

Parashat Ki Tissa · Shabbat Para
18th of Adar, 5783 · March 10th, 2023

Shabbat Times (Cambridge)

Candle Lighting:	5:26 pm
Minḥa:	5:25 pm
Shaharit:	9:00 am
Latest Shema:	8:59 am
Latest Tefilla:	9:57 am
Minḥa:	5:05 pm
Ma'ariv/Havdala:	6:28 pm

Announcements

Kiddush and **se'udah shelishit** this week are sponsored by the Shabbat Fund.

If you are interested in sponsoring in the future, please contact Adina (kiddush) or Raphi (se'uda shelishit).

A Tale of Two Cows

On this shabbat, we read both Parashat *Ki Tissa* – our weekly Torah portion – and Parashat *Para*, the third of the four special *parshiyot* read in the month of Adar. As it happens, both have something to do with cattle. Parashat *Ki Tissa* contains the well-known episode of the Golden Cow^[1], in which the Israelites fall into idolatry at the foot of Mount Horeb. Parashat *Para*, for its part, outlines a ritual by which Israelites who have contracted death-impurity can become purified. Beyond their association with cows, the only strong connection between these two *parashot* to a modern audience might be their remoteness. The first relates a sin that modern-day monotheists – particularly those of a rationalist bent – struggle to understand, and typically see as simple to avoid. The other describes a rite that has not been practically relevant for Jewish observance in nearly two millennia.

I want to suggest that there may be more connecting these two readings than inapplicable bovinity. First, let's take a look at the details of the purification ritual in Parashat *Para*, found in *Homes̥h haPequdim* (Numbers), chapter 19. Initially, an unblemished red cow which has never borne a burden must be brought to Moses by the community. The cow is then given to El'azar the priest, who must take it outside the camp and slaughter it there. Given the severe prohibition on slaughtering pure outside the sanctuary (Lev. 17:3-4), this is surprising. El'azar must then take its blood with his finger, and “sprinkle some of its blood toward the Tent of Meeting seven times” (Num. 19:4). We might be used to this sort of action from the ritual of *Yom haKippurim*, the Day of Atonement. However, unlike that rite (or the parallel rites of the sin-offerings for a high-priest and the whole people in Lev. 4), El'azar does not sprinkle the blood inside the Tent, before the Ark of the Covenant or before the *parokhet* that hangs in front of it. Rather, he sprinkles it in the direction of the Tent – indicating that he is *outside* the Tent. In fact, given that no instruction to return to the sanctuary courtyard is specified, and that he is only to return to the encampment after he has purified himself at the conclusion of the ritual, El'azar is probably *entirely outside the sancta* when he performs this blood-sprinkling. A rite which otherwise occurs only within or just before the Holy of Holies is thus taken entirely outside sacred space. The sprinkling toward the Tent of Meeting only serves to underscore the priest's *distance* from the sanctuary and the Divine presence manifest there.

After sprinkling the blood, El'azar is to burn the entire cow “before his eyes” – he must see it burn. He is to toss cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson dye into the flames. He is then impure; another, pure man must collect the ashes of the mixture. These ashes are then mixed with water to become *me nidda*, “waters of casting,” which are sprinkled upon people and objects that have contracted death-impurity in order to purify them.

[1] For the argument that 'egel does not necessarily designate a young male bovine, and can refer to mature bovines, see Naphtali Meshel (2014), *The 'Grammar' of Sacrifice: A Generativist Study of the Israelite Sacrificial System in the Priestly Writings with a 'Grammar' of Σ*, Oxford UP, p. 58.

ZA'AKAH

The Za'akah peer-support hotline is available as a resource for our community for those who feel they need to talk to someone on shabbat. It is not a substitute for professional crisis intervention. Call, text, or whatsapp +1-888-4 ZAAKAH (+1-888-492-2524)

Weeknight Shiurim

Join us for weeknight shiurim, taught by your fellow community members! Open to the entire community.

Monday, 8:30pm

Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in Search of Man*

With Mike Frank, via zoom

We are looking for more shiurim!

If you are interested in teaching (whether once or regularly), please reach out to [Mike](#) or [Theo](#)

Write for the CanTab!

If you're interested in writing a dvar torah, please be in touch with Education Co-Chairs Mike Frank and Theo Motzkin, or sign up at tiny.cc/cantab

/kan tab/

1. The name of the shabbat parasha sheet and newsletter of the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel; if you want to keep tabs on the minyan, now you can.
2. An allusion to the people who live in Cambridge, MAssachusetts: Cantabrigians.
3. An attempt to open up a can of torah issues.

Let us now turn to the episode of the Golden Cow. Having grown impatient waiting for Moses to descend the mountain, they mob Aaron and press him into making them a bovine figure out of their own golden jewelry. They then declare, "these are your gods, O' Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4) and proceed to offer sacrifices and celebrate before it. God then tells Moses, at the mountain's summit: "Go, descend, for your people which you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely" (32:7). Since the Israelites have declared something else to be the god that took them up out of Egypt, God no longer identifies Himself as their liberator: he is so disappointed, as it were, that he seems to disavow his connection to the people. He then tells Moses that he plans to destroy the people for breaking his covenant so quickly and so severely, and to keep his promise to the patriarchs by forming an even larger nation out of Moses' own descendants. Moses begs for mercy, and God relents.

Moses then descends the mountain, smashes the tablets, and puts an end to the worship of the Golden Cow: he takes it, burns it, grinds it down, scatters what is left of it into water (in Deut. 9:21 he elaborates that this was a stream, running down the mountain) and makes the Israelites drink the mixture. The purpose of this final step in the process is not explained in the text. Perhaps it is a way to compel the community to participate in the utter destruction of the idol with their own bodies, thus giving them the opportunity to utterly disavow the Golden Cow. Perhaps, as Rashi suggests, this process is analogous to the *So'fa* ritual, in which a woman suspected of adultery – but concerning whom no witnesses can be brought – is tested by drinking water into which dust from the floor of the sanctuary has been mixed, alongside the words of a written curse. This ritual is meant to function as an ordeal: the drinker will only experience the adverse effects of the curse if she is guilty. Rashi sees the ground dust of the Golden Cow as fulfilling the same function, and only striking down those who had worshipped the Cow without valid witnesses to their actions. While intriguing, I find this explanation difficult. Saying that the powdered remains of the Golden Cow could have the same effect, by analogy, as the sacred dust of the sanctuary would seem to be imparting a kind of power to the idol – a conclusion that cuts against the grain of the narrative (and which many ancient and modern – particularly rationalist – Jews would find entirely untenable).

I would like to suggest a third possibility: an analogy not with *So'fa*, but with *Para*. The Golden Cow was erected due to God's perceived absence in the camp; the red cow ritual is performed outside the camp, deliberately away from God's presence (but with an eye towards it). The Golden Cow was burned, and its remains mixed with water; the red cow is burned, and its ashes are mixed with water. Perhaps, then, the consumption of the diluted ashes of the Golden Cow are meant to achieve something similar to *me nidda*: the purification of the recipients. Rather than designating a class of Israelites who must die, perhaps the water Moses made the Israelites drink was a sign of those who would live: those who disavowed their association with the Golden Cow and sought purification from their sins.

The sages instituted the reading of Parashat *Para* to remind the Jewish community to purify itself ritually before the month of Nisan, so as to be ready to offer the *pesah* sacrifice. Now that we have no *pesah* sacrifice, perhaps we can ready ourselves for the festival in another way: cleanse our hearts of the idolatry of Egypt, and step into freedom with renewed loyalty to God.

Shabbat shalom!

Theo Motzkin, for the Education Committee

"Let us go and argue it out," says Y-HWH, "if your sins are like crimson, shall they be white as snow? If they are red like worm-dye, shall they be as wool?"
(Isaiah 1:18)