

What's the Truth about . . . the Parah Adumah?



MISCONCEPTION: The person who sprinkles the ashes of a *parah adumah* (“red heifer”) on a *tamei* (ritually impure) person becomes *tamei* himself.

FACT: Most of the people involved in preparing the ashes become *tamei*, but the one who sprinkles the water with the ashes does not.

FACT: Among the various types of *tumah* (ritual impurities) enumerated in the Torah, the kind acquired from direct contact with a human corpse is unique. One who acquires such *tumah* is considered a “*tamei met*,” and in addition to the standard ritual immersion required to remove *tumah*, the Torah mandates that he be sprinkled with ashes of a *parah adumah* (“*parat chatat*”) on the third and seventh day after such contact.¹ The cow used must be completely red,² older than three years (*Parah* 1:1), with no physical blemishes.³ Furthermore, the cow must have been purchased by the *beit din* with Temple funds for the purpose of preparing the requisite ashes, and have never worked (*Shekalim* 4:2).

The details of the preparation are outlined in *Parashat Chukat* (Bamidbar 19). Unlike sacrifices, all of which took place within the Temple precinct, the *parah adumah* ritual took place outside the Temple precinct. When the Temple stood, the ritual of the *parah adumah* took place outside of the municipal borders of Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives (*Middot* 2:4).⁴ Additionally, similar to sacrifices, a non-kohen was qualified to slaughter the *parah adumah*.

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The blood of the *parah adumah* was then collected by a kohen who sprinkled it seven times in the direction of the Holy of Holies. The entire animal—skin, meat, blood and all—was then burnt and pieces of *erez* (cedar), *ezov* (hyssop), and *sheni tola'at* (scarlet-dyed wool) were added to the conflagration; the ashes were then collected and stored.

Spring water was collected in a vessel and sanctified as ashes were mixed into it. The water was called “*mei niddah*” by the Torah and “*mei chatat*”⁵ by Chazal.

This entire process, replete with myriad technical regulations, had one purpose—to purify *tamei* individuals. All those involved in the process were required to be *tahor*. Many stringencies applied to those involved in the ritual of the *parah adumah*—more than applied even to those performing the *avodah* in the Temple! Nevertheless, an individual involved in the ritual of the *parah adumah* was permitted to be a *tvul yom*, i.e., a *tamei* person who immersed in the mikvah and is only fully *tahor* after the sun sets. The Tzeddukim (Sadducees) believed, however, that a *tvul yom* was not permitted to participate in the preparation of the ritual. (Consequently, to reinforce this halachah, the rabbis insisted that after all the stringencies were observed and there was absolutely no doubt that the individual selected to perform the ritual was *tahor*, he should be then be intentionally defiled so that he could have the status of a *tvul yom*!)

All of those involved in the preparation of the ritual become *tamei*, except for the one who sprinkles the ash water (*Parah* 4:4; Rambam, *Parah Adumah* 5:1; *Aruch Hashulchan Ha'atid*,

Taharot 60). This includes the *shochet* as well as those who collect the blood, sprinkle the blood, burn the cow, throw in the *ezov*, turn over the meat while it is burning, collect the ashes, et cetera. In summary, anyone involved in the preparation becomes *tamei* and remains so until he immerses in a mikvah and waits until sunset. Furthermore, the clothing he is wearing and any utensil he touches while engaged in the activity become *tamei* too (Rambam, *Parah Adumah* 5:2).⁶ Although touching the cow does not render one *tamei*, one who touches the sanctified *mei chatat* does become *tamei* (*Keilim* 1:1-2; *Aruch Hashulchan Ha'atid, Taharot* 77).⁷ Thus, while the sprinkler of the *mei chatat* does not become *tamei*, the description of the *parah adumah* ritual as one that is “*metaheir temaim*” and “*metamei tahorim*” is quite accurate.

The fact that the *parah adumah* is a source of *tumah* is not unusual. There are three broad categories of *tumah* sources. The most well-known causes of *tumah* are those associated with death. The most potent source of *tumah* is a human corpse (Bamidbar 19:11). Other death-related sources include dead kosher animals (Vayikra 11:39-40), dead non-kosher animals (Vayikra 11:24-28), and dead kosher birds (Vayikra 17:15; see Rashi). A second source is certain bodily emissions. The third category, called *tumot kedushot* (*Tosefta, Sheviit* 1:4) is *tumah* associated with sacrificial rites, one of which is the *parah adumah*. In this last category, one finds, for example, that the one who burns the bull and goat sacrifices of the Yom Kippur service becomes *tamei*, as does the one who leads the Yom Kippur scapegoat to its death in the desert (*Parah* 8:3).⁸

If the sprinkler of the *mei chatat* does not become *tamei*, why do many people think otherwise? This is probably due to the verse in Bamidbar, stating (9:21): “He also that sprinkled the water shall wash his garments . . .” which seems to indicate that the sprinkler becomes *tamei*. However, the Talmud (*Yoma* 14a) rejects a literal interpretation of the verse.

But is he who sprinkles clean? Surely it is written, “And he that sprinkles the water of sprinkling shall wash his clothes?” “Sprinkle” here means “touch.” But the text reads “sprinkle” and also mentions “touch”; furthermore, he who “sprinkles” must wash his clothes, whereas he who “touches” need not wash his clothes?

Rather “sprinkle” here means “carry.” Then let the Divine Law write “carry”; why is “sprinkle” written? That [is meant] to let us know that there must be a quantity sufficient for the sprinkling [in order for the one who carries to become tamei].

What the *gemara* is stating is that the one who sprinkles is not *tamei*; the verse simply comes to teach that one who carries or touches an amount of *mei chatat* that is sufficient with which to “sprinkle” a person is *tamei*.⁹

Expounding upon the Biblical verse, Rambam states that one cannot explain the verse according to its simple meaning because it is illogical that the act of sprinkling the *mei chatat* purifies one person and defiles another. Therefore a fortiori, the one who sprinkles is not *tamei* (*Hilchot Parah Adumah* 15:1; see *Yoma* 14a for a similar a fortiori).¹⁰ Similarly, Tosafot (*Niddah* 9a, s.v. *mai*) justifies a non-literal translation of the verse because another verse refers to the sprinkler as “*tahor*,” implying he remains *tahor* from beginning to end. *Torah Temimah* (to Bamidbar 19:21, note 125) and the *Netziv* (*Ha’emek Davar* to Bamidbar 19:21) provide additional reasons for the *gemara*’s non-literal interpretation of the Biblical verse.

Another reason this misconception is widespread is because the *parah adumah* ritual is regarded as the classic *chok* that even the wisest of all men, King Solomon, did not understand. It is generally assumed that it is this aspect—that the sprinkler becomes *tamei*

while the sprinkled becomes *tahor*—that is the most confounding element of this mitzvah. Indeed, what element of this “*chok*” did King Solomon find inexplicable.¹¹

The *Gemara* (*Yoma* 14a) asks this very question and provides two possible answers:

*If sprinkling upon a tamei makes him tahor, how much more should sprinkling upon a tahor person not make him tamei, yet Rabbi Akiva says it makes him tamei! And Rabbi Akiva? It is with reference to this that Solomon said: “I said, I will get wisdom, but it is far from me.” And the Sages? They explain this to refer to the fact that he who sprinkles and he who is sprinkled are clean, whereas he who touches them [mei chatat] is rendered unclean.*¹²

The *Sefer HaChinuch*, who provides reasons for almost all of the *mitzvot*, when writing about the *parah adumah* (397) states “My hands grew weak and I was afraid to open my mouth.”¹³ The *Beit HaLevi* on *Parashat Ki Tissa* (*Beit HaLevi al HaTorah*, p. 55 in 5747 reprint of 5644 ed.) comments that when King Solomon was stumped by the *parah adumah* ritual, it made him realize that he also did not fully understand the other *mitzvot*.

From the inexplicable nature of *parah adumah*, the *Beit HaLevi* comments that we learn that the whole Torah is a *chok*—that is, all the *mitzvot* are interrelated and unknowable. Thus, *parah adumah* serves to teach that we cannot fully understand the reasons behind any of the *mitzvot*.¹⁴

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin,¹⁵ quoting Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, explains that a *tamei* individual is like a person sinking in quicksand. Those who come to pull him out will inevitably become soiled in the process. Thus, those involved in preparing the *parah adumah* become *tamei*.

Rabbi Riskin adds that the Lubavitcher Rebbe offered an interesting analysis of the mitzvah of *parah adumah* as well. All the individuals involved in preparing the mixture—the one who burns the heifer, the one who adds the other ingredients, the one who carries them—become *tamei*. But not the one who sprinkles the ashes and actually effects the purification; he remains pure. So too, the Lubav-

itcher Rebbe promised his many emissaries spread out over the far reaches of the globe that because they are involved in purifying their fellow Jews, they and their families will remain pure, no matter how isolated they are. Indeed, the fact that a kohen must be willing to defile himself in order to help remove a form of impurity for the nation conveys an important message about what it means to be a spiritual leader of Klal Yisrael.

A related *midrash* (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:5; cf., *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana* iv, Buber ed. 38b) states that there are four concepts, referred to by the Torah as “*chukah*,” that the Satan (*yetzer hara*) ridicules because of seemingly inherent contradictions. According to the *midrash*, they are: 1. *yibum*: the Torah prohibits a man from marrying his brother’s wife except when the brother dies leaving no children; 2. *kilayim*: the Torah prohibits the mixing of wool and linen together, yet permits one to wear a linen garment with wool *tzitzit*; 3. the *seir hamishtaleach* (scapegoat on Yom Kippur): one who leads the goat to its death becomes impure yet the goat serves as an atonement for others; 4. *parah adumah*: a heifer that defiles the garments of those involved in the process yet purifies a *tamei* garment (in the language of the *midrash*).¹⁶

Another *midrash* (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:8; *Pesikta D’Rav Kahana* 4:7) relates that a non-Jew told Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that the ritual of *parah adumah* seems like witchcraft. In response Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai gave a rational explanation for the mitzvah; he then explained to his students that, “it is not the corpse that makes one impure nor the water that purifies. Rather the Holy One Blessed Be He declared. . . This is the *chukah* of the Torah.” The rules of *parah adumah* are indeed not rational but are decrees from God.

Similarly, *Yoma* 67b lists other *mitzvot* that the Satan belittles and tries to get the Jews to violate, including the prohibition against eating pork,¹⁷ and wearing *shatnez*, as well as *mitzvot* such as *chalitzah*, purifying the *metzora*, and sending the *seir hamishtaleach* down a cliff. Here too God responds: “I have decreed it and you have no right to question it.” The mitz-

vah of the *parah adumah* thus elicits mockery from the non-believer for two reasons—its apparent internal contradictions and its superficial resemblance to witchcraft.¹⁸

Despite all of the above, many Rishonim have offered reasons to explain the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. For example, Rashi (end of commentary to Bamidbar 19; see complete quote in *Torat Chaim* edition) quotes Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan (see *Tanchuma, Bamidbar 8*) who explains that the *parah adumah* atones for the Sin of the Golden Calf; he then links many of the specifics of the ritual to aspects of the sin. The *piyyut* “*Ein L’socha’ach*” by Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir in the *yotzer* for *Parashat Parah* correlates many aspects of the *parah adumah* and the Sin of the Golden Calf.

In all of Jewish history there have been only nine *parah adumot* (*Parah 3:5*)—one *parah* in the time of Moshe Rabbeinu, one in the time of Ezra, and seven during the Second Temple period. May we be privileged to see the tenth *parah adumah* brought by *Mashiach* speedily in our days. ■

Notes

1. The *parah adumah* is necessary to remove only one kind of *tumah*—*tumat met*. The corpse is called *avi avot hatumah* (a post-Talmudic term), and anyone who becomes *tamei* from a corpse is an *av hatumah*. Others examples of *av hatumah* do not require the use of a *parah adumah*.

2. A completely red cow is defined as the following: a cow that does not have two non-red hairs near each other or three non-red hairs anywhere else on its body (*Aruch Hashulchan Ha’atid, Taharot, 53:12-17*).

3. This raises the question as to whether the common term “red heifer” is the best translation of *parah adumah*. Heifer is defined as a young cow, usually understood to be less than three years old, while the *parah adumah* must be older. On the other hand, heifer implies that the cow has never given birth to a calf, and that is indeed a requirement of the *parah adumah*. The word *cow* may be used for older animals, as well as for one that has calved. It is therefore not clear which term is preferred.

Regarding the color of the cow, see Jacob Milgrom et al., *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, ed. Nahum Sarna (Philadelphia, 1990), 158. Relying on A. Brenner (“Color Terms in the Old Testament” *Jour-*

nal Studies of the Old Testament [1982]: 62-65), Milgrom writes that “Hebrew ‘*adom*,’ usually rendered ‘red’ probably means ‘brown’ [for which there is no Hebrew word]. Brown cows, of course, are plentiful, but one that is completely uniform in color, without specks of white or black or without even two black or white hairs, is extremely rare.”

4. See Yonatan Adler, “*Makom Sereifat Haparah Ha’adumah*,” *Tchumin* 22 (5762): 537-542 for impressive research in determining the precise location.

5. On these names, see *Aruch Hashulchan Ha’atid, Taharot 76:8*.

6. This *tumah* is not due to the person touching the clothing. Rather it is due to the fact that the clothing is subsidiary to him and become *tamei* when he does (Re’em to *Rashi 19:21*).

7. There is a debate as to whether the ashes themselves, before being placed in the water, cause *tumah*. The Mishnah (*Parah 9:7*) can be understood to mean that they do, and this is how Rashi (*Bechorot 23a*) understands it. Rambam (*Parah Adumah 15:4*) and others maintain that before being placed in the water, they do not cause *tumah*. See Kehati to *Parah 9:7*.

8. *Oznayim L’Torah* (Bamidbar 19:8 second, s.v. *v’hasoref*) suggests that *tumah* from sacrificial rites differs from *tumah* resulting from a dead corpse, in that the latter occurs immediately while the former sets in after the *avodah* one is performing is complete. This applies even if the *avodah* involves multiple actions. Thus, the same kohen can perform several of the activities associated with preparing the *parah adumah* without becoming *tamei* (*Torah Temimah* to Bamidbar 19:21 seems to disagree).

9. As is his style, Rashi (to Bamidbar 19:21) concisely summarizes the rabbinic interpretation of this verse.

10. *Aruch Hashulchan Ha’atid (Taharot 76:6)* asks how Rambam could argue that we cannot understand the verse literally because it’s illogical when the entire mitzvah is illogical. See *Aruch Hashulchan Ha’atid’s* comments.

11. *Kohelet 7:23-24*. The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6*) says that God did reveal the reason for *parah adumah* to Moshe. This means that it is not a random, meaningless edict, but that it really does have a rationale.

12. *The Aruch Hashulchan Ha’atid (Taharot 60:11)* points out that the fact that touching the *parah adumah* does not cause *tumah* while doing the mitzvot associated with it does is not the inexplicable aspect of the ritual because other sacrificial rites cause *tumah* as well. The *Sefer HaChinuch*

(397) explains that the inexplicable part is that it is performed outside of the Temple precinct, which is highly irregular for sacrificial rites. He further states that it is difficult to understand how the process causes *tumah* and yet the resultant product confers *taharah*.

13. He subsequently tries to provide a rationale. Similar to Rabbi Saadia Gaon (*Emunot Vedeot 2:10*), he states that depending on the circumstances something can be a positive or a negative force, such as a medicine that can cure the sick but harm a healthy individual. He then adds the following poetic statement: “This [the mitzvah of the red heifer] is not clear enough to really attain in this matter anything, but the love of holiness and the desire to acquire knowledge of hidden matters moves the quill to write.”

14. One may ask whether it is appropriate to attempt to understand the reason behind a *chok*, a much-discussed topic. In the *Kuzari*, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi writes that one should accept a *chok* as Divine will without attempting to understand its purpose. Rambam thought it imperative to look for reasons and stated: “Although all the *chukim* in the Torah are pure decrees, as we have explained at the end of *Meilah* (8:8), it is proper to contemplate them and for whichever *chukim* you can assign a reason, do so” (*Hilchot Temura 4:13*). True to his principles, in *Moreh Nevuchim* (3:47) Rambam suggests an explanation for *parah adumah*. Ramban (*Devarim 22:6*) says that there are two approaches—those who maintain that *mitzvot* can be simply Divine decrees with no reason and those who believe that all *mitzvot* have reasons; Ramban asserts that he agrees with the latter approach. *Shem Mishmuel (Chukat, 5672, p. 302)* writes that although the reason for *parah adumah* was not revealed, nonetheless, a person should search for and contemplate reasons for it to the best of his ability. Rabbi Yosef Chaim miBaghdad (*Od Yosef Chai, Chukat 100a*) says that a *chok* is unintelligible on the literal level, but is worth analyzing for its meaning on other levels (such as *remez, derash* and *sod*).

15. *Parashah Devar Torah, Chukat, 2004*.

16. Cf. *Bamidbar Rabbah 19:1*

17. Although the Gemara describes the prohibition against eating pork as a “*chok*,” many reasons for all aspects of the dietary laws have been offered. For a summary of some, see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Vayikra* (Jerusalem, 1985), 76-85.

18. See *Shem Mishmuel (Parashat Ki Tissa 5672, p. 227-228)*, who discusses two different types of *chukim*.

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