

Parashat Chukat 5776, 2016:

The Mystery of the Mitzvot

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Protagoras, the fifth century Greek philosopher, boldly proclaimed: “Man is the measure of all things.” This idea has been championed by many of the Renaissance, Age of Reason, and Enlightenment writers and thinkers and their followers until our present moment. In their view, man’s intellect and inherent abilities are limitless, and nothing can defy his relentless march toward greater progress and unbounded success. In stark contrast, Judaism repudiates this notion in unequivocal terms and declares, “G-d, not man, is the measure of all things and man is but his servant.”

The *mitzvah* of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) is found at the beginning of our *parasha*. It is the greatest example of man’s inability to truly grasp the inherent rationale of Hashem’s commandments. The purpose of this precept is to purify an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) due to contact with a corpse. Yet, it is intrinsically paradoxical and mystifying, since during the process of its fulfillment, it ritually purifies the impure, while simultaneously rendering impure the ritually pure.

Sefer Melachim I: 3:5-12 teaches us that *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) was the

wisest man who ever lived. He received the greatest *da'at* (native intelligence) from Hashem. Moreover, with G-d's help and love, he acquired the most profound *binah* (insight into the interrelationship of things) that any man could ever achieve. Yet, even though King Solomon was blessed with the most prodigious intellect in history, he was nonetheless stymied by the Red Heifer's seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. Little wonder, then, that he plaintively and poignantly declared: "All this I tested with wisdom; I said, 'I will become wise,' but it was far from me." (*Sefer Kohelet* 7:23, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) According to a variety of Midrashim, the word "it" in our verse specifically refers to the mysterious and mystical *Parah Adumah*, whose meaning proved continuously elusive to the greatest mind in history.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892) is known to posterity as the "Beit Halevi" after the name of his ground-breaking work of Torah analysis. In his commentary on *Sefer Shemot* 31, he presents an original and incisive exposition of the *Parah Adumah*. He notes that the phrase "This is the statute of the Torah (*zot chukat haTorah*) that the L-rd commanded, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow...'" is very unusual, since the commandment of the Red Heifer is singled out as being the "statute of the Torah." The Beit Halevi therefore asks: "At face value, the *Parah Adumah* is simply one of the [613] Mitzvot of the Torah. Why, therefore, is it given the unusual label of the "statute of the Torah?" His answer expresses some of his fundamental beliefs regarding the our relationship to the Commandments:

... for it is precisely from the *Parah Adumah* that it is revealed to man that he, in reality, does not know anything regarding [the true meaning inherent] in any *mitzvah* of the Torah, since, [based upon this verse,] the entire Torah is a statute (*chukah*) [that defies our understanding]. And the explanation of this concept is the following, behold all of the Commandments are inextricably attached to, and interwoven with, one another. Moreover, each one depends upon the other – just as we find in reference to lowly man who has 248 limbs and 365 sinews – all of whom are attached one to another, and all of whom depend upon one another. This is the case, as well, regarding the Mitzvot wherein the 248 Positive Commandments and the 365 Negative Commandments are attached to one another and form one unit. [As a result,] it is impossible to comprehend even one of the Mitzvot without understanding all of them. Therefore, when we encounter the *Parah Adumah* and we do not understand its underlying principle – it is clear that we really know nothing at all [regarding the *mitzvot*].

Given the aforementioned, the Red Heifer emerges as a protection against man's natural hubris and potential intellectual arrogance:

...the *Parah Adumah* is, therefore, a fence and a protective measure for man who utilizes his intellect (*hamitbonane b'sichlo*) to examine the reasons inherent in the Commandments; to prevent him from erring in their regard if he were to follow his [mere] intellect and thereby burst forth [against the *mitzvot*] and declare: "I am the one who sees to know their rationale!" In this manner, one would be able to err and add or subtract [from them].

In the Beit Halevi's view, there is only one way to demonstrate loyalty to, and acceptance of, the Commandments:

One must perform all of the *mitzvot*, with all of their specific details, according to what we have received from our Rabbis according to the overarching rules of the Torah and the established Halacha without any deviation whatsoever from the words of the *Shulchan Aruch*. This is the case since he himself recognizes that he does not comprehend the depth of these matters... (All translations and emphasis my own)

In sum, the *Parah Adumah* may be viewed as the *mitzvah par excellence* that teaches us a great deal about all other mitzvot. It reminds us, perhaps more than any other commandment, that G-d is the measure of all things. With the Almighty's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Him with humility, integrity, and heartfelt devotion as we strive to fulfill His majestic and, on occasion, mysterious *mitzvot*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.