

THE RED HEIFER AND THE FEMININE VOICE IN JUDAISM



There are many voices to be heard in the Jewish *Bible*, but one that is often overlooked is a voice that speaks of the primal nature of the female over the male.

In Jewish mysticism, *God* is completely unknowable and even paradoxical, but once we get into the created realm, it is, according to many voices, the female that precedes the male.

Many would like to construe it as the other way around based upon the story that first *Adam* is created and then *Eve*.

However, as my Native American relatives say, “*Everything is born of woman.*” Later on, we’ll see that there were rabbis of the *Talmud* and *Midrash* who were of the same opinion.

To illustrate this point, we'll look in detail at the ritual of the *Red Heifer* found in *Numbers 19*. This ritual involves using the ashes of a *Red Heifer* to restore one to a state of purity after touching a dead body, and the official view of the rabbis is that there is no rhyme or reason to why this should work. It's one of those few items in the *Torah* where the rabbis say we do it just because *God* said so.

However, I see a definite logic and beauty behind this ritual, so let's begin our explanation. Let's start by noting that even though our *Biblical* ancestors had what today we would think of as a primitive understanding of the mechanics of disease and healing, their models were probably, nonetheless, very effective for the treatment of several ailments. In their worldview, humans exist between two opposing forces, the force of life and the force of death, and as they experienced it, both of these forces could be transmitted by touch (*Leviticus 5:2 & Leviticus 6:20*).

They obviously observed that disease was sometimes transmitted by physical contact, and, thus, touching something unclean usually resulted in being quarantined for a period of time followed by a ritual cleansing. Similarly, they surely observed the healing power of therapeutic touch and the touch of a loving spouse, and they knew from experience that touching could transmit both life and death, depending on the circumstances.

Likewise, they knew that running water didn't cause disease in the way that stagnant water did, and so the expression *mayim chaim* can be translated as either "*living waters*" or as "*running waters*." They were keen observers of their environment, and they created models that probably worked fairly well in their time.

The ultimate in negative energy is, of course, death, and so to understand the story of the *Red Heifer*, I believe we need to understand its deeper symbolism and how the ritual transports us from death back to life.

The crux of the matter lies in understanding that women are givers of life. In the *Bible* we hear, in my opinion, many voices. Some of those voices are quite patriarchal such as those that describe the creation of *Adam* first that is then followed by the creation of woman as a mere sparerib. However, there are other voices in the *Tanach* and beyond that describe the female as coming before the male.

For example, in *Proverbs* we read of the world being created through *wisdom*, and *wisdom* is identified as female in the text.

“Does not wisdom call and understanding put forth her voice? She stands at the top of high places by the way where the paths meet. She cries at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors. ... The Lord created me (wisdom) at the beginning of his way, the first of his acts of old.”

(Proverbs 8:1-22)

Similarly, the *Talmudic* sage *Rav Huna* describes the earth as feminine, and he states that all creation comes from the earth.

“Rav Huna said, ‘AFAR (DUST) is masculine, while adamah (ground) is feminine. A potter takes male dust (coarse earth) and female earth (soft clay) in order that his vessels may be sound.’”

(Genesis Rabbah XIV:7)

“R. Huna said in R. Joseph's name, ‘Whatever is in heaven and on earth was created from the earth alone, as it is written, “For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven (Isaiah 55:10).” Just as the rain's creation is from the earth, though it falls from heaven, so all that is in heaven and on earth was created from the earth alone.’ R. Judan proved it from the following, ‘All go unto one place. All are of the dust,’ i.e. earth (Ecclesiastes 3:20).”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:11)

This theme of the feminine preceding the masculine is also found in rabbinic literature where the *Torah*, a feminine word, is identified with *wisdom* and is seen as being used by *God* to create the rest of the universe.

“Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, ‘WITH BEGINNING GOD CREATED,’ BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, ‘The Lord made me (wisdom) as the beginning of His way (Proverbs 8:22).’”
(Genesis Rabbah 1:1)

In the *Zohar*, the female is identified with both darkness and the moon (*Zohar I:23a*). Thus, at the beginning of the *Torah* where we see darkness preceding light and the day beginning in the evening, this is also an indication that in the created world the female principle comes before the male.

And lastly, in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (*The Book of Creation*) we read that *God* first created the mother letters (*aleph-mem-shin*) and then the father letters (*yud-hey-vav*) and then from these came the rest of creation.

“Three mothers aleph-mem-shin, a great and wondrous secret, covered and sealed with six rings, and out of them air, water, fire, and from them originated fathers (yud-hey-vav), and from fathers, consequences.”
(Sefer Yetzirah 3:2)

The letters *yud-hey-vav-hey* spell the most sacred name for *God* in Hebrew, and we often think of this name as a *father name* for *God*. But it would be really nice if replacing the letters *yud-hey-vav* by their feminine counterparts *aleph-mem-shin* resulted in a *mother name* for *God*. Well, guess what. If we replace *yud* by *aleph*, *hey* by *mem*, and *vav* by *shin*, then *yud-hey-vav-hey* becomes *aleph-mem-shin-mem*, and this literally spells “*mother name!*” (mother=*aleph-mem* and name=*shin-mem*)

Thus, there are many places in the literature where we encounter voices that say that the female principle precedes the male. Furthermore, the female is the embodiment of life energy, and if someone has been in contact with death energy, then what better way to restore the balance than through a swift infusion of the life enhancing properties of the feminine?

Consequently, if my theory is correct, then we should find a variety of female symbols in the story of the *Red Heifer*. Let's explore.

The word “*heifer*” means a young female calf. Also, the Hebrew for *heifer* (*peh-resh-hey*) additionally means “*to be fruitful.*” Furthermore, if you permute the letters of the Hebrew word for “heifer,” then you can spell *resh-pey-hey* which is one of the ways in *Biblical Hebrew* to spell the verb “*to heal.*” Also, the color red represents the *blood* of the female, and recall that in the *Torah*, *blood* represents *life* (*Deuteronomy 12:23*). This, in my opinion, is why the *blood* is scattered here and there during this ritual. It was seen as a way of sanctifying the items involved with *life energy*.

The Hebrew word for “red” (*aleph-dalet-mem-hey*) also spells “earth.” Thus, the Hebrew phrase for *Red Heifer* could also be rendered in English as “*the generative, healing earth.*” To summarize, *life* emerges from the feminine, and the *Red Heifer* symbolizes the generative power of the female that serves as an antidote to its antithesis, death.

Continuing through the ritual, we read the following in *Numbers 19:6*.

“And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer.”

(Numbers 19:6)

It is well known that *cedar* has a pleasant, aromatic scent both as a leaf and in its wooden form, and its pleasant scent can have a positive impact on one's state of consciousness. Among traditional Native Americans, *cedar* leaves are widely used as an incense for spiritual purification, and it is not unlikely that its inclusion into the *Red Heifer* ceremony was for a similar purpose. With respect to *Biblical hyssop*, however, it is generally believed that this was a different plant from the one we call *hyssop* today. Some of the candidates that have been put forth as being the original *Biblical hyssop* have been *marjoram*, *oregano*, *thyme*, *caper*, and *sage*.

While we do not know for certain which, if any, of these herbs is the genuine *Biblical hyssop*, I do have a preference for *sage* because varieties of this herb are commonly used along with *cedar* in purification ceremonies by Native Americans. Thus, there is a history of using *sage*, by at least one culture, in a manner that is consistent with the herbs used in the *Red Heifer* ceremony. And if the *Biblical hyssop* is *sage*, then the combination of *cedar* and *sage* burning would likely produce the same positive, spiritual state of mind that it does in contemporary Native American ceremonies.

The most mysterious ingredient found in *Numbers 19:6* is the one that is generally translated as “scarlet” or “crimson stuff.” The actual Hebrew is *shin-nun-yud tav-vav-lamed-ayin-tav* which translates literally as “crimson worm.” This particular *worm*, *coccus ilicis*, has a very important tale to tell. When the mother *worm* is about to give birth, she attaches herself permanently to the bark of a tree, and her body forms a hard, protective crimson shell. Underneath her body and the protective shell, the mother then lays her eggs. When these eggs hatch, the mother’s body provides both protection and food for the larvae, and as the mother dies, her body releases a red dye that stains both the wood and her offspring. What marvelous symbolism!

The saga of the *crimson worm* not only represents the transition from death back to life, but also contains the elements of “*red*” and “*female*” that align perfectly with the *Red Heifer*. One could hardly find a more appropriate symbol to include in this ritual. And my suspicion at this point is that it was this *red-stained bark* that was included with the aromatic *cedar* and *hyssop/sage* as one of the elements burned along with the *Red Heifer*.

The *Red Heifer* is reduced to ashes, and it should be noted that the letters of the word *aleph-peh-resh* for “ashes” can be permuted to spell *resh-peh-aleph*, another word in *Biblical Hebrew* for the verb “to heal.” Additionally, the water that the ashes are mixed with for the *water of sprinkling* is both a common symbol for *Torah* (which we’ve already identified with the female) and a symbol by itself for the feminine. Just think of *Miriam’s Well* or the life-giving waters that the fetus lives in during pregnancy.

One could argue that *water, Miriam, and Miriam's Well* represent a non-verbal, right-brain *Torah* that complements the written *Torah* of *Moses*, and as it says in *Zohar I:50b*, "*The audible voice [verbal Torah] issues from the inaudible [non-verbal Torah].*" Or as I say, if you're going through life using only your left-brain, then you're a half-wit!

Thus, we can say this ceremony involves the generative, female energy, as represented by the ashes of the *Red Heifer*, being combined with the *living waters* of the *Torah* in order to heal one from contact with the dead and to transform one's state from death back to life. The *heifer*, the color *red*, *blood*, *ashes*, *water*, and *crimson stuff* – this story is filled with symbols of the *female* and the life-giving, healing energy that women embody.

In conclusion, there is ample evidence of a line of *Biblical* thought that says that in the created world that the female principle precedes that of the male. And this is going to be a line of thought that becomes very, very important in early Jewish mysticism once we begin our exploration of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.