

Parashat Parah  
March 28, 1970

## “THE RELEVANCE OF IRRELEVANCE”

### I

The temper of the contemporary spirit inclines towards relevance. “Relevance” has become the major test of concepts, systems, and commitments in our times. Part of the campus revolution was powered by a revulsion against the irrelevance of many courses, which seemingly had nothing at all to do with life as it is now lived. In politics, a new breed of young person has been taking over, rejecting the older table-thumping, flag-waving type of politician. In religion too, or especially, there has been a call for relevance, for going “where the action is.”

I confess my complicity in this call for making ourselves relevant to contemporary issues. For too long, we of the Orthodox community have acted as if Torah was an isle of refuge, and the less bridges we build to the world at large the safer we will be.

### II

By this criterion of relevance, however, much of traditional Jewish teaching becomes problematical. Consider, for instance, an extreme but illuminating example: the Biblical law of the *parah adumah*, or Red Heifer, that was sacrificed in order to purify a person who was *tamei*, levitically impure, because of contact with a human corpse.

The ritual had to be performed outside the camp, the cow had to be completely red with not more than two hairs of some other color, its ashes mixed with hyssop and cedarwood and scarlet, the whole thing dissolved in fresh water, and there had to be sprinkling on the third day and the seventh day... How awesomely exotic all this is to technological, secularized man of the late twentieth century! The *parah adumah* may intrigue us, but does it say anything to us?

To complicate matters, the Rabbis seem to give the ritual much more importance than is endurable to contemporary man with his standards of relevance. בשעה שעלה משה למרום שמע קולו של הקב"ה שיושב ועוסק בפרשת פרה אדומה ואומר הלכה בשם אומרו (במד"ר י"ט-ז). When Moses went up to the heights of Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, he heard the voice of the Holy One. What was God saying at this crucial moment in history? Here the Midrash describes Him in anthropomorphic terms, as if the Lord were sitting over an open *Gemara*, and with typical Jewish sing-song studying the *halakhah* of *parah adumah*, reciting a law in the name of the one who originally propounded it: “Elazar My son says such and such...”

Had God nothing better to do than to study the laws of an archaic ritual, of an antiquated and primitive ceremony? Did the Rabbis have nothing more significant to ascribe to divine concern? In a word: isn't all of the Red Heifer really an irrelevancy? And what of so many other commandments and Talmudic passages?

### III

It is impossible to cover the whole field of Jewish religious literature. Let us therefore restrict ourselves to the most blatantly irrelevant institution, that of the Red Heifer, and accept it as a paradigm for all others.

Let us affirm at the outset that the entire question of the *parah adumah* certainly is relevant, although in its exact halakhic form it is not applicable to our days, nor has it been germane since the destruction of the Temple some 2,000 years ago. However, the law of the Red Heifer is full of symbolic insights and suggestions that are most certainly relevant if they are understood properly.

For one thing, it says a great deal to us who live in an age when faith as such has been thrown into crisis. It is true that according to the prediction of most knowledgeable observers and futurists, the next decade will probably witness a resurgence of faith, a new search for transcendence, for that which is beyond the narrow limitations of our particular society and civilization. However, the decade that has just ended was one in which the crisis of faith was so far-reaching that even theologians spoke quite openly and frankly about the "obituary" of God כביכול. And in an age of this sort, when keepers of the faith have faltered, and prophets have failed to speak, nothing can be more significant and relevant than an affirmation of faith.

The Talmud tells us that the law of *parah adumah* was given as a *kapparah*, atonement, for the sin of *egel ha-zahav*; we were commanded about the ritual of purification by means of the Red Heifer to atone for the sin of dancing about the Golden Calf when Moses was delayed in coming down from Sinai. What is the relationship between the two?

The great Hasidic teacher, R. Menachem Mendel of Vorke, revealed the inner connection between them. The episode of the Golden Calf was primarily that of a failure of faith. The people lost faith in God and their confidence in Moses was shaken, as a result of which they fashioned the Golden Calf. And the only way to atone for a lapse from faith is by its reaffirmation; you can make up for faithlessness only by more faithfulness. Hence, the law of the Red Heifer, with its paradoxical, apparently non-rational principle that the ashes of the heifer defile the pure even as they purify the defiled. To accept the principle of *parah adumah* is an act of faith, and only by acts of faith can we overcome the crisis of faith in a faithless society.

So that the reading of *parah adumah* certainly is relevant to contemporary man in this age of religious crisis. It is a challenge to build on the remnants of faith a new structure of commitment to God.

### IV

A second symbolism is even more relevant. The Red Heifer's ashes were used to purify one who had been defiled levitically because of contact with a corpse. *Turnah*, defilement, is the halakhic expression of the Torah's aversion to death. Purification (*taharah*) is the Jewish expression of the love of life. The *parah adumah* is, therefore, a symbol of Judaism's and our affirmation of life.

Surely, every one will agree that a firm dedication to life and the principles of life is very much in place in our times. Once, not too long ago, American and Russian strategists spoke openly of "over-kill," the concept of destroying whole populations in nuclear warfare. Now, in the spirit of peace that prevails throughout the world, military strategists no longer discuss such things openly. But who will deny that such matters are of vital interest and the subjects of constant planning in the basements, if not the public relations departments, of both the Kremlin and the Pentagon? At a

time of this sort, we read the *parah adumah*, and we rededicate ourselves to life. Death and war are -- *tamei*, corrupt.

However, it would be wrong of us to make the military the scapegoats in this matter. The espousal of death is not, unfortunately, confined merely to sinister forces in the military and in the weapons industry. By a curious inversion of idealism, killing has become the ideal for those who are otherwise great liberals and who campaign for peace and life. I refer to feticide or abortion. Let it be clear at once that Judaism does not have an either/or answer to the question of abortion, but that its response differs with each individual case; it is a modified and qualified judgment according to clear halakhic guidelines, and not issued in blanket denial or affirmation as part of an ideological campaign. Yet that is precisely what has happened in our times. The liberal establishment, egged on by radical groups, has bedeviled the problem of prenatal life and death by sloganeering. The right to kill the fetus has been claimed in the name of women's liberation, in the name of conscience, in the name of individual liberty and rights, especially privacy. The lovers of freedom in our times have been transformed into the advocates of death.

An even more horrifying example of this ideological inversion has recently come to public attention. Radical groups have become "urban guerilla bombers," attempting to tear down society and build a better one in its place -- by indiscriminate bombings. They will have peace even if they have to wage war in order to get it. There shall be freedom for all, even if they must impose their will upon the majority in order to attain it. There will be justice for the masses, even if they have to break every law in order to secure it. They will improve the quality of life, even if they have to bomb office buildings and residences and kill indiscriminately in order to accomplish it.

At a time of this sort, we of the Jewish tradition declare clearly and unequivocally that, without being pacifist, we do not brook this contempt for life. The portion of *parah adumah* is read specifically before Passover, because while life must often be sacrificed to attain freedom, it must be the life of the one who wants freedom -- not that of someone else. Freedom must be attained by respecting and cherishing life, not by treating it with contempt. History has given us all too many examples of "freedom" achieved by means of an indiscriminate blood-bath. The French Revolution and the Russian revolution are good examples of this paradox. This we cannot, do not, accept. *Parah adumah, taharah*, express the love and affirmation of life, and that is where we take our stand. Life must be free, but not cheap. Certainly, that is "relevance."

### V

In addition to the relevancies of faith and life, the concept of purity itself is relevant to the concerns of contemporary man. Surely, this is self-evident if we refer to purity in its material or natural sense. The great issue that unites radicals and reactionaries, conservatives and liberals, in American life today is that of ecology, the purity of our air and water, and the purity of our bodies jeopardized by overmedication in this over-anxious and hyper-active American society. *Taharah* speaks of purity certainly in this fundamental area.

But purity is important in a spiritual sense as well. Taking the concept of *taharah* in its largest significance, it speaks to us about the purity of mind and heart and intention. It was Hasidism which most emphatically joined the concept of *taharah* to prayer, and told us that prayer must be with pure intention, with *taharat ha-machshavah*, purity of thought. Hasidism was aware of a

remarkable perversity of the human mind: wherever the human spirit strives for concentration and purity, the mind opens up a little door which allows it to be flooded with distraction and even with evil and immoral thoughts. But at times of worship, at times of prayer, this is poisonous. Think of it when you next recite the Amidah – after a heroic beginning, in which you determine to concentrate on the words with out distraction, your mind suddenly is besieged with מחשבות זרות, “strange thoughts,” whether erotic or other. Purity of mind must be attained by a stubborn act of will. Prayer must mean the *total* concentration of heart and mind in purity towards our Creator; otherwise we are, in the language of Hasidism, *ke'omed bi'levush sak lifnei ha-melekh*, as if appearing before the divine King in indecent garments, in a dirty sack. So the ritual of the Red Heifer speaks to us about inwardness, about the pureness of our heart, about vibrant spirituality.

But purity must also be taken in a moral sense. What a commentary on our times that even Orthodox teachers often feel inhibited and uncomfortable about mentioning the word “chastity” in public! So far have we sunk, so have we deteriorated morally, that chastity is looked upon as a quaint and vaguely archaic idea that certainly means little to modern men and women. Yet if this marks me as a man of the past, so be it: I speak with the confidence that such ideals will leap-frog over the deteriorated present to a brighter future, when such principles will once again become the common heritage of decent mankind.

The disrepute into which moral purity or *taharah* has fallen is part of another trend of idealistic inversion that has accompanied the New Morality in its rise in our generation. Young people have observed the adult established society and they have noticed our hypocrisies -- and God knows that they are many. What we accept as a matter of course, they will not suffer or endure or tolerate. They have brought to our attention, in most irritating fashion, the gap between what we preach and what we practice, between our moral codes and the realities of our mores.

In opposition to our “hypocrisy” they counter-pose their “honesty.” They will no longer tolerate the double standard which we have learned to accept as a matter of course. There must be only one standard, they maintain, and it must be an honest one for the New Society. But how do they propose to abolish this gap between the real and the ideal? Not by transforming the real so as to approach the ideal, but by cutting down the ideal so that the real is automatically fulfilled. If living by a “code morality” produces little hypocrisies and grand failures, then the conclusion is that code morality is “pharisaic” and must be abandoned. If rules are broken, then abandon the rules -- and no one will have to break them. Honesty will prevail in society by throwing out the “Old Morality” and allowing everyone to “do his own thing,” as long as there is “love” and “meaningful personal relations.” As a result, there will be no guilt feelings, no rule breaking, and -- lo and behold! -- perfect honesty.

Here again, Judaism will not abide by this ideological inversion, by having an excess of moral zeal and perfectionism lead us into moral nihilism. An honesty that results from abandoning purity, is a perversion of truth. An honesty that comes from saying that all is permitted, is an honesty of Sodom and Gamorah. We too believe in honesty, in truth, in *emet* -- but only if it issues out of *taharah*, purity. For this is what we say every Shabbat: וטהר לבנו לעבדך באמת, “purify our hearts so that we may serve Thee in truth and honesty.” For us, purity is a way-station to honesty.

If the study of the laws of the Red Heifer can teach us this value of purity, it certainly *is* relevant.

Yet, all this having been said, I concede that the above are only symbolic suggestions of what is fundamentally an irrelevant ritual; they are sidelong glances into the matter of the Red Heifer, and

## THE RELEVANCE OF IRRELEVANCE

by extension into much of the content and teaching of Judaism. We cannot avoid the charge: *parah adumah* has not only been irrelevant for 2,000 years because of the absence of a Temple, but it just does not articulate with the whole life-style of modern man.

That is precisely the point that I wish to make: thank God for a little irrelevance in life! Life is empty and shallow without a necessary dose of irrelevancy.

Of course, I do not mean to say that we must strive to be irrelevant. By and large, Judaism must speak out on issues that concern the average man and woman, and must not make its judgment so arcane, so remote, so esoteric and exotic, that it alienates people who seek the judgment of God, the word of the spirit, a whisper of faith in these terrible times. But there comes a time when the call for relevance turns shrill and superficial. Even Rabbis who call out for relevance betray little learning and less wisdom when they make it appear that every step, every mitzvah, every law must be immediately made meaningful to every individual in his particular circumstances, and that if it is not -- it may be safely abandoned.

Religion, education, life itself, must go beyond the needs of the moment and the limitations of the hour. Without the recollections of the past and the dreams of the future -- including the irrelevancies -- man is a prisoner of the clock, his mind racing round in endless circles like the minute hand, his spiritual slumber punctuated only by the panic of alarm bells, which awaken him to hectic hours which are as meaningless as the hours he spends in sleep.

The "now" generation is an impoverished generation. It lacks roots, it lacks goals. How can we expect it to hold up a vision of a better society to replace our present corrupt one, when it has failed to look to the past? Any dimension goes in both directions, and a generation which knows only "now," which is not aware of a past and a history and a tradition, cannot be expected to think of a future and a destiny and a fate. He who lives only for the relevant misses the dimension of depth in his life. At best, he is a brilliant provincial limited by a parochial modernism. He may make money, but he does not understand its meaning. His intellectual horizons are bounded by the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, or perhaps by Time, Life, Look and Fortune, or in the best circumstances, by Marcuse and MacLuhan. But by his exacting standards of relevance, by his fanaticism for the immediate, for the "now," he denies himself that which can sweeten life, that which can give him the framework and perspective in which to view life. Without a dose of irrelevancy in his life, man wallows in the swamp of his delusions about human self-sufficiency, and lives out his paltry years without a touch of transcendence, the awareness of something ineffably precious above and beyond him.

For that is indeed the whole point of the value, indeed, the very relevance of irrelevancy. When is it, according to the Rabbis, in their imaginative parable, that Moses heard the voice of the Lord studying the portion of *parah adumah*? -- when he went up to the "heights." It is only in the near-silence on top of the mountain that one can understand with proper perspective what goes on in the teeming, screaming valley. Those who are caught up in the fray down below, cannot see in true proportion what is happening to themselves. For this, one must go *la-marom*, up to the heights, even there where, from the narrower vantage of the valley, the Lord speaks in irrelevancies.

How shocked Moses must have been when, according to this Talmudic legend, he heard the Lord speaking of the Red Heifer. Here he has just led the Israelites, out of Egypt, and they already are planning a pagan orgy; enemy nations like Moab and Edom and Amalek are ready to pounce on him; rebellion is brewing in his own ranks with Korah, Datan and Avirarn -- and the Lord chants his Talmudic passage, quoting a *halakhah* in the name of R. Eliezer about the exact age of the

## THE RELEVANCE OF IRRELEVANCE

*parah adumah*. But that is just the point. It is only in the context of the "irrelevant" that we can appreciate the relevant. It is what permits us to judge the current, evaluate the contemporary, assess the new.

That, indeed, is the difference between a truly "liberal education" and a trade school training, between one who is totally journalistic, and one who is well-read in the classics as well -- the difference is whether we aim to produce a wise man or what the French call an *idiot-savant*: one who is brilliant in his own trade or profession, but ignorant in everything else, and therefore one who cannot properly evaluate his achievements even in his very own discipline.

### VII

When, therefore, we consider even as remote a teaching of Judaism as the Red Heifer, we do attain a number of relevant insights, dealing with the importance of faith, the affirmation of life, the resurgence of purity in an age into which it has fallen into disrepute. Certainly the other commandments, exotic as they may sometimes appear, can be appreciated even more for their relevance. But above all else, its very irrelevancy can be extremely relevant. The *parah adumah* allows us to step out of the maelstrom of the now and reintegrate ourselves into an ancient tradition of *kedushah* and *taharah*, holiness and purity -- and if that be fiction, so much the better: with our fiction we shall transform the world and redesign it in a far better way than it exists at present.

Its irrelevancy tells us of the value of ideals, and the value of visions as well. It gives us a perspective and a proportion which we might not attain otherwise.

So, therefore, let us never belittle irrelevancy. Without it, the relevant itself would be meaningless. The totally relevant is so often irrelevant. And the irrelevant, properly understood, can become urgently relevant.

### VIII

Yes, even the Holy One sits and studies the portion of the Red Heifer. Were I privy to divine secrets, had I had -- to continue along the lines of the Rabbinic parable -- a secret glimpse at the private diary of God, I would say that He is not terribly worried about the burning issues that agitate our minds and hearts and fill the columns of our newspapers. These matters He no doubt has well in hand. But He is sitting and studying the laws of the Red Heifer! And out of the *parah adumah*'s relevancies and irrelevancies, out of its *emunah* and *taharah*, out of its faith and purity and love of life, its vision and perspective, He shall create the tissue of a life that will be relevant for us and our children after us, in years and centuries to come.

Even as Moses, reaching the heights, was privileged to hear the Divine interest in what appears as irrelevant, so when we return to study such "irrelevancies," we too shall learn to lift ourselves *la-marom*, to the very heights of Judaism and humanity.