

The ritual of the red heifer (Num. 19) has always fascinated readers. Not only is it elaborate and mysterious, it is also based on a rarity: a red cow. The paradoxes and power of this passage attracted the attention of modern Hebrew writers. Set in Eastern Europe, “The Red Heifer” tells the story of butchers who steal a beautiful and vigorous cow, butcher it without a *shohet* (a ritual slaughterer), and sell the meat as kosher. The centerpiece of the story is a gruesome, blow-by-blow description of the slaughter, the great animal quivering and gushing blood.

Why is Berdichevsky writing this story? We can take guidance from the divided narrator. On the one hand, he views the theft and slaughter with horror and judgment. He also assures us that all of the butchers came to a bad end. On the other, the narrator is transfixed by the fact that there exist, in the depth of the Diaspora, Jews who are muscular and powerful and not afraid to use force. If the butchers’ knives were used for deceit, he notes that when faced with the perpetrators of pogroms, these same weapons were wielded to protect Jewish lives.

Most important, the narrator makes the connection with the pagan sacrificial cult of ancient Israel. Berdichevsky bemoaned the fact that over the millennia, the Rabbis suppressed the vitalistic energy that had once been part of Israel’s prehistory. He did not extol paganism, but he did offer a barbed critique of the over-intellectualized regime of normative Judaism and urged modern Jewish culture to recover the primitive in neglected or suppressed traditions. His critique was adopted by the nascent Zionist movement in its assessment of Diaspora Jewish life and became a fundamental tenet of the return to the body and to the Land.

The attitude of many modern Jews to the sacrificial ritual is similarly divided. We understand that the biblical sacrifices were an advance on the pagan cults they replaced; we appreciate them in their context, but we do not wish to resume their practice. We are enlightened people. Nevertheless, like the narrator of Berdichevsky’s story, we cannot help being fascinated by the primordial power of the red heifer.

Parashat Hukat 5775

פרשת חקת תשע"ה



Modeling Ritual

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Recently I visited a group of Ramah teens on their one-week Poland experience, just prior to their summer trip to Israel. While visiting Jewish cemeteries in Krakow, I stood to the side and did not enter the area of the graves. Two of our teen participants, also both *kohanim*, asked me why I wouldn’t enter the cemetery, and I told them about the traditional prohibition of *kohanim* coming within six feet of a grave. Both decided to adopt this custom—at least for the days we were together—and both told me that even though they couldn’t explain why, it just felt right.

If Jewish summer camp and teen summer travel are opportunities for young Jews to engage deeply in the rituals of Jewish life purely out of joy, what role do obscure symbolic gestures or legal obligations play both during the summer and when the camp season ends? Is there any room left for commitment to a way of life which makes demands upon us even when we may not understand those demands or find immediate meaning in the performance of a ritual?

Perhaps one of the laws of Judaism that seems most distant and irrelevant in modern times is the idea of ritual contamination emanating from a corpse. Corpse defilement, as outlined in Leviticus 21 and elsewhere in Torah, is “cured” by the strange rituals set out in this week’s parashah, *Hukat*. We take the ashes from the *parah adumah* (red heifer), and create a strange liquid mixture to sprinkle on the people, vessels, and rooms that came into contact with the corpse. Within seven days, everyone is purified. Not exactly an easy ritual to explain to anyone, much less children, teens, and young adults at summer camp.

This struggle for meaning is not unique to modernity, but has challenged Jewish educators for thousands of years. Our midrash provides us with a

fascinating insight through the lens of one of the great 1st-century Rabbis, Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai. “A certain non-Jew once asked Rabbi Yohanan about the ceremony of the red heifer, which ‘seems like sorcery.’” Rabbi Yohanan explained to the Roman that just as Roman culture contains mystical rituals; so too does Judaism. Most interesting in this midrash is the response of Rabbi Yohanan’s students: “Our master, you have dismissed him with a trivial reply. What answer do you give us?” He said to them, ‘By your life, a corpse does not defile, nor does water make ritually clean, but it is the decree of the Holy One Blessed Be He who declared, I have issued an ordinance and enacted a decree, and you are not permitted to question My decree.’” (Tanhuma, Hukat, 8) In other words, Judaism may be filled with beautiful and meaningful practices, but the true test of our faith is our willingness to follow Jewish law even when we cannot understand any purpose.

Why keep kosher? Why pray regularly, even when not in the mood? Why must we abstain from so many behaviors on Shabbat, even when they may help us relax? These questions are asked at every Ramah camp and give those of us who are educators (or parents, or grandparents) the opportunity to deeply engage the next generation, so many of whom are not likely to easily accept any authority as definitive for their lives.

So what are the possible answers? We have faith in God and we don’t question God’s Torah? But how do we know what actually is the word of God and what has been attributed to God through human intermediaries?

Must we follow our parents’ and grandparents’ ways in order to perpetuate our culture, our Jewish way of life? Must we keep faith with the practices of Jews throughout the world and throughout the generations? But our kids learn about the plethora of practices and beliefs and are encouraged to develop their own unique approaches. How does that jive with an appeal for uniformity?

While there is no perfect rational answer to this challenge, we can learn from Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai’s response to his students. We can tell the next generation that while we may find meaning in certain individual practices, we can also accept the yoke of commandedness even when the meaning isn’t so apparent. The greatest power that we possess is through being accessible role models and leaders. We hope that our children, students, and campers will learn, in their own way, that there are limits to

rational understanding and that accepting Jewish law as a whole system can indeed lead to more satisfying lives.

Perhaps then, the lessons of the red heifer and the discussions around these strange rituals are indeed perfect lessons for summer camp and for any other setting of intense Jewish learning and living. And perhaps that is why two young men, standing with me in Krakow, took pride in being *kohanim* and in following an age-old tradition of keeping their distance from the graves of our ancestors.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Butchers

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נפשטה הבהמה, החלו האנשים לחלק אותה לחלקים, לחתוך את ראשה, את רגליה. קצב אחד לא יכול לעצור ברוחו, ויקח את הכבד השמן וישטחוהו על גבי גחלים בווערות, ששמו אחרים בפינה. ובבוא הדם באש אכלו אותו כולם בלי מליחה ובתאוה עזה נמרצה וילקו את אצבעותיהם בחמדה. ובקבוק גדול של י”ש היה עומד מוכן על הקרקע וישתו ויאכלו מלוא תאותם. ככוהני-הבעל בשעתם היו האנשים האלה בשעה ההיא, בהיחלק הקרבן לפני המזבח. והדבר לא היה בבית-אל או בדן, כי אם בעיר היהודיה דשיה, לא לפני גלות עשרת השבטים נעשה הדבר, בממלכת ישראל הצפונית, כי אם בשנת חמשת אלפים שש מאות ארבעים וחמש ליצירה. . .

The animal was stripped. The men began to divide her into pieces, cutting off her head and her legs. One butcher couldn’t restrain himself. He took the fat liver and put it on the hot coals that been placed in the corner. When the blood reached the flames, everyone ate it without proper salting and with ravenous hunger, licking their fingers eagerly. A large bottle of brew was ready so they ate and drank until they satisfied their lust. They were like priests of Ba’al when the sacrifice was on the altar. But this did not happen at Beth El or at Dan; it happened in the Jewish city of Dasha, not at the time when the ten tribes were exiled from the Northern Kingdom, but in the year 1884.

–“The Red Heifer” by Micha Josef Berdichevsky
(Translation by William Cutter)