

UNDERSTANDING THE MYSTERY OF THE RED HEIFER RITUAL

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The ritual of the Red Heifer described in Numbers 19:1-22 is considered to be one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible rituals in the entire Bible and has troubled interpreters throughout the ages.¹ The main difficulties are (1) the special power of a red cow's ashes to purify someone who came in contact with a dead body; and (2) the seeming paradox that while the ashes are able to purify, they defile anyone involved in their preparation, albeit on a low level. The Midrash reveals the wise King Solomon to have been incapable of solving the mystery of the Red Heifer (*Kohelet Rabbah* 8:5). In talmudic literature, the Red Heifer is viewed as the quintessential example of a *hok*, a rule that cannot be understood through logic and reason (TB *Yoma* 67b).

However, this never prevented attempts to find some rationale for the ritual. Rashi, at the end of his commentary to Numbers 19:22, cites a midrashic reading from Rabbi Moshe ha-Darshan, which states that the Red Heifer ritual is an atonement for the worship of the Golden Calf. It is as if the mother cow seeks to expiate the sin committed through her offspring. This also explains why the Bible states that Aaron's son Eleazar was to perform this service, his father being unworthy of the task due to his involvement with the Golden Calf. The color red is associated in the Bible with sin (Isa. 1:18), so a red cow symbolized the ultimate sin of the Israelites, worshipping the Golden Calf.

In order to grasp the significance of the Red Heifer, we must first understand the meaning behind the Golden Calf. Why did the Israelites choose that particular animal as an object of worship? According to Ezekiel 20:7, the enslaved Israelites defiled themselves *with the idols of Egypt*, a land where rites associated with bulls and cows were widespread.² Some scholars identify the Golden Calf with worship of the goddess Hathor, one of the leading Egyptian deities.³ Hathor was worshipped throughout Egypt, had many functions,⁴ and was depicted either as a beautiful woman with bovine ears and

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horns or as a red cow.⁵ Hathor was sometimes referred to as "Nub the golden" or as "heifer with the golden neck".⁶

Rabbi Moshe ha-Darshan explains that the rite of burning the Red Heifer was a reenactment of the destruction of the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. Thus, it would also be a symbolic destruction of the cow-goddess Hathor which the Golden Calf represented. This explains why a red cow was needed for the ritual. The association with cleansing from impurity as a result of contact with a dead body is understood, in light of the *midrash* in TB *Avodah Zarah* 22b, to mean that the Israelites attained a state of immortality at Mount Sinai, but lost it due to the sin of the Golden Calf. Purification from death thus involves rejection of the Golden Calf, demonstrated by the ashes of the Red Heifer. This is especially powerful considering that Hathor was associated in Egypt with life and reproduction.⁷ Seen in this light, the Red Heifer ritual is a total rejection of Egyptian idolatry and its symbols. The ritual includes burning a crimson thread (Num. 19:6), which may likewise be a negation of the magic scarlet ribbon worn by the cow-goddess that was thought capable of binding evil spirits.⁸

This interpretation of the Red Heifer may enable us to fathom a seeming paradox: that while purifying the afflicted, contact with the ashes of the heifer defiled those who were themselves ritually clean (Num. 19:21). One explanation could be that since the Red Heifer represented Egyptian idolatry, the state of impurity resulted from contact with an idol. In the Bible we find Jacob instructing his family to cleanse themselves after discarding the idols they had with them (Gen. 35:2), and impurity due to contact with idols is mentioned in the Mishnah (*Shabbat* 9:1). The impurity contracted by dealing with the Red Heifer is therefore associated with the idolatry that it represented.

By combining traditional rabbinic interpretation (particularly that of Rabbi Moshe ha-Darshan) with our knowledge of ancient Egypt, a new understanding of the Red Heifer ritual and its mysteries is possible.

NOTES

1. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1965) p. 652.
 2. Youn Ho Chung, *The Sin of the Calf: The Rise of the Bible's Negative Attitude Towards the Golden Calf* (New York: T. and T. Clark, 2010) pp. 3-4.
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3. E. Danelius, "The Sins of Jeroboam ben-Nabat," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 58 (1967) pp. 95-114.
4. S. Newman, "Pharaoh's Dreams: an Extended Interpretation," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 40:4 (2012) pp. 253-4.
5. A. Edwards, *Egypt and Its Monuments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891) p. 274.
6. G. Massey, *Ancient Egypt, the Light of the World* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) p. 522.
7. E. O. James, *The Tree of Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) pp. 175-6.
8. E. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Divination and Magic* (Boston: Wheel/Weiser, 1998) p. 59.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Isaiah	33 – 61
May	Isaiah	62 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 24
June	Jeremiah	25 – 52
	Ezekiel	1
July	Ezekiel	2 – 30
August	Ezekiel	31 – 48
	Hosea	1 – 10

