

"זאת חוקת התורה אשר צוה ה' לאמר... ויקחו אליך פרה אדומה תמימה..."  
(במדבר י"ט ב')

**SUMMARY OF THE  
BASIC LAWS OF THE  
RED COW  
(THE RED HEIFER)**

**DESCRIBING THE RITE OF PURIFICATION  
FROM DEFILEMENT WITH A CORPSE  
USING THE ASHES OF A RED COW  
As per Bamidbor 19:1-22**

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## SUMMARY OF THE BASIC LAWS OF THE RED COW

### INTRODUCTION

One who becomes defiled by a human corpse achieves purification after being sprinkled upon twice with the Ashes of a burnt Red Cow (or Heifer) mixed in spring or river water. Sprinkling is performed once on the third day and again on the seventh day after his contamination. After the second sprinkling, he immerses himself in a Mikveh and, with nightfall, becomes purified. This defilement may result from contact with or being under the same roof as the corpse.

Vessels which became similarly defiled are also ritually cleansed by means of the Red Cow Ash Water on the third and seventh days.

The elements necessary to affect purification comprise:

1. "Live Waters" drawn directly from a spring or river.
2. Ashes from an unblemished, never-yoked and completely red-haired cow. The Cow is slaughtered and burnt to ashes outside the Camp or Temple. These Ashes are tossed onto the Live Waters and mixed creating "Waters of Purification".
3. A bunch of hyssops are dipped into the Waters of Purification and used to sprinkle the Waters on the defiled (see MP 8:2).

Since there is the utmost concern that absolutely nothing involved in this procedure may itself be defiled, this entire process is characterized by the institution of many extreme and unique precautions to prevent uncleanness from any person or object involved in this rite.

Unusually, even though the animal was slaughtered and burned outside of the Sanctuary, the Cow receives the status and restrictions of a Public Sin-offering (חטאת). The Waters of Purification themselves have the sanctity of a תרומה offering (MP 3:2, 10:6, 11:2).

The source of all these Laws is במדבר י"ט.

#### Abbreviations:

MP = Mishna Poroh

MT = Mishne Torah of the Rambam, Hilchos Poroh Adumoh.

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### DETAILS OF THE LAWS

#### a. Buying the Cow

1. The Cow is specifically not raised but bought, based on the verse, “*and you shall take (acquire) a cow for yourselves*” (MT 1:1).
2. The Cow may be purchased from a non-Jew and from outside of the Land of Israel (MP 2:1).
3. The Cow is bought with monies from the Temple Treasury (MT 1:1).
4. It cannot be purchased with disgraceful monies of the sort one could not use to buy other offerings (see MP 2:3).

#### b. Age

5. The Cow must be three or four years old. Younger than this it is considered a “calf”. Use of five year-old cows was discouraged since waiting so long increased the risk that the animal would develop disqualifying black hairs (MP 1:1).
6. Also, older animals, i.e. those of five years and older, are considered less honorable offerings than younger animals (MP 1:2).

#### c. Redness

7. The hairs of the Cow must be perfectly red. The Cow’s eyes, teeth and tongue may be black (MP 2:2).
8. Two non-red hairs disqualify (see MP 2:5).
9. The black tip of a red hair may be cut off (MP 2:5).
10. Black horns or hoofs may be cut off (MT 1:5).

#### d. Blemishes

11. The Cow must have no disqualifying blemishes or defects, as any other animal offering. A dwarf size is not a blemish (MP 2:2, 3).
12. The Cow must have had a natural birth (not a “Caesarean” one) (MP 2:3).

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### **e. Un-worked**

13. The Cow must not have been “worked” in any way. It must never have been broken to the yoke. Disqualifying acts include if someone rode or leaned on it, hung on to its tail while crossing a river, hanging its reins upon it, pulling it by a harness, and placing one’s cloak on it unless done to protect the animal, etc. (MP 2:3).
14. Protecting the animal’s feet with a boot or shoe would not disqualify the animal (MP 2:3).
15. If a bull mounted the Cow, it is disqualified (MP 2:4).
16. Certainly, a pregnant Cow is invalid, for that is considered a form of “work” (MP 2:1).

### **f. Preparations**

17. The Kohen who will be burning the Cow is sequestered for seven days, and away from his wife, similar to the Kohen Godol before Yom Kippur, in a room in the Temple in order that he not become defiled. He is served from stone vessels only which are unsusceptible to uncleanness. He himself is purified with Ashes from a Red Cow every day that week to remove any doubt about his own purity (MP 3:1).

### **g. The Water-Drawers**

18. Children born in a place where they could not become defiled and who were guarded from birth against contact with uncleanness, are used to draw the water (see MP 3:2), although this could have been performed by an adult (see MT 6:2).
19. These children draw the water from the Shiloach Spring in a stone bowl and ride atop a board on the backs of bulls to the Temple Mount. All this was done to prevent accidental defilement of the water (MP 3:3).
20. Ashes of a previously-burnt Cow would then be sprinkled onto the water and mixed (see MP 3:3).
21. The children would immerse and then sprinkle these Waters of Purification onto the one who will be burning the Cow (MT 2:7).

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### **h. The Water**

22. The water may be drawn during the day or at night (MT 6:3).
23. The water must be scooped directly into a bowl and not drawn via another vessel (MP 6:4 based on Bamidbor 19:17).
24. The water must come directly from a spring or river and may not come (see MP 6:4) via a channel or a pit with rainwater or a place where the waters stood still (MP 6:5).

*(See MP Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 11 for further details and what are considered invalidating interruptions and disqualifying acts regarding the water as well as the ashes.)*

### **i. The Burning**

25. The Cow is taken to Mount Mishechoh (Olives) for burning. A special ramp over arches is built between there and the Temple, constructed in such a way as to prevent any defilement from rising up over it from below (MP 3:6).
26. The Sages lay their hands on the Kohen and say, “(Sir) Kohen (Godol), immerse once.” He then immerses and dries himself off. A tower-like triangular-shaped pyre with gaps for airflow is prepared using cedar, pine, cypress (or spruce) wood and fig-wood since these woods burn well (MP 3:8).
27. The pyre is constructed in a pit (MP 3:10).
28. The Rambam rules that the Kohen who does the burning need not be the Kohen Godol and he wears the normal, four-garment Kohen outfit (MT 1:11, 12).
29. All involved in this procedure must immerse in the Mikveh first, but do not wait until evening to become ritually clean (MT 1:3).
30. The Cow is tied with a non-defileable reedgrass or bast rope and set upon the pyre with its head in the south facing west towards the Temple. The Kohen stands on the south and faces west and slaughters the Cow with his right hand. He captures the blood of slaughter in a vessel with his left hand. Using his right forefinger, he sprinkles the blood seven separate times in the direction of the Holy of Holies. He dips his finger in the blood, sprinkles once, wipes any excess blood off on the body of the Cow, and dips his finger in the blood again. He is not allowed to sprinkle blood from his finger twice. When finished, he wipes the excess blood on the body of the Cow. He then ignites the pyre with thick matches (MP 3:9).

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31. The Kohen supervises the fire from afar until the majority of the animal is consumed in flames and its carcass bursts open (MT 3:2).
32. Wood could be added to the flames until there was ash. Burning had to take place during the day and only by a Kohen. The burning was invalid if done at the same time the water was being drawn (MP 4:4).
33. The Cow in its entirety, with its hide, flesh and blood, is burned (Bamdibor 19:5).
34. This entire procedure takes place just before evening (see MP 3:7).

### **j. Preparing the Hyssop, Cypress and Scarlet**

35. The Kohen takes a piece of cypress and asks the Sages thrice, "Is this the cypress wood?" and thrice, "Is this the hyssop?" and thrice, "Is this the scarlet wool?" They respond, "Yes. Yes. Yes." This is all done to publicize the procedure (MP 3:10).
36. The Rambam says that this is done to show them that these are the correct species demanded by the Torah (MT 3:2).
37. The hyssop, cypress and scarlet-colored wool are coiled together and cast into the fire. The fire is then doused. Any coals are pounded into ashes. The ash mix of the wood and Cow together are considered the Ashes of the Cow (MP 3:11).

### **k. The Ashes**

38. The resultant Ashes are divided into three lots. One part is stored for future use in the Temple; one part is kept for the Kohanim themselves who will need purification for preparing the Ashes of the Cow; and the third part is given to the various watches of the Kohanim for general use (MP 3:11).

### **l. Invalidating Thoughts and Acts**

39. If the Cow was slaughtered or its blood was captured without the correct intentions, it was invalid (see MP 4:1).
40. Similarly, the Cow is invalid if the Kohen did not properly wash his hands and feet or he did not wear the appropriate vestments. In this case, the Kohen Godol would wear his special white outfit as he would wear on Yom Kippur, and not his everyday gold clothes (MP 4:1).
41. If the animal was not burned in a pit or the Kohen did not immerse his finger in the blood between sprinklings, it is invalid (MP 4:2).
42. But, if the Cow was burned without a pyre or with other types of wood or with straw, it is valid. If the animal was flayed or gutted of its internal

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organs before being burned, it is valid. Even if the animal was slaughtered believing that its meat would be eaten, it is valid (MP 4:3).

43. If the Kohen involves himself in some other activity in the middle of this procedure, the Cow is invalid (MP 4:4).

### **m. The Mixing Bowl**

44. A new earthenware bowl is prepared, immersed, set upon the furnace and guarded so that it does not become defiled after its completion (see MP 5:1).
45. The bowl is wiped dry unless the water it was immersed in was itself "Live Water" (see MP 5:2-4).
46. Any other type of non-defileable bowl could have been used as well (see MP 5:5-8).

### **n. Mixing the Ashes with the Water**

47. The Ashes are very carefully put by hand onto the Water (see MP 6:1-4).
48. Only a small amount is necessary, enough that the Ashes are visible on the surface of the Water, regardless of the quantity of water used. The water is mixed until the Ashes dissolve (MT 9:1).

### **o. The Hyssop**

49. The Hyssop used must be of a species called only "Hyssop" and not one which has some other descriptive prefix, such as the Greek Hyssop, the Kacholis Hyssop, the Roman Hyssop or the Wild Hyssop (see further details in MP 11:7, 8).
50. Three Hyssop stalks each with three leaves (or buds or stems) are taken (MP 11:9).
51. If the Hyssop was short, a string or stick could be attached to it for dipping into the Waters, but when sprinkling, the Hyssop itself must be grasped (MP 12:1).

### **p. The Sprinkler**

52. Anyone who knows how to sprinkle could, except for a hermaphrodite, a woman or a small child who does not know how to sprinkle with proper intentions; however a woman can assist him (MP 12:6, see MT 10:6).
53. The sprinkler must himself be in a state of purity (MT 11:1).
54. The sprinkler and his clothing become unclean until evening (Bamidbor 19:21).

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### q. The Sprinkling

55. The Waters may be sprinkled on a person whether he was awake or asleep or even if he was not aware that he was being sprinkled on. Persons and vessels could be sprinkled on together, even a hundred at a time (MP 12:2) as long as there still were Waters on the hyssop. Everything depends on the intention of the sprinkler (MP 12:3).
56. The sprinkler may stand at a window and sprinkle on the people in a public place outside the Temple as they pass by (MP 12:4).
57. Only Waters which strike the person or vessel directly from the Hyssop purify (MP 12:5).
58. The smallest amount of Water which hits any part of his body, except his tongue, affects purification (MP 12:5, Yoma 14a, MT 12:1).
59. People who have vessels which need purification hold them in their clothes and not in their hands (MP 12:5).
60. Sprinkling should be done during the daytime, and on the same day as was the Hyssop dipped into the Waters (MP 12:11).

### r. Defilement of Those Involved in the Cow's Preparation

61. Everyone involved in a valid preparation of the Red Cow's Ashes and their clothing become defiled, including the slaughterer, the ones who help with flaming the fire and those who gather the Ashes, etc. (MP 4:4, MT 6:4).
62. They remain unclean until sunset, and after they wash themselves and clothing.

### s. Red Cows of History

63. Moshe prepared the first one and Ezra the second. Rebbe Meir says that there were five after Ezra. The Sages say that there were seven: two by Shimon HaTzadik, two by Yochanan Kohen Godol and one each by Elyahoynai ben HaKof, Chanamael HaMitzri and Yishmoel ben Piovi (MP 3:5).
64. The tenth will be prepared by the King Messiah (MT 3:4).