A heathen questioned Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, saying: “The things you Jews do appear to be a kind of sorcery. A cow is brought, it is burned, is pounded into ash, and its ash is gathered up. Then when one of you gets defiled by contact with a corpse, two or three drops of the ash mixed with water are sprinkled upon him, and he is told, ‘You are cleansed!’ ”.

Rabban Yohanan asked the heathen: “Has the spirit of madness ever possessed you?”. He replied: “No”. “Have you ever seen a man whom the spirit of madness has possessed?”. The heathen replied: “Yes”. “And what do you do for such a man?”. “Roots are brought, the smoke of their burning is made to rise about him, and water is sprinkled upon him until the spirit of madness flees”.

Rabban Yohanan then said: “Do not your ears hear what your mouth is saying? It is the same with a man who is defiled by contact with a corpse—he, too, is possessed by a spirit, the spirit of uncleanness, and Scripture says, ‘I will cause [false] prophets as well as the spirit of uncleanness to flee the Land’ ” (Zech. xiii 2).

Now when the heathen left, Rabban Yohanan’s disciples said: “Our master, you put off that heathen with a mere reed of an answer (lit. “you shoved aside that heathen with a reed”), but what answer will you give us?”.

Rabban Yohanan answered: “By your lives, I swear: the corpse does not have the power by itself to defile, nor does the mixture of ash and water have the power by itself to cleanse. The truth is that the purifying power of the Red Cow is a decree of the Holy One. The Holy One said: “I have set it down as a statute, I have issued it as a decree. You are not permitted to transgress My decree. ‘This is the statute of the Torah’ ” (Num. xix 1) (Pesiq. Rab Kah. 4:7).

The discrepancy between the explanations given by the rabbi to the heathen and to his students reveals the great puzzlement among
early Jewish scholars concerning the working and meaning of this ritual. What outwardly looks like an exorcism is flatly denied by Rabbi Yohanan. Yet he is at a loss to find a rationale. His perplexity is aggravated not just by the form of the rite, but by its paradoxical effect. Whereas the ashes of the Red Cow purify those whom they sprinkle, they defile those who do the sprinkling (vv. 19, 21) and, indeed, anyone who handles them (v. 21) and is involved in preparing them (vv. 6-10). This paradox is neatly captured in the rabbinic apothegm: they purify the defiled and defile the pure 1).

It is here proposed that the key to unlock the paradox of the Red Cow is that it is a *hatta’t* sacrifice, as stated unambiguously by the text: "it is a *hatta’t*" (v. 9) 2). The function of the *hatta’t* sacrifice, as has been demonstrated, is to remove contamination (*hitta’s* means "decontaminate") and, hence, it should be rendered "purification offering" 3). Since the Red Cow is labelled a "burnt *hatta’t*" (v. 17), it falls into the category of the *hatta’t* brought for severe impurities whose flesh may not be eaten but is burnt outside the camp (Lev. iv 6-7, 11-12; cf. vi 23, x 18) 4). Yet the difference in the ritual procedure is glaring: the blood of the Red Cow is not offered up on the altar as is the blood of every *hatta’t* and, indeed, of every other animal sacrifice, but the whole cow, together with its blood, is incinerated outside the camp (v. 5). Thus it does not appear to be a sacrifice at all.

This discrepancy is a serious one but it can be resolved. The blood of the Red Cow is not offered on the altar for the simple reason that it is needed in the ashes as a continuing *hatta’t*. It has been shown that the element of the *hatta’t* which does the decontaminating is the blood. Its placement on the horns of the altars (Lev. iv 4, 7, 18, 25; 30, 34), in the shrine (Lev. iv 6, 17) or in the adytum (Lev. xvi 14) is what purges these sacred objects of their accumulated impurities. True, other traditional purgatives are contained in the ashes: cedar, hyssop and crimson yarn, but these elements are clearly secondary to the blood. It is the blood which infuses the ashes with their lustral power.

2) Contra RSV and NJPS which are clearly influenced by its non-sacrificial characteristics. The Tannaim, on the other hand, consistently label it a *hatta’t* (e.g., M. Para II 1, III 4, IV 1).