

Shabbat Parah is the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach. Ritual impurity prevents a person from entering sacred space and from participating in sacred acts. The reading from Numbers deals with the red heifer, whose ashes mixed in living water purify people who have been near a corpse. Because death represents a total and irreversible separation of body and soul, *tum'at met* (corpse impurity) is more severe than the temporary forms of impurity related to reproduction, birth, and illness. For our ancestors, it required an antidote – the ritual of the red heifer. An unblemished young female cow, entirely red to represent the life-force, and who has never performed labor, is slaughtered and completely reduced to ash. Mixed with fresh water, these ashes purify those who have come in contact with a corpse. But paradoxically, the ritually clean person who gathers the ashes of the cow and places them in a clean place outside the camp becomes ritually unclean until evening. In other words, the water containing the ashes of the burnt cow along with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet wool that are burned with it, cleanses the one who is ritually unclean because of having come into contact with a corpse, but in doing so, renders the one who prepares the water unclean. Although this ritual ceased a few centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, its significance is profound. We can heal illness, recover from childbirth, and repair moral failings, but we cannot restore life. The red heifer ritual, which purifies the living after an encounter with death but leaves impurity in its wake, acknowledges our human limitations. And when Shabbat Parah coincides with Parashat Ki Tisa, life, death, and the Source of Life intertwine. Because HaShem's presence will inhabit the *mishkan*, it is essential that the red heifer ritual is introduced before it is inaugurated. Shabbat Parah reminds us that the *mishkan* is the place where the Source of Life chooses to dwell among mortal beings. Our parashah finds Moses receiving HaShem's final instructions for the *mishkan*. After naming two overseers for the building project, HaShem abruptly returns to the topic of Shabbat, beginning with the word אַךְ (*akh* – only, however, yet, nevertheless). This word alludes to the message of the red heifer and of the golden calf, which is usually the focal point of this parashah. The people have begun to worry that Moses will never return, and in desperation they clamor for new leaders and let Aaron make them an object for them to worship. In the meantime, Moses is hearing, “Nevertheless, keep My Shabbats. For it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations to know that I, God, sanctify you.” (31:13) It is noteworthy that the book of Exodus prohibits working on Shabbat four times (20:9-10, 23:12, 31:15, 35:2). The first two address each of us personally, while the latter two are general prohibitions, i.e. no work shall be done. Just as HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too, must we cease working on Shabbat. Viewed in this light, building the *mishkan* is an act of *imitatio dei*, of striving to be as much like HaShem as is humanly possible. And because we know that only HaShem can create *ex nihilo*, we understand that the inanimate objects we create with the materials HaShem provides cannot contain or dispense holiness, they can only frame it. The true essence of the *mishkan* is the empty space between the *keruvim*, those winged creatures fashioned out of one piece of gold, where the Presence of HaShem dwells. Despite all they symbolize, the figures themselves as well as all the utensils, garments, and rites are nothing more than the structure outlining the space in which holiness may exist. In contrast, that piece of solid gold, which according to Aaron's fanciful description, simply “came out of” the fire in the shape of a calf, is the polar opposite. It is just a piece of metal that looks like a calf. It is as lifeless as the blind, deaf, and dumb idols described in Psalm 115, an impotent symptom of the fear and impatience that have continually plagued the Israelites since they left Egypt. Their lives as slaves were hard, but also comfortably predictable. And despite all the miracles that had delivered them from Egypt and were sustaining them in the wilderness, their concept of HaShem is overshadowed by centuries of proximity to Egyptian culture. Now, they are in uncharted waters, and their leader seems to have abandoned them. Driven by their immature understanding of how to serve their unseen God and unsure of the future, they yearn for something tangible, tragically unaware that worshipping a lifeless object created from pre-existing materials and expecting it to respond is futile. Shabbat Parah reminds us that only HaShem can create life. After death, the inanimate body that the soul once inhabited must return to the elements from which it came. All of creation is ephemeral; only HaShem is eternal, and only HaShem is holy. The *mishkan* teaches us that holiness can dwell among mortals, but only within strictly defined boundaries. Shabbat and our festivals provide the holy framework within which we worship our Creator, dressed in special clothing and using specific objects that represent holiness, but are not themselves intrinsically holy. Holiness is not a thing; it is a mindset, a state of being that we experience in the special places we choose to designate as holy: our bodies, our homes, our houses of worship and study, and in nature. And when we observe the Torah's cycles of work and rest, we are holy to HaShem, our holy God.

Shabbat shalom!