. Some want to applaud it while others want to ban it. How can two polar views exist regarding the same thing?

Looking at the two sides, it is not hard to answer that question. Both agree that the Internet accomplishes amazingly good things in this world, and both agree that it accomplishes just the opposite as well. But one side says that, for all its good, the Internet has too much potential to easily do tremendous evil. The other side says, for all its terrible evil, the good it promotes is just too valuable to be pushed aside.

One Internet, two extreme viewpoints.

The problem, of course, is not the Internet, any more than it was the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra in Adam's time. The problem then was the people eating from the tree, just as the problem today is the people using the Internet. It's a simple equation that goes something like this: man, whose "every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time" (Bereishis 6:5), plus Internet, which provides an easy and cheap fulfillment of some of his most immoral imaginations, equals moral disasters.

And not just moral disasters. You don't have to be religious and Torah adherent to lose self-respect by going after dark desires. Internally people know when they are behaving subgrade, and try as they might to hide it, it eats away at their self-esteem. You may be wondering, what is the point, at

least in terms of this week's parshah and special Maftir?

The centerpiece of the parshah is the tragic death of Nadav and Avihu, made all the more tragic because of how and why it happened. They were great people who had done great things. In Sha'ar HaGilgulim you can learn just how great their souls actually were. Yet those souls were burned out of them when they brought their "unauthorized" fire offering.

There are a few explanations as to what exactly they did wrong to warrant such a severe Divine response at such a momentous period in history. At the end of the day, after all the discussion becomes great divrei Torah and makes it into holy books for all eternity, they will all have come down to one conclusion. Whatever they did, and why ever they did it, they did not do what God wanted. Period.

This is what the Red Heifer symbolized, what God "wants." It represented His pure, unadulterated will, not having been subject to human interpretation and explanation, because being a statute it was beyond both. It was a reminder that though God gives us plenty of leeway to think for ourselves, and even rewards us for trying to understand His intention, the bottom line is to do the simple, plain, and pure will of God.

Loyalty to God is loyalty to His will. It means knowing that no matter how much we think we can improve upon a situation ourselves that we should not until we know for sure it is what God wants. This requires two components. First, we must be loyal to Torah tradition as passed down through the ages. Second, it means receiving Divine help to make the correct decision, which is based upon the fulfillment of the first condition.

This is what the Erev Rav through the incident of the golden calf came to undermine. This is what the Red Heifer came to rectify. The former promises freedom but delivers slavery to the yetzer hara instead. The latter is the best ticket to freedom a person can ever have.

Text

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