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The Red Heifer

19: 1-22

The red heifer (DIG): With so much death and the pollution of corpses in their midst, how were the Israelites to be declared ritually clean? What was the ritual of the red heifer? Why a red heifer? Was the ritual Temple dependent? Are there any red heifers today? Are there any previous red heifer ashes today? Who was, and is, needed to prepare the ashes?

REFLECT: In what way are God's people to purify themselves today (First John 1:8-9). Who solves the purity paradox? How do we deal with our uncleanliness, our sin nature today? According to Hebrews, what kind of purification did Yeshua accomplish? Explain the paradox of the person who prepared the living water and ashes which purified, to become impure himself in the process.

Parashah 39: Chukat (Regulation) 19:1 to 22:1

(See my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click [Af](#) - Parashah)

[In regular years read with Parashah 40, in leap years read separately]

The Key People are Moshe, Aaron, Miryam, the kings of Edom, Arad, the Ammonites, Bashan and Isra'el.

The Scenes include the Tabernacle, the Desert of Zin, Kadesh, Meribah, Edom, Mount Hor, the Negev, Hormah, various stops on the way to Mo'ab, Jahaz, Amorite territories and capital of Heshbon, and Bashan.

The Main Events include the mitzvah of the brownish red heifer for purification; Miryam's death; Moshe striking the rock twice, which would later bar his entry into the Promised Land, the detour around Edom, Aaron's death, more complaints, the Israelites being bitten by snakes, and the bronze serpent lifted up, and more traveling, with defeats of the Amorites and Bashan.

Staying clean in the midst of death.

The generation that left **Egypt** was condemned to wander and **die in the wilderness**. Their rejection of the Land resulted in forty years of despair. **YHVH** had told them: **For forty years in the wilderness . . . until the desert eats up your carcasses (14:33)**. The story of **Korah's** rebellion (**to see link click [Cn - Korah's Rebellion](#)**) is the last we hear of them in the Torah. And the last words we hear from them are: **Behold, we are perishing, we are being exterminated . . . are we all to completely perish (17:12-13)?** Before the story resumes, virtually the entire generation had **died**. Of those who were over the age of 20 when the nation rejected the Land, only **Moshe, Aaron, Joshua** and **Caleb** remained alive. And before this portion is over **Aaron** and **Miryam** will have both been laid to rest (see [Dc - The Death of Miryam](#)).

There is no transition between the **death** of the **Exodus** generation and the story that begins in **Numbers 20**. Instead, the Torah teaches us **the mitzvah of the red heifer**. First, **the mitzvah** surrounding **Numbers 19** seems to interrupt the narrative progression. But on closer examination, we realize that **the mitzvah of the red heifer** concerns **the ritual uncleanness** that arises from human **death**. And as **the corpses** of the **Exodus** generation fell **in the wilderness**, the Torah tells us about the remedy for the contamination of **death**.³⁷⁷

I. The ashes of the red heifer (19:1-10).



A. The red heifer (19:1-2): ADONAI said to Moshe and Aaron. This chapter was addressed to **Moshe** and **Aaron**, but **Eleazar** was the one who carried out the ritual, thus suggesting that **Eleazar** was operating as an associate with **his father** and proving that the threat to **his** ascendancy to **the priesthood** by the rebellion of **Kora** was a thing of the past.³⁷⁸ **This is the**

mitzvah from the Torah which ADONAI has commanded. Tell the people of Isra'el to bring you a young red (Hebrew: *adummah*, meaning reddish brown, being the only time in the Torah where the color of an animal is specified) **heifer without fault** (Hebrew: *tamim*, meaning unblemished or perfect) **or defect**. This apparent redundancy is for the sake of emphasis. **And which had never borne a yoke (19:1-2)**. The fact that **it** had never worked in the fields suggests that **it** must have been healthy, whole, and strong in every way - a **pure** and pristine **animal** fit to accomplish the sacred role for which **it** had been born.³⁷⁹ **It had to be completely brownish red; two white or black hairs would disqualify any prospective heifer.**

B. Burned to ashes (19:3-6): You are to give it to Eleazar the priest, it is to be brought outside the camp and slaughtered in front by the first layman (19:3). This is the only **animal** that was **ritually slaughtered outside the camp**. The writer to the **Hebrews** saw a Messianic foreshadowing in this **purification offering burned outside the camp**. In **Temple** times, the entire **city of Jerusalem** was considered "**the camp**." He wrote: just as **the purification offerings** were brought **outside Jerusalem**, so too **Messiah**, the ultimate **purification offering**, was **sacrificed outside the camp**. **And so Yeshua also suffered outside the City gate to make the people holy through His own blood (Hebrews 13:12)**.³⁸⁰

Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle this blood toward the front of the Tabernacle of seven times (19:4). This is very similar to the procedure of **the purification offering** in **Leviticus 4:6, 11 and 21**. There **it** was sprinkled **seven times** towards **the inner veil in the Sanctuary**; here, **it** was **sprinkled seven times toward the front of the Tabernacle** because **the red heifer was slaughtered outside of the Tabernacle courtyard**. In **the Second Temple era**, the **slaughter** and **burning of the heifer** took place on the Mount of Olives directly across from **the Temple**.

The heifer was laid upon a great pile of logs **to be burned to ashes before Eleazar's eyes - its skin, meat, blood and dung is to be burned to ashes (19:5)**. **It** was to be **burned** entirely **outside the camp**; this was true of **the purification offering**. This was true of **the Yom Kippur offering (Leviticus 16:27)**, and could also be seen in **the dedication of the priesthood (Exodus 29:14 and Leviticus 8:17)**. **The red heifer offering** was the only **one** that was **burned** without draining **the blood** from **the**

animal because **burning the flesh** with **the blood** would make **the ashes**. **The first layman** did **the burning** while **Eleazar** did the officiating. When the entire **animal** was reduced to **ashes**, bones too large for **burning** were crushed. **The ashes** were then mixed with large quantities of living **water** drawn from natural sources. Only a pinch of **ash** was sufficient to render a large container of **water** useful for **purification**. In fact, **the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**) **states that only nine red heifers were killed from Moshe to the destruction of the Second Temple.**³⁸¹

Then Eleazer himself was **to take cedar-wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn** (see the commentary on **Joshua Ao - The Scarlet Cord**) **and throw them onto the heifer as it was burning up**, which would add to the effectiveness of **the cleansing (19:6)**. These three elements were also used for **the cleansing of the healed leper (Leviticus 14:4, 6, 49, 51-52)**. There were four factors that indicated that **the killing of the red heifer** was not an ordinary **offering**: first, **it** was the only **offering** that was not eaten; secondly, **it** was the only **offering** that was taken **outside the camp**; thirdly, **its blood** was not drained from **its** body; and fourthly, **its** offal was not **cleansed**.

C. The need for purification (19:7-10): This **mitzvah** specifically concerned with the procedure of making with **waters of purification** for those who come into physical contact with the dead (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bo - Ritual Uncleanness Through Contact**). **Then** we have **the cleansing of the first layman**, which was done in four specific stages. First, **he was to wash his clothes**; secondly, **he** would immerse **himself in water**; thirdly, **after which he** could **re-enter the camp**; and fourth, **he** would **remain ritually unclean until evening (19:7-8)**.

Then **a second layman, who** was **ritually purity** (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bj - The Mitzvot of Purification**), was **to collect the ashes of the heifer and store them** in a **ritually clean** vessel **outside the camp in a ritually pure place** until **they** were needed. **The Oral Law states that during the Second Temple period, the ashes were divided into three parts. One part was kept in a designated place inside the Temple, and two parts were kept on the Mount of Olives where the slaughter and the burning took place once they settled in the Land. They are to be kept for the Israelites to prepare water mixed with ashes for ritual uncleanness, it is a purification offering. The second layman who**

collected the ashes was to wash his clothes and be ritually unclean until evening. For the people of Isra'el and for the foreigner staying with them this will be a mitzvah forever (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of the Torah**) (19:9-10).

D. So, three people were involved. First, **Eleazar the priest**, who brought the brownish red heifer outside the camp, he officiated over the slaughter, sprinkled the blood seven times toward the Tabernacle, and he officiated over the burning. He then tossed the cedar-wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn onto the fire as the heifer was burning up. In the cleansing process, he washed his clothes, immersed himself in a mikvah, and came back into the camp. The second person, **the first layman**, slaughtered the red heifer, he then burned its skin, meat, blood and dung before undergoing the cleaning process of washing his clothes and immersing himself in a mikvah. The third person, **the second layman**, was responsible for gathering up the ashes, placing them in a ritually clean place outside the camp, and his cleansing process was merely to wash his clothes.³⁸²

The purity paradox: The ashes of the red heifer cleansed the ritually unclean, and those who came into contact with a human or animal corpse were purified by the ashes of the red heifer. But on the other hand, it made the clean, ritually unclean . . . the priest and the two laymen involved. That's why they had to be immersed in a mikvah. The red heifer was not Tabernacle or Temple dependent, but the Tabernacle or Temple was red heifer dependent because no one was allowed to enter the Tabernacle or Temple while in state of ritual uncleanness. This means that even if the Dome of the Rock vanished tomorrow and Isra'el was invited to rebuild the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah, no offering could be brought. Without the ashes, there is no ritual purity, and without ritual purity, there can be no Temple.

The situation is further complicated by the rabbinical teaching that only a person in a state of ritual purity can administer this rite. Though it is not explicitly stated in the Torah, it is implied that the person administering the rite is made unclean by it. To be made unclean, we must assume that he must have been pure to begin with. This creates an obvious paradox. In our day, there is no previous ashes of the red heifer with which to purify a priest who could prepare more ashes of the red heifer.

Therefore, before **Isra'el** can reinstitute **the Temple offerings, the priesthood** needs to be in a state of **ritual purity**; **they** would need to be **sprinkled** with **the ashes of the brownish red heifer**. However, before they can obtain **the water of purification, they** need a **purified priest** to oversee the making of **the ashes**. But, before **they** can raise up a **ritually pure priest, they** need **the ashes of the red heifer**. Thus, we have a **purity paradox!**³⁸³

II. The Mitzvah of corpse contamination (Numbers 19:11-22).

A. The general rule (19:11-13): Anyone who touches a corpse, no matter whose dead body it is, will be unclean for a minimum of seven days. While unclean, everyone he touches will also be rendered unclean. Even vessels and containers that he handles are made unclean. To be purified, he must be sprinkled with the living water and ashes from the red heifer on the third day and seventh day in a week-long purification process. However, corpse contamination does not wear off by itself after seven days. It can only be removed through the sprinkling of the waters of the red heifer. Only then will he be clean. But if he does not purify himself the third and seventh days, he will not be clean. Anyone who touches a corpse, no matter whose dead body it is, and does not purify himself has defiled the Tabernacle of ADONAI. That person will be cut off from Isra'el, because the water for purification was not sprinkled on him.

As far as being cut off from his people, rabbinic literature calls the penalty *karet*, or being “cutting off.” This penalty is usually formulated in terms of being cut off from *his kin*. He will be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him. In priestly literature, the penalty of *karet* was understood to include a series of related punishments at the hand of God, ranging from the immediate death of an offender, as in Leviticus 20:17, to his premature death at a later time, and even to the death of his descendants. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 9:6 and Mishnah Keritot 1:2, this penalty was characterized as *mitah biydei shamayim*, or “death at the hands of heaven.” Since in Leviticus 7:20-21 *karet* is mentioned in the context as childlessness, there is the implication that it took that course as well.³⁸⁴ The Tabernacle of YHVH was a place of life. It was the Dwelling Place of He who is the source of life. Death had no place in His courts. It was banished from His Holy House. Even the shadow cast by death

was not allowed in **His** presence. This is why the meat of the sacrifices were not allowed to be putrefy. This is why the bread was made unleavened, free of corruption and souring. **Death**, decay and decomposition were banished from **the Tabernacle**, and later the Temple.³⁸⁵

B. Two specific cases (19:14-16): This is Torah (Hebrew: *This is instruction*). The two realms of life in which this form of **uncleanness** may be contacted are examined; the interior, **the tent** and the exterior, **an open field**. **When a person dies in a tent, everyone who enters the tent and everything in the tent will be unclean for seven days. Every open container without a cover closely attached is impure. Also whoever is in an open field and touches a corpse, whether of someone killed by a weapon or of someone who died naturally, or the bone of a person, or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.** Dealing with **the dead** was not to be thought of as a casual thing. Even today, Jewish people strive to complete their task for burial preparation within a day's time and under strict conditions. These factors heighten our appreciation of those who cared for the body of our **Lord**, helped with **His** burial (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lx - The Burial of Jesus in the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea**), and planned for the full anointing and preparation of **His** body after the Shabbat was completed. Those loving disciples were voluntarily placing themselves in a position of **ritual uncleanness for seven days**. Yet it was something they did without hesitation, such was their love for **Him**.³⁸⁶

C. Purification on the third and seventh day (19:17-19): For the ritually unclean person they are to take some of the ashes of the animal burned up as a purification from sin and add them to living water in a container. A priest was not necessary for **the sprinkling**. Anyone in a state of ritual **purity** could administer **the sprinkling of ashes**. **A clean person, a layman, is to take a bunch of hyssop leaves, dip it in the water and sprinkle it on the tent, on all the containers, on the people who were there, and on the person who touched the bone or the person killed or the one who died naturally or the grave. The clean person will sprinkle the sprinkler who had become ritually unclean on the third and seventh days.** There is no mention of anyone being banished from the camp during the period of **uncleanness**. **The third day** is associated with **resurrection**. **After two days, He will revive us; on the third day, He will raise us up; and we will live in His presence**

(Hosea 6:2). On **the third day**, putrefaction became obvious **and the rabbis teach that the soul finally leaves the body completely on the third day** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ia - The Resurrection of Lazarus: The First Sign of Jonah**). **On the seventh day he will purify him.**

The significance of **the seventh day** is that it anticipates the final redemption. **Seven** is the divine number of redemption (see the commentary on **Genesis Ae - The Number Seven**). The **seventh-day** Shabbat is a foretaste of the Messianic Kingdom which starts with the resurrection. The High Holidays, with all their rich resurrection allusions, are celebrated in the **seventh** month of the year, and the **seventh** dispensation is the Dispensation of the Messianic Kingdom (see the commentary on **Revelation Fh - The Dispensation of the Messianic Kingdom**). Therefore **the sprinkling on the third and seventh days** after contact with **the corpse** symbolize the final victory over **death**. Indeed, as disciples of **the risen Lord** we have already seen the power of **the third day** which began our **purification**. Now we only await our day of final resurrection (see **Revelation Ff - Blessed and Holy are Those Who Have Part in the First Resurrection**). After **the sprinkling** had been administered **on the seventh day, the person** being **purified** was required to go through a full **immersion. Then he will wash his clothes and himself in water; and he will be ritually clean at evening.**³⁸⁷

D. The importance of following the correct procedure (19:20-22): A summary statement reviews the basic principles of **uncleanness. The person who remains ritually unclean and does not purify himself will be cut off from the community because he has defiled the sanctuary of ADONAI.** Now, the sin itself might not be known to the general community, so the cutting off may be done purely by the hand of **God. The water for purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is ritually unclean. This is to be a permanent regulation for them** during the Dispensation of the Torah. **The person who sprinkles the water for purification is rendered unclean and required to wash his clothes. Whoever touches the water for purification will be ritually unclean until evening. Anything the ritually unclean person touches will be ritually unclean, and anyone who touches him will be ritually unclean until evening.** Every person who merely touched **the water of ashes** was made **unclean**. Again, this is the paradox of the **purity** ritual. While **cleaning** others, **the one doing the**

cleansing was made **unclean**. This seems like a contradiction, but it is perfectly consistent with the principles of the Kingdom. To ascend you must descend. To be first you must be last. To lead you must serve. To be exalted you must be humbled. To be rich you must be poor. To **cleanse** you must be made **unclean**.³⁸⁸

Hebrews has the answer to the purity paradox: The red heifer is specifically mentioned in **Hebrews** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Bx - The Insufficiency of the Blood of Bulls and Goats**). The atonement of **Yeshua** puts an end to the ritual of **purification**. For, **the ashes** only affected **the outward purification**. **Messiah's sacrifice** goes far beyond **the red heifers**. It does so because **the red heifer's offering** could never **cleanse** a dead soul from his dead works. It only **cleansed** one from contact with a dead body. Our **Lord's** sacrifice provides spiritual **cleansing**. Just as contact with the realm of **death** prohibited one from being in the intimate presence of **the Holy One**, personal "contact" with the realm of spiritual **death** prohibits the sinner from an intimate personal relationship with **God**. Therefore, **the cleansing of the Master** renders the believer totally and forever **cleansed** within (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**). Whatever may happen to our physical body, we are radically changed to function in another spiritual dimension where **ritually pure** and **impure** are irrelevant. This is because of the miracle of a new birth (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Bd - A New Creation**) created by **God** in all of us who have truly placed our faith in the once-and-for-all and sufficient atonement of **Yeshua**.³⁸⁹

III. Quest for the red heifer: As explained above, without **the ashes of the red heifer**, it is impossible to reinstitute **the Temple** or the Levitical sacrificial system. Without **the ashes of the red heifer**, **priests** remain in a state of **ritual uncleanness**, and without a **priest** who had been **cleansed** by **the ashes of the red heifer**, new **ashes** cannot be made. Therefore, some hope that a repository of **the ancient ashes** might still be discovered in the archaeology of **Isra'el**. But this is merely Indiana Jones stuff. It has little relationship with reality. Even if a collection of **ashes** were found in a sealed jar labeled "**Ashes of the Red Heifer**," there would be no guarantee that **they** were really the genuine article, prepared by **the priesthood**. It is almost unthinkable that modern-day Judaism would think **it** to be legitimate.

Therefore, the quest for a new **red heifer** has begun in earnest. The radical sect of

Orthodox Judaism, represented by the Temple Institute in Jerusalem, has been raising cattle from Texas in an attempt to produce the perfect **red heifer**. So far their efforts, though generously assisted by many eager eschatology enthusiasts, have not met with success. Occasionally, potential **brownish red heifers** grab international headlines and stir up a lot of excitement, but even if they did manage to produce a perfect **red heifer** that met all the biblical and **Talmudic** criteria, who would slaughter it, burn it and prepare **the waters**? The Torah requires a **ritually clean person**, and without **the ashes**, there is none.

The idea of pregnant women of **the Cohanim** giving birth to sons in a **ritually clean** place that was guaranteed not to be a burial site. Today genetic DNA markers can identify **the Cohanim**. The results of the analysis of the Y chromosome markers of **the Cohanim** and non-**Cohanim** were indeed significant. A particular marker, (YAP-) was detected in 98.5 percent of the Cohanim, and in a significantly lower percentage of non-**Cohanim**. Today, **Cohanim** boys are raised in this **ritually pure** environment and great care is taken to ensure that they never come into contact with a grave or **death**. Then, when they are of an age to do so, they would be ready to carry out the rituals of **the red heifer**, mix **the ashes** and administer **the sprinkling**. It could work, but there is a much simpler solution.

In the days of **the Tabernacle, the priesthood** and the people were similarly **ritually unclean** through **corpse** contamination. Who then prepared **the first red heifer**? The Torah tells us that **Eleazar** did it (**19:3**), but wasn't **Eleazar** in a state of ritual impurity from **the death** contamination as well? Surely **he** was. But on the authority of **Moses**, **he** did it. Therefore, the first **red heifer offering** was attributed to **Moshe**, even though **Eleazar** carried it out. **The Oral Law states that, "Moses prepared the first red heifer" (M.Parah 3:5)**. When **the prophet like Moses** comes (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Dk - A Prophet Like Moses**), **He** will have the authority to order the ritual. **He**, who has already overcome **death** and now lives in eternal **purity** does not need **the ashes** or **the water**.³⁹⁰ And just as those in the Dispensation of the Torah had in this ritual the means of making one **ritually clean**, so we are reminded that **the blood of Yeshua cleanses us from all sin (First John 1:7)**.³⁹¹

*Dear Heavenly **father**, Praise **Your** steadfast love (**Psalms 63:3**) and total holiness! Thank **You** so much for **the purity** that **You** give those who love **You** thru **the blood of Messiah**. In Him we have redemption through His blood - the removal of trespasses - in keeping with the richness of His grace that He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight (**Ephesians 1: 7-8**). What marvelous*

grace **You** give **Messiah's righteousness** to me! **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21).**

The gift of **Messiah's righteousness**, thru **His death** and **righteousness**, cost you so much shame and pain (**Hebrews 12:2**). My love and worship of **You** is not just lip service. I desire to please **You** by the way I live my life. I love to praise and glorify **Your Name**. As David wrote we also desire to live that: **May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You, ADONAI, my Rock and my Redeemer (Psalms 19:14).** In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen