

# The Mount of Olives and Jewish Immortality

Parashat Chukat, Numbers, Chapters 19-22 | July 7, 2022

In 1871, William Seward, former Secretary of State under Abraham Lincoln, toured the Holy Land. The book about his journey describes an unusual encounter by his traveling party:

As we sat on the deck of our steamer, coming from Alexandria to Jaffa, we remarked a family whom we supposed to be Germans. It consisted of a plainly-dressed man, with a wife who was ill, and two children—one of them an infant in its cradle. The sufferings of the sick woman, and her effort to maintain a cheerful hope, interested us. The husband, seeing this, addressed us in English. Mr. Seward asked if he were an English man. He answered that he was an American Jew, that he had come from New Orleans, and was going to Jerusalem.

This mother, it turns out, was ill and had journeyed halfway around the world with her children in order to pass away in the Holy Land, because, as the book puts it,

The Jews throughout the world, not merely as pilgrims, but in anticipation of death, come here to be buried, by the side of the graves of their ancestors.

It is a moving and astonishing story: a woman came to the Holy Land to be buried. In choosing to be buried overlooking Jerusalem, in a place where so many centuries of Jews exhibited in death their love of Israel and their faith in its future, she thereby joined her own finite life with Jewish immortality, embodying eternity at the very moment of her own passing. This is a story of death, but also of life, and is, in its own way, a striking application of one of the most famously mysterious passages in the Torah.

The biblical laws of ritual purity embody the Jewish celebration of life, the biblical emphasis that it is in this world that human beings, as both body and soul in unison, can sanctify existence. Thus, impurity in all its forms is associated in some way with death or with loss of life-giving powers. It is not usually forbidden to become impure, and it is often obligatory. Yet, once impurity is experienced, it is only after a series of purification rituals that a person may enter certain spheres of the Sanctuary in the Temple or Tabernacle. What must one do in order to achieve purification? For certain lesser forms of impurity, immersion in a *mikvah*, a certain type of ritual pool, is sufficient. But how is the impurity incurred by the encounter with the dead counteracted?

It is here in our *parashah* that the Torah introduces the law known as the “*para aduma*,” or “red heifer.” This animal serves as the source of a substance that provides purifying powers. The ritual of this preparation is performed not in the Temple or Tabernacle, but rather outside the Sacred, while still in the sight it:

*And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying,*

*This is the statute of the law which the Lord hath commanded, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer faultless, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke:*

*And ye shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may bring it forth outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him:*

*And Eleazar the priest shall take of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle of its blood directly before the tent of meeting seven times. (Numbers 19:1-4)*

By sprinkling toward the Tabernacle, as commentators explain, the priest links this ritual to the sacred site. The entire animal is then burnt, and we are further informed:

*And the priest shall take cedarwood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire, consuming the cow. (Numbers 19:6)*

The ashes produced here will be utilized to purify those who have come in contact with the dead. But what is going on here? It is important to stress that for the rabbis, the law of the red heifer is considered one of the rules of the Torah that is known a “*chok*,” one whose explanation is not entirely understandable to us. But we can try to discern some of its significance. The hint is the hyssop. We have seen earlier how blood, the symbol of life, is utilized in purification rituals to remove impurity, the symbol of death.

Hyssop is often used to apply blood in biblical purification rituals, as in the case of the Paschal blood during the exodus and in Leviticus for the ritual regarding one previously afflicted with *tzara’at*. Here with the red heifer, as Professor Jacob Milgrom has written, the cow is itself an embodiment—through its redness—of the blood of life. Thus, the ashes produced by it, in combination with these other purification materials, embody a sort of concentrate with purifying power. That is why the ritual of the red heifer, though performed outside the Temple, is called a “*chatat*,” the word utilized for offerings of purification on the altar. The ashes of the red heifer are placed in water from a spring, and the water is then sprinkled over the impure person twice over seven days:

*And for the impure, they shall take of the ashes of the burning of the chatat, and living water shall be placed along with it in a vessel:*

*And the pure person shall sprinkle upon the impure on the third day, and the seventh day: And on the seventh day, he shall purify him... (Numbers 19:17,19)*

The phrase for the liquid utilized here—“*mayim chayim*,” living water—highlights again the Jewish celebration of life, of the sanctifying power of life in this world, describing thereby that in this ritual, the im-

purity incurred by the encounter with death is overcome. But why does this law, this passage, appear here? Would it not have made more sense to discuss a purification ritual Leviticus?

The answer, and I draw here on a suggestion by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, lies perhaps first and foremost in the decree delivered several chapters before: that following the sin of the spies, much of Israel is doomed to die in the desert, with only the next generation entering the Holy Land. Indeed, soon after we will read of the mysterious episode in which Moses himself is told that he too will die with them, and Aaron also. Moses received this decree after the death of his beloved sister, Miriam. Thus, the forty years in the desert were haunted by the grisly specter of death and the introduction of the red heifer.

Thus the ritual of the red heifer appearing at this point signifies how Judaism, in its love of life, seeks to overcome the domination of death. It is therefore striking that while the ritual of the red heifer was performed throughout Jewish history by the High Priest, here in our text, it is Aaron’s son and designated successor, Eleazar, who is instructed in the rite. At this point, Aaron is still alive! But looking to the future, the law is given to Aaron’s son, thereby linking the ritual of purification from death with family continuity.

There is perhaps a hint to the fact that while the red heifer involves purification from death, one significant form of Jewish immortality is found in taking one’s place and forming a link in the chain known in Hebrew as *Knesset Yisrael*, the intergenerational assembly of Israel.

It is with this in mind that we can study a fascinating feature of Jewish history. The Mishnah describes how during the Second Temple period, the preparation of the red heifer was performed on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, overlooking the Temple Mount. A bridge, according to the Mishnah, would link the two mountains, and at the top of the Mount of Olives, the High Priest would sprinkle the blood of the heifer toward the Temple, joining the ritual thereby to the holiest site on earth.

With the destruction of the Temple and the rarity of red heifers, the ability to produce the ashes necessary

for purification eventually disappeared, so that ultimately everyone today is considered by Jewish law to be in a state of ritual defilement, for everyone in some way, comes in contact with the dead. But because later passages in Scripture describe the end times as bound up somehow with the Mount of Olives, it was on that mountain that generations of Jews chose to be buried during the many centuries of exile.

They came to Jerusalem from all over the world, not only to die, but to be buried in that site overlooking the place where the Temple once stood, to be buried at the very location where once the Priest crossed from the Temple across the Kidron Valley, in order to perform the preparation for purity. Thus did the Mount of Olives, once the location of the ritual of *para aduma*, become the most revered Jewish burial site in the world. It was presumably on the Mount of Olives that the Jewish woman met by Seward's traveling party was ultimately buried. In a striking inversion, a site set aside to perform the preparation for purity from death, is suddenly set aside as a cherished burial place for the Jewish people. The location where once the ashes were prepared to purify from an encounter with the grave, became a site of Jewish graves.

The message, perhaps, is that the refusal to forget Jerusalem, the desire to be buried overlooking Jerusalem, paved the path for the generations that would come in turn, forming a link in the continuum that is the countless generations of Jewry. That is itself also part of how Judaism addresses death, responds to death, defeats death.

Several years ago, before one of my childrens' Bar Mitzvah celebration in Jerusalem, I went with my family to visit the graves of three of my grandparents who are buried on the Mount of Olives. Standing there, joining those alive in this world and those alive in a different way, we embodied several generations overlooking the Holy City, preparing for a ritual celebrating the future, celebrating life, celebrating sanctity, celebrating the endurance in the eternity of the Jewish people. I thought, at that moment, of the bridge that, according to the Mishnah, once connected the Temple Mount to that place. As I stood, I felt that the bridge was there again, but it was a bridge between two worlds, between those who had come before and those who

would follow, as I realized that it was this site of Jewish death that truly embodied a people that would never die.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. Rabbi Soloveichik draws a connection between the eternal Jewish love of Jerusalem and Judaism's approach to life and mortality. What might this teach us about the meaning of the story of modern Israel to the Jewish people, the Jewish faith, and the world at large?

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