

NUMBERS 19:1-11

THE RED HEIFER (PARAH ADUMAH)

by Ya'acov Natan Lawrence
Hoshana Rabbah Messianic Discipleship Resources

The Overview of the Ceremony and Its Greater Implications

The Jewish sages say that the commandment (*mitzvah*) of the red cow is “beyond human understanding”. Like the *afikoman* (the middle broken matzah that is “buried” and “resurrected”—a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Yeshua) in the Passover (*Pesach*) Seder, the meaning of which to this day remains unclear to the Jewish rabbis, the red cow is a ritual that makes sense *only* when Yeshua the Messiah is added to the picture.

While the symbolism of the red heifer was, to Jewish Torah scholars, admittedly incomprehensible to human reason, by the second temple era they began to speculate about its spiritual significance in their *aggadic* literature. Some felt that it was atonement for the sin of the golden calf (*The Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion*, Massada-P.E.C. Press, 1965, p. 327; Artscroll *Chumash*, p. 839). Others viewed it as somehow relating to the *azazel* or scapegoat and the bullock sin offering of *Yom Kippur*, since all were sacrificed outside the camp of Israel (Lev. 16:27).

This sacrifice of the red heifer was for the purpose of purifying someone who had become ritually impure or polluted through contact with the dead, or for purifying metal war booty (Num. 31:21ff). This sacrifice was to be made outside of the camp of Israel, and later occurred outside of walls of the city Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, not far from the Temple. The concept of *the camp* signifies outside of or away from the Divine Presence or *Shekinah* meaning outside the Tabernacle courtyard (Artscroll *Chumash*, p. 839).

The heifer was to be three to five years of age and totally red in color, without a single black or white hair on its body, blemish free and to have never born a burden. The animal was slaughtered with the priest sprinkling blood seven times toward the Tabernacle (later, the Temple). The entire carcass (hide, entrails and meat) was then burned on a wood pyre. Into the fire were tossed cedar wood, hyssop and a scarlet thread. The ashes were then divided into three portions: one part was kept in a secure place on the Mount of Olives (during the second temple period), one part was kept in the area immediately outside the wall of the Temple Courtyard, and one part was divided among the priests throughout the land of Israel to be used, as needed, in purifying the people (*Mishnah Parah* 3:11). The ashes to be used in the Temple service were then mixed with fresh water (in Jerusalem, from the Pool of Siloam), and then called “waters of separation” (*mei nidah*; *nidah* means *impurity, filthiness, menstruous, set apart, ceremonial impurity*), and were ritually sprinkled over something or someone that was impure. Numbers 19:9 states that the waters of sprinkling were for *purification*. The Hebrew word for *purification* is *chatat*, which according to some rabbinic interpreters is a reference to a *sin offering* (*ibid.*). Others disagree arguing that the plain (*pasbat*) meaning of the text does not speak of the red heifer atoning for sin (see Rashi’s commentary on this verse). This is an interesting debate, but regardless of what the rabbis think, the ritual of the red heifer shows striking parallels to Yeshua’s salvific work at the cross, as we discuss below.

The crucifixion implications are not missed by Alfred Edersheim who links the scapegoat, which was to remove the personal guilt of the Israelites, with the red heifer, which was to take away the defilement of death that stood between man and Elohim, with the “living bird,” dipped in “the water and the blood,” then “let loose in the field” at the purification from leprosy, which symbolized the living death of personal sinfulness, were all, either wholly offered, or in their essentials completely outside the sanctuary. He then observes that the “Old Testament” sanctuary had no real provision for spiritual wants to which they symbolically pointed; their removal lay outside its sanctuary and beyond its symbols (*The Temple and Its Ministry*, pp. 280-281). This is why Yeshua had to be sacrificed *outside* of the Temple area. Additionally, he had to be the sacrifice for sin outside of the Temple area, which symbolized the *Shekinah* or Divine Presence of YHVH. This speaks of the fact that the Father looked away, turned his back on and forsook Yeshua while he bore the sins of the world on his shoulders. (Isa. 53:4-6; Matt. 27:46).

The writer of Hebrews understood the greater implications of the red heifer as it pointed to Yeshua when he wrote:

Which stood only in meats and drinks, and various washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation. But Messiah being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and **the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Messiah**, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to Elohim, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living Elohim? And for this cause he is the mediator of the renewed covenant, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. (Heb. 9:11–15, emphasis added)

Eighteenth-century Christian commentator, Matthew Henry, asks why does the Torah make a corpse a defiling thing? He answers, Because death is the wages of sin, which entered into the world by it, and reigns by the power of it. The law could not conquer death, nor abolish it, as the Gospel does, by bringing life and immortality to light, and so introducing a better hope. As the ashes signified the merit of Messiah, so the running water signified the power and grace of the blessed Spirit, who is compared to rivers of living water; and it is by his work that the righteousness of Messiah is applied to us for our cleansing (*MH Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 137, Moody).

The Rituals of the Red Heifer Sacrifice Related to Yeshua's Atoning Work at the Cross

- ☞ Red is the color of the stain of sin (Isa. 1:18, "though your sins be as scarlet...red like crimson."). Red is the color of the *tzaaras* skin infection dealt with in Leviticus 13:19, 24, 42–43. Scarlet or red is also associated with such things as Santa Claus, the devil, whorehouses, the whore of Babylon and the garb of Buddhist and Hindu monks, as well as Indian gurus and Catholic Cardinals.
- ☞ Red is the color of clay earth out of which Elohim formed the first man naming him Adam (*Strong's* H119/120) which means *ruddy, red, bloody* or *rosy in color*. Red is also the color of the Second Adam, Yeshua the Messiah who was literally red covered in his own sacrificial blood while hanging on the cross.
- ☞ Burning the cow represents the death and suffering of Messiah on the cross.
- ☞ More care was exercised in choosing a spotless cow than in any other sacrifice. This spotless purity represents Messiah Yeshua, the perfect sacrifice.
- ☞ The red heifer is just one more of the many shadow pictures that point to the Suffering Servant Messiah found in Torah. Other of these antetypes or prophetic shadow-pictures include:

Abel's sacrifice

Isaac on Mount Moriah and the ram caught in the thorns

The Paschel Lamb

The two goats offered at *Yom Kippur*

The Angel/Messenger of YHVH at the burning bush

Various burnt offerings and other sacrifices

Aaron's rod that budded

Water from the rock

The serpent on the pole

The tree thrown into the bitter waters making them sweet and drinkable

- ☞ The red cow had borne no yoke. Similarly, Messiah was neither under the yoke of sin nor was beholden to or under bondage to any human, institution, government, religious system or anything else of an earthly nature.
- ☞ The heifer was slain outside of the camp. During the first and second temple eras the red heifer was slain on the Mount of Olives by the priests. The Mount of Olives was located off the Temple Mount and outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem (see *The Pentateuch/Numbers*, p. 329, by Rabbi Samson Hirsch). Messiah Yeshua was sacrificed outside of the city gates of Jerusalem (Heb. 13:12) and very possible, contrary to Christian tradition, on the Mount of Olives from which the front of the temple and the veil was clearly visible. Remember, the rent veil was visible from the place of crucifixion (Matt. 27:51, 54; Mark 15:38–39).
- ☞ The heifer was totally burnt. Messiah suffered in body, soul and spirit (Is. 53) to atone for man's sin.
- ☞ Into the burnt offering fire went three things: cedar, hyssop and scarlet.
- ☞ The cedar tree grows tall, imposing and wide symbolizing haughtiness and loftiness of sinner in rebellion against Elohim. This wood was used to build a house for King David (2 Sam. 5:11) as well as for the Temple that Solomon built (1 Kings 6:9-10). This points to the cross, which was made of wood.
- ☞ Hyssop represents that to gain atonement the cedar one must bow in humility like a blade of hyssop. In 1 Kings 4:33 we see the contrast of the great cedar tree to even the hyssop. Hyssop was used to put the blood of the Passover Lamb on the doorposts as well as to put the sour wine to Yeshua's lips while on the cross. It is a medicinal plant known for its cleansing properties (Ps. 51:7).
- ☞ On the spiritual significance of the cedar and the hyssop, the *Jewish Encyclopedia (1901–1906 edition)* states, "The symbolical significance of the rite has been interpreted as follows: The majestic cedar of Lebanon represents pride, and hyssop represents humility; uncleanness ... and sin and death are associated ideas; the ceremony, therefore, is a powerful object-lesson, teaching the eternal truth that a holy God can be served only by a holy people."
- ☞ Scarlet represents the stain of sin (Isa 1:18); the priests made red with dye from a snail or insect—a lowly creature symbolizing the penitent's new-found humility. This is one of the colors in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) as well as the priestly garments. It is also a color of royalty and prosperity (Prov. 31:21, Daniel 5:7; Rev 17:4). It is the color Matthew describes as that of the robe the Roman soldiers put on Yeshua on Passover (Matt 27:28).
- ☞ We also see the cedar wood, the hyssop and the scarlet, in Leviticus 14:4 for cleansing one with the skin disease of *tzaaras*.