

NUMBERS

Lesson 23 - Chapter 19

Last week we discussed holiness; and I'm not sure I'm at more a loss for words, nor feel less adequate, than when discussing holiness. It is a much more expansive and controversial issue than one might have thought, isn't it? What makes it controversial is NOT that the Bible doesn't give us sufficient detailed and consistent information that well defines the essence and operation of holiness; but rather men have chosen to ignore and disregard entire sections of the Bible and take only from the remainder their definitions for **most** things.....holiness being one of them. So, the concept of holiness has been greatly watered down and made passive.

How did it strike you to learn that Numbers (and Exodus and Leviticus as well) explains that holiness and uncleanness can be transferred from a person to an object, from an object to another object, and from person to person.....by physical contact? Or that holiness can be dangerous? Or that only some people are authorized to have holiness and that those who are not are subject to grave consequences if they go ahead and contract holiness anyway. That is a hard teaching. But, let me remind you that we ARE reading the Bible not someone's commentary. It's there in full living color, blunt and unequivocal. It's really a matter of whether or not we accept what it says.

But be forewarned: we've not yet learned all the Bible has to say about holiness; nor does holiness stand alone as an attribute of God. Other factors like His omniscience, justice, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, and wrath.....to name just a few.....play roles and all work together. God never acts one dimensionally; that is, ONLY in justice or ONLY in mercy or ONLY in wrath. Yet, there is no way to understand each of these aspects of the Lord without untangling them, and then isolating and examining them as best we can. And, while holiness is simply asserted as fact in the New Testament, where we're going to find holiness **explained and defined** is in the Old Testament, primarily the Torah.

Because of the era the church has been immersed in for almost 2000 years.....an era that I believe is drawing to a close..... the mission of the church has generally been to grow through evangelizing. And, the job has been done, overall, quite well. Unfortunately, what seems to have suffered along the way is the maturation process (what Paul causes the "perfecting") of the individual Believer. Those who wish to move forward in deeper faith and knowledge haven't had a lot of encouragement or support. It's a little like a community with a burgeoning population that has focused on building excellent new Elementary Schools for the children; but as the children matriculated through each grade, so many resources were spent on the Elementary level that the community neglected to build a high school. So, at some point there was no choice but to repeat the same educational material over and over again, perhaps in

slightly different form and style in what passes for deeper enlightenment. The 15 year old effectively sits in the same classroom with the 10 year old, hearing the Elementary school level curriculum yet again. The Elementary material is not wrong or defective; but neither does it challenge and advance the child to the next natural level that is needed. As applied to Believers, the perfection process is stunted.

Yet, graduating into higher education brings with it its own set of anxieties and problems. When we are children, the rules are black and white, hard and fast, and instructions are basic. There is little room allowed, or tolerated (rightly so) for children to make value judgments on their own because FIRST the foundation must be well established for determining those values. Therefore, as most of us have already learned the basics of God's plan of Salvation, who Jesus is and what He expects of us, and what seems to lie ahead in the future, it is natural for us to leave behind the comforts of knowing but the primary colors, and turn our attention to the more difficult hues and tones of our faith.

The difficulty is that the black and white edges we were so used to begin to blur. The answers are not always apparent and succinct. Faith is much easier in the black and white stage than it is as we advance. This is why it is said that we must come to Jesus, in the beginning, as little children; be willing to begin with the basics and accept them as the truth that they are, with little questioning. But later we are fully expected to embrace the struggle to advance in Godly wisdom and understanding. For it is this struggle that keeps us glued to God and moving forward. And, in consideration of our current topic, holiness, we find that it is a whole lot easier to simply look holy, than to be holy

The problem with holiness is that while it is intrinsic to God's character it is not to ours. Men are only truly holy when God is near and endows us with HIS holiness. Now, it's not as though some effort on our part to attain and maintain holiness is not needed; it is. But, the effort is to be aimed at trusting God and following His plan, not making our own way. Korah, Datan, Aviram and their followers made a supreme effort, but the effort was in opposition to God's plan. Even though a measure of holiness was indeed attained because God's holiness is so powerful that it's mere proximity will automatically infect whatever is near with it, it was not attained in accordance with His plan. Therefore God's attribute of His justice came into play. And, according to God's justice, those rebels who attained this unauthorized holiness, against His rules and ordinances, felt His wrath and were destroyed. On the other hand, the Priests, who had been set-apart, and authorized, by God for holiness, attained that holiness legitimately and safely.

We're going to veer away from the holiness topic for a time, and in Numbers chapter 19 were going to find an intriguing discussion about a specific type of impurity, and what to do about it. Recall that impure and unclean is the same thing. So, as we leave the issue of holiness just keep this in mind: the holiness that is inside of you is God; He put Himself there. Further, that holiness CAN be defiled; the advent of Yeshua did not change how holiness operates. It is our job, as disciples of Yeshua, to see to it that His holiness that is housed within this temporary and imperfect sanctuary that is our body, is protected. And the beginning of doing that is being open to learn about what holiness actually is, according to the Bible.

Because of the evangelical church's renewed interest in prophetic happenings and the end times, most of us have at least heard of the Red Heifer and a group of Jews' constant search for a perfect one; this special red colored cow is needed when the long hoped-for Temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem. Well, here in Numbers 19 is where the purpose and the details of the Red Heifer ritual are pronounced. Although we must go through several verses of the ritual procedure before we get to its purpose, it turns out that it is all about decontaminating a person who has become unclean because they touched a human corpse.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 19 all

So much of what we have just read in this chapter (and previous ones) about these elaborate rituals cannot help but seem to us moderns as mumbo-jumbo; sorcery, stuff we expect some deep-jungle tribes of the Brazilian rain forest might perform. And, that is because we have set aside ritual as unimportant and unneeded and unintelligent. We don't see its value any more; in fact, we really don't like it and aren't at all comfortable talking about it. But contained within Biblical ritual is the visible picture of what is going on in an invisible realm.

Believe me, long before the church was around, Rabbis struggled with the words to explain just WHY ritual was performed, and WHAT actually occurred during these sacred procedures, just as we do. Did the blood and body parts of sacrificed animals take on supernatural qualities? Did sacred procedures done in exactly the right way and order create magic-like effects upon the people of Israel? Does bathing in water and saying the right words at the right time actually react with our flesh and our souls so as to remove whatever it is that has contaminated us and offended God? So as important as this chapter of Numbers and its details is, so is the need for us to take another step in understanding the Biblical principles surrounding ritual impurity.

I'd like to begin by quoting a brief story from the Talmud about a famous Rabbi who was asked to explain the very issue I just framed.

A heathen questioned Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, saying:

"The things you Jews do appear to be a kind of sorcery. A cow is brought, it is burned, it is pounded into ash, and its ash is gathered up. Then, when one of you gets defiled by contact with a corpse, two or three drops of the ash mixed with water are sprinkled upon him, and he is told, 'You are cleansed'".

Rabban Johanan asked the heathen: "Has the spirit of madness ever possessed you?" He replied, "No."

The Rabbi said: "Have you ever seen a man whom the spirit of madness possessed?"

The Heathen replied, "Yes."

The Rabbi said: "And what do you do for such a man?"

The Heathen replied, "Roots are brought, the smoke of their burning is made to rise about him, and the water is sprinkled upon him until the spirit of madness flees."

Rabban Johanan then said: "Do not your ears hear what your mouth is saying? It is the same with a man who is defiled by contact with a corpse; he, too, is possessed by a

spirit, the spirit of uncleanness, and Scripture says, 'I will make false prophets as well as the unclean spirit vanish from the land.'

Now, when the heathen left, Rabban Johanan's disciples said: " Our master, you put off that heathen with a mere reed of an answer, but what answer will you give to us?"

Rabban Johanan answered: "By your lives, I swear.....the corpse does NOT have the power by itself to defile, nor does the mixture of ash and water have the power by itself to cleanse. The truth is that the purifying power of the red cow is a decree from the Holy One. The Holy One said: 'I have set it down as a statute, I have issued it a decree. You are not permitted to transgress My decree. This is the ritual law.'

In essence the Rabbi is saying: I'm not entirely sure how the whole thing works, but I know that the cow has no magical power in itself, and I know that a corpse can't inherently defile anybody. In the end, we do this Red Cow purification procedure because God said to do it, and if we do so He will count us as purified and it is NOT permitted to do otherwise.

So the good Rabbi is denying that any kind of sorcery is involved. He readily admits that it all sure LOOKS like a mumbo-jumbo pagan exorcism.....but it's not. And, part of the reason it's not is that he says God has said that He has banished unclean spirits from the land of Israel, so it's impossible that the contaminated man could even HAVE an unclean spirit in him.

But what also throws the Rabbi off.....though it is not easily seen in this Talmud story.....is that there is a very strange paradox in Numbers 19 about the workings of the Red Heifer's ashes upon the defiled man who touched the corpse. Let's take a close look at what we call the Red Heifer Sacrifice and see just where that paradox lays.

The first thing we notice, in verse 2, is that the animal involved is a red cow, which we usually call a Red Heifer. This is, of course, a female animal. It is young, but older than a yearling and it has never been used for work; that is it has never been used for a common purpose (that is what it means by 'never been yoked'). This animal must also be unblemished as are all animals destined for ritual slaughter.

Next and most importantly we are told that the red cow must be taken OUTSIDE THE CAMP to be slaughtered. This represents the first element of the paradox. This Red Heifer, which is to be used as the primary ingredient in an especially important purification concoction, is going to be killed in an UNCLEAN place. Recall just what OUTSIDE THE CAMP means. The only ritually clean ground is INSIDE the camp. Inside the camp is where the Israelites live. In time, this area became more defined and actual measurements (city limits, if you would) were assigned. Do not confuse ritually CLEAN with ritually HOLY. The only ritually HOLY ground was within the Temple or Tabernacle courtyard, which lay at the center of the ritually CLEAN camp.

So somewhere outside the camp, in an unclean place, a special altar was erected. In point of fact "altar" is probably too strong of a word. This was merely a large, but common, wood fire-mound upon which the red cow was killed and burned up.

The general procedure was that a priest of high order (but not THE High Priest, who in our example in Numbers was Eleazar, son of Aaron) accompanied the red cow to the woodpile and officiated the ceremony. This priest would cut the throat of the cow and then gather some of its blood in a ceremonial vessel. He would then turn and face the door into the Sanctuary and sprinkle some blood with his finger, 7 times in the direction of the Sanctuary. Of course he was quite some distance away so a line of sight had to be established so that he could literally see the door into the Holy Place, that first chamber inside the Sanctuary.

After this the entire cow (every part of it) was burned up whole atop this huge bonfire. While the cow was being burned up the priest would throw cedar wood, hyssop (often called oregano), and a red-colored thread on top of it, to be consumed as well. In essence the wood, hyssop, and thread were being added to the mix.

Upon completing his task the priest had to remove his priestly garment and bathe in water. After putting on fresh garments he could re-enter the camp, but he remained in a ritually unclean state until the sun set, indicating the end of the current day and the beginning of the next. Whoever assisted him in this operation also had to remove and wash their garments, take a bath, and they, too, and remained in a state of impurity until the sun went down.

Next a man who had NOT participated in any of the ritual up to this point (and therefore was still ritually clean) was to gather up the ashes and put them in a designated place where they would be used to combine with water and thereby make the special purification liquid for use as it was needed. THIS man, in gathering the ashes, became defiled. So as with all the others involved, he had to wash his clothes and take a bath and remain in an unclean state until the sun set.

Because the level of impurity of contact with death (usually human death) was so great it could not only defile whomever or whatever touched it, it could even defile whomever or whatever came in close proximity. However that which actually came into contact with the dead body was contaminated with a **greater** degree of impurity than whatever was merely nearby.

The remedy for the impurity caused by a dead body was this mixture of ashes of the Red Heifer and water. The mixture was sprinkled on the home or building where this person died, and it was also sprinkled on whomever came into contact with that person. The sprinkling procedure occurred twice: the first time was on the 3rd day after the defilement, and the second time was on the 7th day after the defilement.

The defiled persons who had been properly sprinkled were then returned to a ritually pure status at the end of the 7th day, at which time they washed their clothes and bathed.

This was no light matter. Anyone who became defiled from a corpse and did NOT go through this ritual procedure was to be cut-off. We've talked about this term cut-off (**karet** in Hebrew) and you can go review previous lessons for more information. In a nutshell, generally a person who was cut-off lost his relationship with the people of Israel and more importantly, with the God of Israel. A critical question arises: why such a severe penalty? The answer for this drastic consequence is near the end of verse 20: the person who has been defiled by a dead body

and refuses God's provision to be made clean, "**has defiled the Lord's sanctuary**". God's holiness has been endangered and there is nothing more high-handed than to bring defilement into the dwelling place of YHWH. Keep that at the front of your mind as we continue because we'll revisit it.

To end the chapter, we are next told that the clean person who did the sprinkling of the ash and water mixture onto the defiled person now finds HIMSELF in an unclean state and then must, of course, wash his clothes, take a bath, and wait until the sun goes down.

Even more, anyone who is currently ritually clean and touches even a drop of this special purification water becomes unclean. And whomever or whatever touches that unclean person now becomes unclean. And that is the completion of the Red Heifer story.

Let me begin the examination of this startling and somewhat perplexing chapter at its end: notice that just as in the previous chapter concerning holiness (that holiness could be inadvertently transmitted from one thing made holy to another), so it is with impurity. Impurity can be inadvertently transmitted from one thing made unclean to another whether it is objects or people.

I remind you what I said at the outset today: you can be uncomfortable with this (you can even not like it very much) but here it is in black and white. This is not my interpretation. This is not taken from Hebrew Tradition. This is not human commentary. We are reading this directly from God's Word, the Bible. Therefore we are obligated to deal with it as it is and not simply try to wish it, or allegorize it, away as has been Christian habit for centuries.

So here we go. The Dictionary says that a paradox is a situation or statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd. And yet it is very likely true or factual. And the paradox of this Red Heifer sacrifice is this: everybody that has anything to do with its preparation, death, burning up, and gathering of its ashes becomes UNCLEAN. Did you catch that? People who are but following God's command in this ritual law of purification, begin in clean state but wind up becoming ritually impure. On the surface that makes no sense at all. Can it be that we have Yehoveh ORDERING some holy and/or clean people to INTENTIONALLY become ritually defiled?

The unclean person (from touching a corpse) is made CLEAN from these ashes of the Red Heifer.....but the **clean** persons who perform the ritual and apply the ashes are made **unclean**. As the Rabbis say about this procedure: the same ashes that purify the defiled also defile the pure. How is this possible? This is so completely opposite from all of the other sacrifices and their effects. The other sacrifices atone and often make clean. Typically, handling a sacrifice properly automatically brings a measure of holiness with it. In fact the average citizen must turn his sacrifice over to the priest to be put onto the Brazen Altar because only a priest is holy enough to get near the Altar. Even the animal is considered holy (a higher status than merely clean) the moment the worshipper determines to offer it as a sacrifice, otherwise it wouldn't even be allowed into the Holy Precinct. So, what gives here?

One of the difficulties in grasping the Red Heifer sacrifice, regular sacrifices, and the Temple

rituals is the real meaning of the term "holy". The term in Hebrew is **kodesh** or **kadosh**; and it REALLY simply means to be separated away or set apart. When my wife is getting ready to do laundry she carefully separates types of material as well as light versus dark loads. It is perfectly within the meaning of **kadosh** or **kodesh** to apply that Hebrew term to her separating one kind of color or cloth from another. But did she make the dark load "holy" and the light load something else? No.

It's the CONTEXT of the use of the term **kadosh** or **kodesh** that matters; is it used in a spiritual/religious context or something else? A person could be **kadosh** for destruction; or they could be **kedesh** for Satan. But both of those things are negative. Remember: holy is NOT a Hebrew word; it is an ENGLISH word that has been used as a translation for **kodesh** or **kadosh**.

It's ONLY when something is **kadosh** for GOD (separated away specifically for service to the Lord) that it carries with it the sense of "holy" as we think of "holy". Thus the Red Heifer isn't so much "holy" as it is simply **kadosh**, set apart; but it is set apart not for service to God (like in a standard Temple sacrifice) but rather for destruction. But this destruction will be used by God to make His people clean again. So it would be a mistake to apply the term "holy" as it is thought of in Christianity to the Red Heifer.

Another key to understanding the Red Heifer ritual is to notice that the Torah calls this sacrifice, in Hebrew, a **Hata'at**. If you've been studying with me for a while this is not the first time you've heard that term, **Hata'at**. That is the Red Heifer ritual belongs in the general classification of the **Hata'at** category of sacrifice. Recall that early in our Leviticus study that we spent a lot of time with the various classifications of sacrifices and their precise God-ordained purposes; they are deep and complex, so I'll only talk about the parts of the **Hata'at** sacrifice that are pertinent to the Red Heifer ritual.

Most Bible translators will render the Hebrew term **Hata'at** as a "sin offering". But that is rather ambiguous and completely misses the purpose of it. **Hata'at** is better translated as "purification offering". In other words while it may well be a sin that eventually leads to the need for this **Hata'at**, the effect of the **Hata'at** is to decontaminate, to purify.

In the standard **Hata'at** sacrifice the flesh of the animal may not be eaten, and the animal must be burned outside the camp....just as with our Red Heifer ritual. But there are significant differences between the Red Heifer kind of **Hata'at** and the standard one. For instance the blood of the Red Heifer is **not** to be splashed on the altar. Rather the blood is to remain IN the cow so that it is burned up as part of the ashes. This is because a bedrock principle of the sacrificial system is that blood is central to the entire process.

The **Hata'at**....the regular Levitical purification offering..... is a most unique sacrifice because one of its effects is to make its handlers and officials impure. And of course we find this exact thing also applies to the Red Heifer ritual here in Numbers 19. What a strange thing; what could possibly be the reason that God would design a sacrifice that generates impurity? Well here is the reason for this: the sacrificial animal (in our case the Red Heifer) purifies by means of effectively **absorbing** the defiled person or object's impurities. The **Hata'at** sacrificial animal

behaves like a spiritual sponge. And since the **Hata'at** sacrificial animal serves its purpose by soaking up the certain types of contamination it was meant to absorb, IT thus becomes contaminated with an enormous amount of impurity and therefore must be destroyed. It is so dangerously impure that it must be destroyed AWAY from anything holy; it must even be destroyed away from anything clean (the camp of Israel). It cannot possibly be offered up on the Holy Altar in such a condition, and so it is destroyed far away from anything holy, on a common fire, outside the camp. In fact technically, the **Hata'at** sacrifice is NOT offered up to God. It is set apart for a purpose (it is **kadosh** for a purpose) but that purpose is NOT to be set apart for God. Only things specifically set apart (**kadosh**) FOR GOD can be offered to the Lord.

The concept of set apart for common purposes versus set apart for God also comes into play with the use of the fire that is used to burn up the animal. The fire of the Brazen Altar is a **positive** kind of fire that transforms and purifies because it is used to offer up smoke to the Lord. The common wood fire that consumes the Red Heifer is only meant to destroy; it is meant to get rid of whatever is put on it because it is dangerous and defiled, not unlike the burning of medical waste.

We recently discussed that God's holiness is so powerful, like unsealed nuclear radiation, that everything that comes near to it is irradiated with holiness and so attains a measure of holiness itself. It is the same kind of effect with the red cow that becomes so full of the worst sort of impurity from soaking up the defilement of others, that everything that comes near it, every object and every human, is irradiated with uncleanness.

Now let me point out something else quite unique about the Red Heifer sacrifice: it is NOT the one who performs the ritual sacrifice that receives its benefit. In fact it is the same way for ANY **Hata'at** sacrifice: the blood of the animal is NOT used to purify the worshipper or atone for him. That is, in the regular **Hata'at** sacrifice the blood of the animal is splashed on the Altar and in certain instances on other Sanctuary furnishings because the animal blood is performing a purification function. In the Red Heifer sacrifice the blood of the animal becomes part of the ashes and, when mixed with water, winds up being splashed on the **person** who is in need of decontamination and purification.

In other words the foundational purpose of the standard **Hata'at** sacrifice is to use the blood of the animal for the purpose of purifying the SANCTUARY (the Tabernacle or Temple) and it's sacred objects. It is NOT used to purify the one who brings the offering, nor is it offered up to Yehoveh.

OK. Let me put a couple of pieces together for you. Recall what it says in verse 20: that if anyone does NOT purify themselves (with the Red Heifer ashes mixed with water) from the uncleanness of death (due to touching a dead body) that they will be cut-off; they will have their relationship with the congregation of Israel ended and they will have their relationship with God terminated. WHY this severe penalty? Because the consequence of a person contracting uncleanness from a corpse is that it defiles God's sanctuary. It is the defilement of God's sanctuary that is the largest issue; and therefore it is the defilement of God's sanctuary that must be remedied.

Bottom line to all this: the ashes of the Red Heifer (when mixed with living water) are designed to purify the Sanctuary of God. And it has long been understood within Judaism that the people of God are in some mysterious way ALSO sanctuaries of God (this concept is NOT a new Christian invention). That is their ONLY use. No wonder the good Rabbi in our story had such a hard time explaining just WHY ashes that were obviously meant to purify the Temple of God were for some illusive reason also used in a ritual to purify a human being from the worst kind of contamination there was, contact with death. The Rabbi did not understand what we now know in hindsight: that eventually, once the Messiah had finished giving up His life to atone for ours, that God would abandon the Sanctuary that men had made for Him, and make the MEN themselves His new sanctuary in a fully literal way.

The ritual picture that emerges here is to connect the Sanctuary of God with men. Are we not told that WE as Believers are now the Temple of God? And indeed does not the Holy Spirit, who is God, literally live within these fragile tents we call bodies? Then these tents must be purified and cleansed to be suitable for God to dwell there. Further just like for the ancient Tabernacle and Temple, simply being in proximity to people and in contact with people, and existing in a defiled world means that the Sanctuary will constantly be under bombardment of impurity. Therefore a regular purging of those impurities is mandatory.

Recall Yeshua's crucifixion; when the Roman soldier wanted to determine if Jesus was actually dead, or just passed out, he reached up with a spear and pierced his side. And what flowed out? Blood AND water. Blood we would expect, but why water? Because blood atones, and water purifies, and both actions are needed. Blood removes sin, water removes uncleanness. Two different things, two different spiritual elements, but Yeshua was sufficient for both. What was the purification mixture of Numbers chapter 19? Blood and water. The blood was in the ashes of the Heifer, mixed with the water of purification, and applied to the person contaminated with death.

We'll move into another area next time.