



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vayakhel-Pikudei

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Vayakhel-Pikudei
Shabbat Parah

Red Bull vs. Red Heifer



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Merely one week after Purim, a holiday that is the epitome of joy, we must take up a most somber topic – life and death. For this Shabbat forces us to consider the most troubling of all questions: When defiled by death, what can we do to restore life?

The answer, strangely enough, lies in the most potent energy potion in the history of existence.

No, not Red Bull. Red Heifer.

This week’s Torah reading speaks of this mysterious law that involves taking the ashes of a most particular animal – a completely red heifer – and mixing it with water to produce a potion that, when sprinkled on a person defiled by death, made him or her pure again.

In addition, our Haftarah, from Prophet Ezekiel, describes the Final Redemption in similar terms – as a cosmic sprinkling of pure waters.

This sermon is augmented by a beautiful story from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the Chief Rabbi of Efrat, who relates the mitzvah of the Red Heifer, *Parah Adumah* – to our contemporary time.

A logical interpretation from his teacher, Rav Soloveitchik, is enhanced by an insight from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, pointing out that the *Parah Adumah* purified the defiled and defiled the purifiers – save for the actual sprinkler of the pure waters.

Drink this and be energized!

RED BULL VS. RED HEIFER

1. A Bull That's Red (Joke)

Good Shabbos and Shabbat Shalom.

My children kept me up the entire Thursday night. The next day, Friday, feeling all groggy and tired, I decided to have a Red Bull with my coffee. Then I headed to synagogue for morning prayers.

After ten minutes on the highway, I realized that I had left my car at home.

2. Red Bull: Now and Then

Yep, Red Bull certainly revs your engine.

If you go to the Red Bull website, you will be met by a tagline that reads: "Giving wings to people and ideas."

Red Bull, a caffeinated drink meant to energize, invigorate and rejuvenate is smartly associated with action sports and death-defying anti-gravitational leaps of faith, and is expertly marketed as a product that will make you grow wings.

This past year, close to five-and-a-half-billion Red Bulls were purchased by consumers. Red Bull in the trademark can might be the best known energy drink out there, but it's been around only a couple of dozen years, and is not the first Red Bull known to man.

Some three thousand years ago another Red Bull was gifted to man, this one way more potent.

That Red Bull didn't only give you wings. That Red Bull gave you life!

Now, I have to say right here and now that it actually wasn't a bull – it was a heifer. And she was an extremely rare phenomenon of nature. She was perfectly red all over with nary a tiny white or black or brown or blonde hair anywhere. And she had uncommon powers.

3. A Red Heifer Named Melody (Optional)

No one has seen such a Red Heifer since the Temple was destroyed. But, some years back, an all-red baby cow – named Melody – was born on a farm in Israel. Immediately she made news as no one had seen a perfectly red cow, with not even one red hair, for some two thousand years.

Instantly, the birth of Melody was seen as a portent of the Messianic Era and the imminent rebuilding of the Temple.

For this reason, Melody aroused tremendous controversy. While Melody stood in her stall chewing cud and swatting flies, a furious debate swarmed around her red being. Some saw her as an imminent threat to peace in the region, fearing that she would embolden extremists to destroy the Muslim Dome of the Rock. Others debated whether she was actually “red” or really more kind of “auburn.”

Before long, however, Melody sprang some white hairs on her snout and tail and was disqualified for Temple duty. Alas, she proved to be more of a red herring than a red heifer.¹

4. Life and Death

Why was the Red Heifer so important?

The greatest purity in creation is life; the greatest impurity is death. When one is defiled by death, how can one not become corrupted? How can one ever again become pure?

This is where the Red Heifer comes in. And on this Shabbat – which is called *Shabbat Parah*, the “Sabbath of the Heifer” – we find out all about it.

¹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1997/05/18/the-strange-case-of-israel-s-red-heifer.html>

In addition to the regular Torah reading in the sequence of chapters, concluding the book of Exodus with Vayakhel-Pekudei, we read for *Maftir* an additional chapter, *Parshat Parah*, from a second Torah scroll.

This reading is excerpted from *Parshat Chukat*, a portion in the Book of Numbers² that describes the foundational practice involving the *Parah Adumah*, the Red Heifer, as follows:

A perfectly unblemished and completely red cow, that has had no yoke placed upon it, should be taken outside of the camp by a priest to be ritually slaughtered. The priest should then sprinkle its blood seven times toward the Tent of the Meeting in the Tabernacle.

Then the red cow and a few other ingredients should be burnt together. The resulting ashes are to be gathered and stored in a safe place outside the camp. When someone comes in contact with death and is thus ritually defiled, these ashes are to be mixed together in a vessel with living water (*mayim chaim*) and then sprinkled upon the defiled person.

This, instructs the Torah, is how an individual defiled by death becomes pure again.

This law is deemed a *chok*, a supra-logical mitzvah, for on its face it really doesn't make sense. Indeed, the Torah begins the description of the *Parah Adumah* process with the words, *Zot chukat haTorah*, "This is the supra-logical statute of the Torah." But these words imply that this statute is not only one mitzvah in the Torah, but this is the statute of the entire Torah – after all, it doesn't say *Zot chukat haparah*, but rather *Zot chukat haTorah*.

How could that be?

² Numbers 19:1-22.

5. The Haftorah: The Cosmic Red Heifer

Everything in life exists on a personal and periodic level, as well as on a cosmic and eternal level. And the Red Heifer is no different. This is epitomized by the Haftorah, the section from the prophets that we read at the conclusion of the Torah reading.

This week's *Haftorah*³ applies the idea of the Red Heifer in a cosmic way.

The time of exile – spiritual displacement or dissonance – is compared to toxic impurity, where the finality of death's decay is the norm, and God's eternal Name is profaned. This is because, since Adam and Eve brought mortality in the world and humanity was expelled from the Garden of Eden, a certain toxicity has permeated the earth. Impermanent materialism began dominating over the permanent spirit.

God is life. God is eternal. God is dynamic. The soul of man is sourced in God and thus the soul too is life, is eternal, and is dynamic. But death is the diametric opposite of God, soul, eternity and life.

After the banishment from the pure world of Eden, and after all of the resulting exiles, death and toxicity became the "norm" and everything Godly, soulful, living and eternal became concealed.

Death takes on many shapes. Not only physical death, but also spiritual death – which can come in the form of psychological numbness, apathy or indifference. Have you ever felt – or met someone that felt – "dead" inside though you were biologically alive? At times each of us can experience spiritual and emotional deadness, a lack of passion and energy in our lives or relationships. Marriages sadly can at times become stale and stagnant.

Redemption is the healing: a psychological and emotional awakening; a spiritual renaissance. What will happen when spiritual life becomes the true norm, and material life is simply a means to spiritual growth. A world in which the living God – the eternal soul and dynamic life – is returned in a revealed way.

³ Ezekiel 36:16-36.

Our *Haftorah* describes the process of redemption which will resemble the sprinkling of the purifying waters of the Red Heifer, except that it will happen on a global scale. This is what Prophet Ezekiel says, quoting God:

“For I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you to your land. And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; from all your impurities and from all your abominations will I cleanse you.”⁴

This is what God, the Lord, says, “On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited ... And they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden, and the cities that were destroyed and desolate and ruined have become fortified and inhabited.’”⁵

Thus we see the effects of the purifying waters of the Red Heifer on a cosmic and global level. When these waters will be sprinkled upon the whole world, all of God’s creation will be purified from the defilement of exile.

6. The Eternality of the Red Heifer (Optional)

The eternity of the mitzvah of the Red Heifer⁶ is actually mentioned in the Torah:

A ritually clean person shall gather the cow’s ashes and place them outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall be as a keepsake for the congregation of the children of Israel for sprinkling water, for cleansing.⁷

⁴ Ezekiel 36:24-25.

⁵ Ibid 36:33-35.

⁶ See Sefer Hasichot 5749, vol. 1, p. 342ff.

⁷ Numbers 19:9.

It shall be as a keepsake (in Hebrew *mishmeret*) indicates that a portion of the ashes was kept safe for all time. Also a few verses later the Torah states that, This shall be for them as a perpetual statute,⁸ meaning, this shall be a mitzvah that never goes away and is eternal.

7. A Few Facts

To understand the global and eternal Red Heifer that will, according to Ezekiel, occur at the time of the Final Redemption, we have to understand this strange ritual as it is described in the Book of Numbers.

A few facts that will help us in this regard:

- There were nine documented Red Heifers in the times of the two Temples. Moses implemented the first, Ezra the second, and there were seven more from the time of Ezra through the destruction of the Second Temple. The Messiah will implement the tenth and final Red Heifer.⁹
- The Red Heifer was slaughtered, its blood sprinkled, and then it was burned according to certain specifications.
- Its ashes were then collected and stored in three different locations: 1) on the Mount of Olives for purifying Israel; 2) with the *Kohanim* for purifying the priests involved in the Red Heifer process; 3) on the ramparts, concealed for eternity.¹⁰
- The ashes were mixed with living water, then sprinkled on anyone who was defiled by death, until that person became pure.
- Anyone involved in the preparation of the Red Heifer and its ashes became defiled (including the priest who slaughtered the Red Heifer, the one who burned it, the one who collected the ashes, the one who mixed it with water, etc.)

⁸ Ibid 21.

⁹ See Rambam, Laws of Parah Adumah, ch. 3.

¹⁰ See Mishnah, Parah end ch. 3; Rambam *ibid*; Sifrei and Rashi to Chukat 19:9.

- The only one who remained pure was the one who actually sprinkled the purifying waters upon the defiled person.¹¹

This captures the mysterious nature of the Red Heifer: It purifies the defiled yet defiles the purifiers. Yet this seems to be an internal contradiction.

8. Rabbi Riskin's Story

On this subject, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the founding rabbi of Lincoln Square synagogue in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the chief rabbi of Efrat, Israel, relates a beautiful teaching from his own teacher Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, better known as the Rav, and then a very special insight from the Lubavitcher Rebbe.¹²

Rabbi Riskin relates that the Rav asked: "Why is the Red Heifer considered a *chok*, a supra-logical law? If one has a friend that falls into the mud, would nature not dictate that he who pulls his friend out of the mud get dirty? So, too, he who reaches out to purify the impure should surely become defiled himself. *Parah Adumah*, then, seems to be completely logical!"

Following the Rav's argument, Rabbi Riskin expands the question, "If one pure individual goes out of his way to purify someone that is impure, would logic not dictate that the pure person be somewhat adversely affected by the impurity of the person and environment that he has come in contact with?"

He answers: "If you sit in yeshiva all day, in the hallowed halls of Torah, in a pure environment, you will certainly remain pure. But if you go out and interact with the impure world, logic would dictate that pure though you may be, you will inevitably be influenced (albeit minimally) by the impurity you encounter."

¹¹ See Yoma 14a, quoted by Rashi to Chukat 19:21.

¹² Chabad.org and YouTube.

Yet, every Jew has the responsibility to make this world a better place. And therefore, even a pure Jew must go out of his or her hallowed halls of Torah to purify the world. And he must do so even if he himself will become impure in the process.

But will he?

Rabbi Riskin then relates the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teaching.

As mentioned, all those involved in the purifying process of the *Parah Adumah* became defiled, save for one person. The person who actually did the sprinkling – he remained one-hundred-percent pure even though he came the closest to the defiled person whom his sprinkling now made pure.

The Rebbe pointed this out to Rabbi Riskin, implying that if one dedicates one's life to purifying the children of Israel, one remains pure, even though one has to interact with so-called impure and unholy matters.

This, the Rebbe said to Rabbi Riskin, is why *Parah Adumah* is, in fact, a supra-logical *chok*. The sprinkler himself, the one closest to the defiled, nevertheless remains entirely pure and unaffected by the impurity around him.

9. The Foundation of the Entire Torah

Today, in the connection with the Red Heifer, we read: *Zot chukat haTorah*, "this is the underlying tenet of the entire Torah."

The entire Torah is about purifying Israel, refining all forms of psychological, emotional and spiritual dissonance, abolishing death and its defilement, and about becoming one with our family Israel.

This isn't logical but something far greater: supra-logical.

And there is only one way to remain above death, undefiled by its tentacles – to be the one sprinkling the purifying waters.

The best defense is offense.

Even if we spend our all our days, every second of every day, preparing purifying mixtures of living waters to purify the world and the innocents of Israel, we will still be adversely affected by the process.

It is only logical: If we are involved in the physical world (and we have to be, for we have to eat, sleep, make a living) it is logical and natural for the physical world to rub off on us and our loved ones.

Especially today, with perpetual connectivity to the world wide web – a web of anything and everything – it is impossible not to be somewhat adversely affected and infected by the toxicity of material life.

This is part of exile which is full of pain, suffering and death. Who doesn't know a grieving widow or a mourning widower? Who hasn't heard the sobs of orphaned children and suffering parents?

Make no mistake about it: this is exile, and it is a disaster of the most impure proportions.

The one and only way to ensure that we remain perpetually pure – and that our children (and their children) remain perpetually pure – is by being the ones on the front lines, the proactive ones who take the initiative and actually do the sprinkling.

Remember: The best defense is offense.

When we dedicate our lives to touching other Jews with the pure waters of Torah, the living waters of God's wisdom, we purify the world and, even more supra-logically, we purify ourselves and guarantee that we and our families remain pure and grow in purity.

10. Forever (Conclusion)

The mitzvah of *Parah Adumah* is not a once-upon-a-time commandment reserved for when the Temple stood. It is forever. And perhaps it epitomizes the eternal nature of all the mitzvot more than any other mitzvah:¹³

¹³ See Sefer Hasichot ibid p. 346.

The main goal of creation in general and of the Jew in particular is to remove the impurity of the world, especially the harshest defilements of death and its toxicity, including sometimes the worst form of death – apathy and indifference.

We do this by implementing *Zot chukat haTorah*, the fundamental principal of all Torah. We do this by sprinkling our fellows with the waters of purity – and the purest water of all is Torah, which is also called the Tree of Life, and which is the opposite of impurity and death.

Each of us needs to “sprinkle” the living waters of Torah on all people we meet, by inspiring and motivating them.

This way we remove all death forever and ensure that we ourselves, who are doing the actual sprinkling, remain pure in the process.

Red Bull may give us wings. But the Red Heifer gives us life.

And, when we all do our part, the Red Heifer – with its cosmic sprinkling of the cleansing waters – will usher in the eternal redemption. May it happen speedily in our day. And let us all say, Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!