

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Kitissa

There are times you read texts in the Torah and you just have to scratch your head and say, “I don’t get it.” For a text that is supposed to be the seat of all that is sacred in the western world, you have to wonder about texts that appear, as if out of nowhere that instruct the reader not to mix linen and wool, or to declare a woman unclean after giving birth to a girl for twice as long as she would be if she had given birth to a boy. One of my favorites is the command to bathe in the ashes of a burnt red heifer before leaving a cemetery. There are no reasons given in text. Sages across time debate the value of these texts, all of which can only be understood through metaphor or allegory. The most common bottom line is that it has something to do with self-discipline. There are things you don’t do, because you shouldn’t do them. If you know me at all, then you know that this answer just begs me to be more challenging (by the way, that is not always a good thing, so boys and girls be careful before you try this at home).

This week we meet the Golden Calf. Moses took too long coming down the mountain from his visit with God. Moses, the one who spoke to the people on behalf of God seemed missing. The people were frustrated and afraid. They so they had Aaron fashion a calf of Gold for them because that had been the idol that they stood before and prayed while in servitude in Egypt. Of course, this upsets God results in God and Moses having a wonderful argument before Moses descends (Chapter 32). It has always troubled me that God expected the people to sit and be patient for forty days with no word from God or their leader. It was as if Israel was being set up to fail, which, of course, they did. As I pondered this, I had a thought about the red heifer command that we will meet in the book of Numbers. How odd is it that the ashes of the Golden calf will be ground up and the people will be forced to drink them as a punishment here, but in Numbers the ashes of the calf (red heifer) are purifying. According to the text, one is to bathe in the ashes of a red heifer every time one leaves a cemetery, and this is a law for all time. Of course we do not perform this ritual anymore, and when a perfectly unblemished red heifer was found several years back (since a partially red heifer would not serve the purpose), the community to which it was offered rejected it as being unnecessary. Why would this law for all time become superfluous over time? How is it that the red heifer’s ashes and the golden calf’s ashes might be related in theme?

It did not take me long to realize that this was not an original thought. I found a piece in Midrash Tankhumah (the longest running collection of commentaries) that already addressed this phenomenon. “A maid’s child once dirtied the royal palace. The King said, “Let his mother come and clean up her child’s filth.” By the same token, God says, “Let the Heifer atone for the deed of the Calf.” First I was disappointed that my query was not original. After getting over it (since my father always taught me that no thought is truly original), I had a “Wow!” moment, even while the Midrash moves on in a direction than my head was going. The Golden Calf existed because the people lacked faith, in the absence of something tangible in which to worship. Today, in the midst of our suffering or despair, we must know, unlike our biblical ancestry, that God is there, even when not visible or tangible. The red heifer reminds us that God is not tangible, but still present – the message we did not understand when fashioning the Golden Calf. And, while I know that defining what God is (such that we can know God is present) is blasphemy, I know this: We are not alone, even in moments of despair and fear, so long as we have faith that someone – something is out there offering strength and comfort. That someone or something manifests itself in our lives as friends, family and community. Whatever God is, God’s work is done through us, and we have to have enough faith to know that we have the power to create miracles for each other, even when no source of that power is visible.

Ultimately, the text of Torah may or may not have intended this dichotomy. But the midrash makes it clear that whatever mess we create through lack of faith, the remembrances of faith (even absent the ashes) will see us through our healing and our restoration. And we, as God's partners need to be the ones to exemplify that faith does have substance and that this strength and power is real. We are the ashes of the red heifer that shower those in need with support, even while they may still be stuck in the shadows of the golden calf. It is our job to restore faith to those who, in their own suffering have lost it. And this faith is not defined by religious dogma or doctrine – it is the faith that assures us that whatever or whomever is to be credited with the magnificence of creation – that we have the same access to that power as anyone else around us. No one gets left out. May we find ourselves faithful to this call and faithful that others will respond to it, as well. Shabbat Shalom.