

Parashat Chuqat חקת

Torah: Numbers 19:1–22:1

Haftarah: Judges 11:1–33

Mini-Mysteries

General Overview

Besides the opening parashiyot of Genesis, very few Torah portions have more important events in them than the one now before us. In this sidra we learn about the ashes of the red cow; the waters of Meribah; the death of Aaron and Miriam; the raised up snake; and the first battles of this new generation as they travel to the edge of the Promised Land and encamp across from Jericho on the plains of Moab.

Yet, for all of its action, are there any parashiyot that contain more mysteries than this one? What is the mystery of the red cow? How and why did it work? What specifically was the sin of Moshe that forfeited him the right to enter the Promised Land? How did looking at a bronze snake on a pole cure those who had been bitten by real serpents? For these reasons, we have chosen to call this week's commentary "Mini-Mysteries"!

Exposition

As we embark on our study of some of these mini-mysteries, we need to keep in mind the larger context of the book of Numbers. In this book there are two strands of thought behind every event or passage:

- 1) Preparations for life in the Promised Land, and
- 2) Fulfillment of the judgmental promise of the Lord that, except for Caleb and Joshua, the present generation of people twenty years old and older will not enter the land.

Many events chronicled in Numbers are there for these reasons.

Here, then is the list of mini-mysteries that we will examine:

- I. The First Mini-Mystery — The Red Cow
- II. The Second Mini-Mystery — The Sin of Moshe and Aaron
- III. The Third Mini-Mystery — Death and Denial
- IV. The Fourth Mini-Mystery — The Healing Snake
- V. The Fifth Mini-Mystery — The Secret Writings

In this excerpt from Parashat Chuqat, we will focus on section I, the mini-mystery of The Red Cow.

I. The First Mini-Mystery — The Red Cow

The teaching of the ashes of the red heifer (Somehow calling it a "heifer" makes it sound more mysterious!) is found in chapter 19. Verses 1–10 teach the procedure and verses 11–22 provide some examples of its application.

The text calls the teaching about the red cow a *hukat haTorah* (חוקת התורה). A *chuqah* (חוקה) is usually considered a teaching in which there appears to be no rational explanation; it is to be received and obeyed by faith. If that is true, then we have an example *par excellence* here with the red cow ritual. It is a real stumper! Even Philip Blackman, the eminent Mishnah commentator admits,

This ordinance has passed human comprehension and is the most mysterious rite in Scripture — none of the many attempts to explain it is convincingly satisfactory.¹

In other words, what we have here is a real mystery!

The mystery is not in the details of the ritual. They are clear. A perfect red (female) cow, which was never under a yoke, was taken outside the camp where she was slain under the supervision of the High Priest. Some blood was sprinkled toward the Mishkan. Then, the cow was burnt on the Altar and the ashes were mixed with water, hyssop, cedar wood, and a crimson thread. This mixture was carefully set aside to be used in the purification process of one who was *tam'ei*, especially from contact with a dead human. In addition, the Mishnah provides even more specific details about how the ritual was carried out, particularly during the Second Temple period. In fact, one whole tractate, *Parah*, is devoted to the subject.

Unanswered Questions

While there is an abundance of information concerning the ritual, there is little knowledge concerning the *meaning* of it. Therein is the mystery! For instance, why is a red cow chosen for this purpose? Furthermore, why, paradoxically, does the person who takes the ashes from the cow that are used to purify, become himself *tam'ei* and in need of the very ashes he has just prepared?

Researching various suggestions on how these and other related questions could prove to be an education in itself. One of the best examples of this is reading Rabbi Elie Munk's commentary on the Torah called, *The Call of the Torah*. The reason why it is so interesting is that Munk, in proposing various suggestions about the meaning of this ritual, gives a classic example of the use of the four different categories of interpretation, characteristic of Jewish scholars through the centuries. These four steps to traditional Jewish interpretation have been referred to since the middle ages by *Pardes*. This is a word that stands for:

P — P'shat: The literal, normal understanding of the text.

R — Remez: Hints in the text of something else that might be referred to.

D — Drash: The sermonic understanding of the text, particularly using allegory, the under the surface meaning.

S — Sod: The secretive or mystical meaning of the text, sometimes by using numerology called *gematria*.

There is a great deal of evidence that the term *Pardes* was actually invented by Jewish Kabbalists. According to David Bivin,

Kabbalists were mystics, *par excellence*, and they pursued vigorously Scripture's concealed meanings. They aspired to an elevated spiritual

¹ Philip Blackman, *The Mishnah*, vol. 6, 402.

awareness by gaining access to concealed knowledge through scrutinizing each letter of the biblical text and through ecstatic ascents into heaven.²

We do not believe that practicing kabbala is something appropriate for the sincere and honest student of God's Word. However, even though the term *Pardes* was not used to describe a hermeneutical principle of the Bible during the time of Yeshua, nonetheless, there is evidence that its *methods* were practiced in His day. David Stern writes in this regard:

Even though these four ways of dealing with a text were systematized by the kabbalists, they existed long before. A computer search of early rabbinic literature — Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, Mekhilta, Sifre and the like, a good deal of which dates from the first century and earlier — yielded dozens of examples of the rabbis pointing out a *remez* [one of the four parts of [Pardes]³

Moreover, one can easily recognize examples of each of the four parts of *Pardes* when one studies the pages of the Renewed Covenant Scriptures. Here are just a few examples without elaborating on them. One can see *P'shat* everywhere. This is the plain, simple meaning of the text. There are several examples of *Remez*, such as in John 1:51 and in John 8:56. In addition, there is a *Drash* in 1 Corinthians 10:1f and in Galatians 4:22f, and finally in Revelation 13:18 we see a *Sod*.

Thus, it appears that *Pardes* was practiced in the first century, though not known by that name. It is much the same way with the acronym *Tanakh*. While Yeshua did not use this term because it was invented centuries later, yet He certainly acknowledged that the Hebrew Bible was organized traditionally into three sections, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, as we see in Luke 24.

Munk delineates the four categories and provides an example of each by showing what each level would say, concerning the red cow ritual. We will only give two examples from Munk for our interest. These examples also provide some plausible interpretations of the meaning of this puzzling ritual.

A. The Divine Kiss — *P'shat*

One of the most common approaches to understanding this ritual is by using *P'shat*, the literal or rational interpretation. Rambam appears to be one of its chief exponents. According to this viewpoint, there is no point in trying to figure out what God has kept secret. We are to just accept it. In keeping with this outlook, the sages have referred to this ritual as somewhat of a "Divine Kiss." "HaShem gave His best and most secret commands in the form of a divine kiss, like the close intimacy of a lover to his beloved."⁴ Because intimacy is of utmost importance and needs to be protected, the red cow ritual helps to serve as a kind of a restriction to those who wish to enter into the Mishkan but are not qualified to do so.

² David Bivin, "Medieval Jargon on First-century Lips" from *Jerusalem Perspective*, July–September 1999, 34.

³ David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 35.

⁴ Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 222.

Here is how it restricted people. For one thing, the ritual was expensive because of the components used to carry it out — including the red cow itself. Moreover, the right kind of heifer was so rare that according to the Mishnah only seven existed from the time of Moshe to the end of the second Temple period. In addition, the ritual was also complex. In contrast, there were many reasons why people would have been rendered *tam'ei* and in need of this ritual for cleansing. Hence, it appears that the Holy One was purposely restricting intimacy to only a few.

B. A Closer Look — *Drash*

The *Drash* approach, typified by the *midrash*, is our second example. It “focuses primarily on the difficulty in grasping the reasoning behind this mitzvah, especially its apparent paradox.”⁵ Among the various explanations given by the midrash for the red cow ritual, it appears that R. Levi has the most accepted. He contends that Rabbi Akiva was given revelation concerning the secret of the red cow. For Rabbi Akiva, its deeper meaning was to be found in the letters and symbols of Torah. Rabbi Levi also explains that the Lord revealed to Moshe the deepest meaning of the red cow when He taught him that each case of contamination could be removed except for the contamination of the *kohanim*. For these, according to R. Levi “the ashes of the red cow could affect cleansing.”⁶

Another explanation given by the Midrash is that the red cow ritual is the only one in all of God’s offerings or rituals that uses a female cow. Why? “Let the Heifer come and atone for the incident of the Calf!”⁷ The Midrash also informs us that we should just accept the paradox of the red cow without questioning it. In fact, the Scriptures contain several other such paradoxes that are equally as difficult to explain. However in the end, “The things that are concealed from you in this world, you will see in the World to Come, like a blind man who regains his sight.”⁸

Finally, the Midrash Rabbah tells a story to illustrate how complex the red cow ritual is to understand, thereby requiring mere obedience without understanding:

A certain heathen asked Rabbi Yochannan ben Zakkai, “The rites you perform with the red heifer smell of witchcraft! You bring a heifer, burn it, grind it, and take its ashes. You sprinkle two or three drops on one of you who is contaminated with corpse defilement and say to him, ‘You are clean’.” Said R. Yochannan ben Zakkai to him, “Have you ever been possessed by a demon?” “No.” “Have you ever seen a man possessed by a demon?” He answered, “Yes.” “And what do you do for him?” “We bring herbs and make them smoke beneath him, and throw water on him and the demon is exorcised,” He answered, “Let your ears hear what your mouth has spoken. The spirit of defilement is the same as your demon. We sprinkle on it the waters of purification and it is exorcised.” After the heathen had left, R. Yochannan's disciples said to him, “Him you have put off with a straw, but what answer will you give to us?” He replied to them, “By your life, neither does the dead defile nor the water

⁵ Ibid, 220.

⁶ Barnidbar Rabbah 19.4

⁷ Bamidbar Rabbah 19.8

⁸ Bamidbar Rabbah 19.6

purify, but the Holy One blessed be He said, 'It is a statute I have laid down, a decree that I have decreed and you are not authorized to violate My decrees'.⁹

Non-Jewish commentators are even more silent on the meaning and symbolism of this peculiar ceremony. One thing, however, which they are quick to point out, is the fact that the ashes of the red cow are mentioned in Hebrews 9:11–13 in connection with the atonement of Yeshua.

This passage explains that whatever the paradoxes and the intricacies of the red cow ritual meant, one thing is certain: the Atonement of Yeshua put an end to this ritual of purification. For the ashes only affected outward purification, that is, they only rendered *tahor* that which was *tam'ei* for the given situation. (Please see the commentary on Leviticus 12–15 for the meanings of *tahor* and *tam'ei*.) Whereas, the cleansing of Yeshua renders the believer totally and forever cleansed within. Whatever may happen to our earth-suit, our insides are radically changed to function in another universe where *tahor* and *tam'ei* are irrelevant. This is because of the miracle of the new birth wrought by God in all of us who truly have placed our faith in the once for all and sufficient atonement of Yeshua.

⁹ Barmidbar Rabbah 19.8