

Reimagining Haftarah

Shabbat Parah 5784

March 29, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Traveling to Israel a year ago, I was seated next to an evangelical pastor from Indiana. He asked me about the red heifer. Now, I've been a rabbi for more than thirty years, and no Jewish person has ever asked me about the red heifer. My seatmate, though, was hardly the first Christian to do so. Just this week, a rabbinic colleague—coincidentally, also in Indiana—reported that the pastor of a small evangelical church had stopped into the synagogue to inquire when they would be conducting the red heifer sacrifice, and if it would be livestreamed. The pastor was surprised when my colleague informed him that no such ritual is part of normative Jewish practice—indeed, it hasn't been for two millennia.

Tonight, we observe, *Shabbat Parah*, “Red Heifer Sabbath.” In traditional synagogues tomorrow, after reading the weekly selection from Leviticus, a second scroll will be taken from the Ark, and a passage from Numbers will be read. Moses describes the process for sacrificing an unblemished red cow, burning it, mixing its ashes with water, and using that water for purification. Thankfully, the impure person doesn't drink that concoction; it's sprinkled on them, to cleanse them of impurity conveyed by contact with a corpse.ⁱ Rabbi Isaac Klein explains why this passage is read as Passover is approaching: “All Israelites came to the Temple in Jerusalem on *Pesach* to offer the Paschal lamb. They had to be in a state of ritual purity to perform this rite. Since the ashes of the red heifer were used in the process of purification, this passage served to remind those who were not in a state of purity to take the necessary steps.”ⁱⁱ

Let me count the reasons why we don't usually read the red heifer passage: We don't believe that contact with a corpse conveys ritual impurity, making a person unfit to participate in Jewish life, nor do we imagine that a sprinkle of water mixed with bovine ashes would purify. We neither practice animal sacrifice nor harbor messianic dreams of resuming it. And that's before we get to Jewish and Christian fundamentalists who are seeking to breed a perfect red heifer to speed the certain kind of messianic redemption that would replace Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock with a third Temple.

Modern Jews were not the first to be uncomfortable with red heifer passage. That started with the haftarah, the prophetic reading first paired with this passage from Numbers in the early rabbinic period—that is, about two thousand years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this haftarah, the prophet, Ezekiel, does not talk about slaughtering a red cow or defilement by contact with a corpse. Speaking to Israelites exiled after the destruction of the First Temple, he offers God’s promise, “I will take you from among the nations and gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you back to your own land.”^{iv} He describes a different kind of purification, without cow ashes: “I will sprinkle **pure** water upon you, and you shall be purified from all your defilement and from all your [idols]. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put My spirit into you. Thus I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfully to observe My rules. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be My people and I will be your God.”^v

Reform Judaism as we know it was established in the early 19th century. However, the process of continually “renewing and reimagining”^{vi} Judaism started much earlier, even before the Hebrew Bible found its final form. Ezekiel’s listeners were dismayed that they could not purify themselves with the red heifer. He redirects them. Corpses aren’t the **real** source of defilement. Instead, unethical behavior and idolatry have rendered the Israelites unfit to worship at the Jerusalem Temple. Water with bovine ashes won’t purify them. Instead, **pure** water is the symbol of God’s grace, enabling penitent Israelites to cleanse themselves of their wrongdoing and return to the Divine presence.

After the Temple is destroyed a second time, and hope of rapid return is dashed in a bloody rebellion, the rabbis repackage Ezekiel’s teaching as a foil to the *Shabbat Parah* Torah reading. The rabbis want to dissuade their communities from taking up arms yet again, repeating the devastating slaughter in yet another futile attempt to defeat the Romans and rebuild the sacrificial site for the ritual of the red heifer. The sages also want to comfort their people with the message that purification is still available. Ezekiel’s prophesy fits the bill: Spiritual renewal does not require the sacrifice of any cow, red or otherwise!

Contemporary Jews in 2024 may find inspiration in that haftarah reading from Ezekiel. Still, as Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar notes, “the haftarah reading also speaks about our feelings of shame for our failures: ‘Then you shall remember your evil ways, your dealings that were not good, and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds.’^{vii} Brené Brown defines shame as ‘the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do make us unworthy of connection.’ If we allow our shame or self-loathing to overwhelm us, we will never be able to move toward a sense of healing and engage in a process of *t’shuvah* (repentance).”^{viii}

Ezekiel's words may not work for everyone. In her 2023 book from our Reform Movement's CCAR Press, *Prophetic Voices: Renewing and Reimagining Haftarah*, Rabbi Barbara Symons offers new ways of understanding ancient prophetic words alongside innovative options for alternative haftarah readings—some from the Bible, with others from a wide range of voices, ancient, medieval, and modern.

Rabbi Bahar does ask us to consider sticking with the classical prophet. She writes, “We might feel ashamed of ourselves, but God values us already for being honest and open with ourselves. We can move beyond brokenness by following a path of *t'shuvah* leading to self-transformation and self-acceptance. This is God's gift of purity to us.”

Turning the page, though, we find another option for the haftarah this week. It comes from a friend and frequent visitor to our congregation, Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell. She writes of water, real and symbolic, and its power to heal and renew:

And you shall draw water in joy from the wells of redemption.^{ix}
Throughout their desert wanderings,
The Israelites were refreshed by miraculous springs
that bubbled out of deep crevices
in the rocky landscape.
When Miriam died, the waters dried up.
The people mourned the slave child who waited by a river,
the woman who danced across a sea,
the leader who sang a nation to freedom.
When the springs flowed once more,
we named them Miriam's Well.
When fear blocks our path, when our travels deplete us,
we seek sources of healing and wells of hope.
May our questions and our stories nurture us
As Miriam's Well renewed our people's spirits.^x

Our ancient forebears believed that God's forgiving love could be activated through animal sacrifice and a purification ritual. The prophets taught that God's love is conveyed through ethical and righteous living. Rabbi Elwell invites us to seek cleansing water of God's love in “our questions and our stories.” What unites them all? The promise of *Ahavat Olam*, faith in a God who so loves the world that God has given us a Torah of truth alongside prophetic voices, our sources of renewal in every age.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 19:1-22.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979, www.jts.edu/the-laws-of-passover/#Four%20Parshiyor.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Richard Sarason, PhD, “Readings from the Prophets: The History and Significance of the Haftarah Readings in Rabbinic Judaism and in the Reform Movement,” *Prophetic Voices: Renewing and Reimagining Haftarah*, Edited by Rabbi Barbara AB Symons, New York: CCAR Press, 2023, pp. 25-26.

^{iv} Ezekiel 36:24.

^v Ezekiel 36:25-28. Emphasis mine.

^{vi} Taken from the subtitle of *Prophetic Voices*.

^{vii} Ezekiel 36:31.

^{viii} Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar, “Through *T’shuvah* to Purity,” in *Prophetic Voices*, p. 403.

^{ix} Isaiah 12:3.

^x Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, “And You Shall Draw Water,” in *Prophetic Voices*, p. 406.