

**19** The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2This is the ritual law that the LORD has commanded:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן  
לֵאמֹר: 2 זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה  
יְהוָה לֵאמֹר

*The Generation of the Exodus: The March to Transjordan (continued)*

PURIFICATION FROM CONTAMINATION BY A CORPSE (19:1–22)

Contamination that results from contact with a corpse is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah (see, e.g., Lev. 21:1–4; Num. 6:6–13). Here, the Torah prescribes the method of purification. In this rite, the blood of an all-brown (“red”) cow is not of-

fered on the altar; it is burned together with the cow’s body, so that the ashes may be used as an ongoing instrument of purification. As in all purification offerings, the man who burns the cow becomes impure himself.

In the course of this *parashah*, Miriam dies, Aaron dies, and Moses is sentenced to die without reaching the Promised Land. A transition of generations is taking place. The narrative’s center of gravity is moving farther from Sinai and closer to the challenge of conquering the Promised Land. Soon there will be no Israelites left who actually stood at Sinai, only Israelites who have heard about it from parents and grandparents.

CHAPTER 19

Before continuing with the narrative, the Torah offers us the strange ritual of the brown (“red”) cow. It is the classic example of a law that defies rational explanation. Indeed, the general tenor of the commentaries asks us to accept this law without understanding it, as a sign of love for and trust in God. The commentators hold that it would be almost unseemly to search for a rational explanation, implying that God’s word would be acceptable only if it fit our canons of reasoning. Human failure to understand a truth does not make it any less true. The Midrash pictures King Solomon, the wisest man in the Bible, saying, “I have labored to understand the word of God and have understood it all, except for the ritual of the brown cow” (Num. R. 19:3). “These laws are decrees from God and we have no right to question them” (Num. R. 19:8). “It is more praiseworthy to do something solely because God commands it than because our own logic or sense of morality leads us to the same conclusion” (*Sifra K’doshim*). The Tosafot compare this commandment to a lover’s kiss which cannot be explained but can only be experienced (BT Av. Zar. 35a).

Yet there have been persistent efforts to uncover the lessons taught to us by this ritual. Although the Torah describes the ritual as purifying a person of contamination from contact with a dead body and nothing else, the Midrash widens the scope to include moral contamination, especially idolatry, viewing this special cow as the antidote for the sin of the Golden Calf. “Let the mother come and repair the damage the offspring has caused” (Num. R. 19:8). Ramban, noting that the passage comes immediately after the completion of the tabernacle and the challenge to Aaron’s priesthood, understands it as a way of preventing ritually unfit people from violating the sanctity of the tabernacle. Israel of Ruzhin points out that this cow purifies the impure but renders the pure impure; God similarly purifies those who approach the sanctuary in a spirit of humility with knowledge of their own inadequacies, but condemns those who come in a spirit of arrogance and a claim to perfection. A modern commentator suggests that the ritual’s purpose is psychological. To heal a person burdened by a sense of wrongdoing, who feels the purity of his or her soul has been compromised, we take an animal completely without blemish and sacrifice it, as if to imply that perfection does not belong in this world. Perfect creatures belong in heaven; this world is given to the inevitably flawed and compromised.

Because this rite is inoperative today, so that there is no way to purify the ritually contaminated, some halakhic authorities consider all Jews ritually unfit to enter the Temple Mount lest they inadvertently tread on the site where the holiest precincts of the temple once stood in Jerusalem.



Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. <sup>3</sup>You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. <sup>4</sup>Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. <sup>5</sup>The cow shall be burned in his sight—its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included—<sup>6</sup>and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow. <sup>7</sup>The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be impure until evening. <sup>8</sup>He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be impure until evening. <sup>9</sup>A man who is pure shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a pure place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for purification. <sup>10</sup>He who gathers up the ashes of

דִּבֶּר | אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלָיו פָּרָה  
אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה אֲשֶׁר אֵין-בָּהּ מוֹם אֲשֶׁר  
לֹא-עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֹל: <sup>3</sup> וַנִּתְּנָהּ אֵלֶיךָ  
אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְהוֹצִיא אֹתָהּ אֶל-מִחוּץ  
לַמַּחֲנֶה וְשָׁחַט אֹתָהּ לִפְנָיו: <sup>4</sup> וְלָקַח  
אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן מִדָּמָהּ בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ וְהִזָּה אֶל-  
נֹכַח פְּנֵי אֹהֶל-מוֹעֵד מִדָּמָהּ שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים:  
<sup>5</sup> וְשָׂרַף אֶת-הַפָּרָה לְעֵינָיו אֶת-עוֹרָהּ וְאֶת-  
בְּשָׂרָהּ וְאֶת-דָּמָהּ עַל-פְּרִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָף:  
<sup>6</sup> וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן עֵץ אַרְזוֹ וְאַזְוִיב וּשְׁנֵי תוֹלְעֹת  
וְהִשְׁלִיךְ אֶל-תּוֹךְ שְׂרֹפֶת הַפָּרָה: <sup>7</sup> וְכִבֵּס  
בְּגָדָיו הַכֹּהֵן וּרְחָץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְאַחֲרֵי  
כֵן בָּאוּ אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה וְטָמֵא הַכֹּהֵן עַד-  
הָעֶרֶב: <sup>8</sup> וְהִשְׂרָף אֹתָהּ יִכְבֵּס בְּגָדָיו בַּמַּיִם  
וּרְחָץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרֶב:  
<sup>9</sup> וְאָסַף | אִישׁ טָהוֹר אֶת אֲפֶר הַפָּרָה  
וְהִנִּיחַ מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה בַּמָּקוֹם טָהוֹר  
וְהִיָּתָה לַעֲדֹת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לַמְשֻׁמֶּרֶת לַמִּי  
נִדָּה חֲטָאת הָאֵם: <sup>10</sup> וְכִבֵּס הָאֵם אֶת-

#### THE BROWN ("RED") COW (vv. 1–13)

**2. red** Hebrew: *adam*, which here probably means "brown"—for which there is no word in the Bible. The idea is to increase, symbolically, the amount of blood in the ashes.

**red . . . without blemish** Better: "unblemished brown." A cow completely uniform in color, without specks of white or black or without even two black or white hairs, is extremely rare.

**no yoke has been laid** It must not have been used for profane purposes.

**3. in his presence** The cow will also be burned in the presence of Eleazar, indicating that it is imperative for the officiating priest to supervise the entire ritual.

**4. sprinkle it seven times** This act consecrates the cow as a purification offering.

**6. priest** Any priest, not just Eleazar.

**hyssop, and crimson stuff** Hyssop, an aromatic plant, is widespread in the land of Israel. Crimson yarn refers to the dye extracted from a "crimson worm," used in the weaving of the sa-

cred garments of the high priest and the inner curtains of the tabernacle.

**7. wash his garments and bathe his body** If he bathed first, his unwashed garments would recontaminate him.

**until evening** Whoever handles a burnt *hattat* offering may enter the camp as soon as he has laundered his clothing and bathed (see Lev. 16:26,28), provided he does not partake of sacred food until the evening.

**8. He who performed the burning** It is also presumed that he who gathers up the ashes remains outside the camp until after he has laundered and bathed, precisely as the contaminated priest has done.

**9. A man** Not necessarily a priest.

**to be kept** The ashes of the brown ("red") cow must be guarded scrupulously lest they become contaminated.

**It is for purification** These ashes mixed with water will be sprinkled on corpse-contaminated individuals to remove the impurity.

**10. wash his clothes** It is understood that he will also bathe his body.



the cow shall also wash his clothes and be impure until evening.

This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.

<sup>11</sup>He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be impure for seven days. <sup>12</sup>He shall purify himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be pure; if he fails to purify himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be pure. <sup>13</sup>Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the LORD's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains impure; his impurity is still upon him.

<sup>14</sup>This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be impure seven days; <sup>15</sup>and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be impure. <sup>16</sup>And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be impure seven days. <sup>17</sup>Some of the ashes from the fire of purification shall be taken for the im-

*strangers* All those who dwell in the Holy Land, Israelites and non-Israelites alike, must purify themselves of corpse contamination lest they defile the sanctuary by bearing their impurity within the community.

**11. seven days** Similarly, in ancient Babylonia, one who came into contact with dust from a place of mourning was required to offer sacrifices to the god Shamash, to bathe, change clothing, and remain inside the house for seven days.

**13. defiles the LORD's Tabernacle** Severe impurity is dynamic and can attack the sanctuary through the air. Corpse-contaminated individuals who prolong their impurity have defiled the sanctuary from afar, even without entering it.

*shall be cut off* If the neglect was deliberate

אֶפֶר הַפָּרָה אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְטָמֵא עַד־הָעֶרֶב וְהִיָּתָה לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם לַחֲקֹת עוֹלָם:

<sup>11</sup>הַנִּגַּע בַּמָּת לְכָל־נֶפֶשׁ אָדָם וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: <sup>12</sup>הוא יִתְחַטֵּא־בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְיָטָהָר וְאִם־לֹא יִתְחַטֵּא בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לֹא יָטָהָר: <sup>13</sup>כָּל־הַנִּגַּע בַּמָּת בְּנֶפֶשׁ הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־יָמוּת וְלֹא יִתְחַטֵּא אֶת־מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה טָמֵא וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מִי נָדָה לֹא־זָרַק עָלָיו טָמֵא יִהְיֶה עוֹד טָמֵאֲתוֹ בּוֹ:

<sup>14</sup>זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי־יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל כָּל־הַבָּא אֶל־הָאֹהֶל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶל יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: <sup>15</sup>וְכָל־כְּלִי פְתוּחַ אֲשֶׁר אֵין־צִמִּיד פְּתִיל עָלָיו טָמֵא הוּא: <sup>16</sup>וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־יִגַּע עַל־פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּחִלְל־חֶרֶב אוֹ בַּמָּת אוֹ־בַעֲצָם אָדָם אוֹ בַּקֶּבֶר יִטָּמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: <sup>17</sup>וְלָקְחוּ לְטָמֵא

(see 15:30–31). (If the neglect was accidental, a purification offering is brought.)

#### PURIFICATION BY SPRINKLING (vv. 14–22)

**14. enters the tent** The impurity emitted by the body is trapped by the roof, so to speak, and cannot rise. Hence, every person and object under the roof is contaminated.

**15. every open vessel** A tightly closed vessel made entirely of earthenware, however, will not admit the “vapors” of impurity given off by the corpse; its contents remain pure.

*fastened down* The lid is attached by cords passing through holes in it and through the handles of the vessel. Such a lid would keep the vessel tightly closed and preserve it from defilement.

#### HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**19:14. When a person dies** Once the Temple was destroyed, we could not purify ourselves from this type of ritual impurity. Now all but *kohanim* may attend funerals (see Lev. 21:2). We rinse our hands upon leaving the cemetery or upon entering a house of mourning after the funeral, in symbolic recollection of this law.