

Parashat Chukat 5777, 2017:

The Mystery of the Mitzvot

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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, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etiel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *mitzvah* of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) is found at the beginning of our *parasha*. Its purpose is to purify an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) due to contact with a corpse. This commandment is intrinsically mystifying in nature since, in the course of its fulfillment to ritually purify *tamei* individuals, it simultaneously renders those performing the purification process ritually impure.

Sefer Melachim teaches us that *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon), the wisest man who ever lived, 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:

Give (therefore) Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this Your great people?" And the speech pleased the L-rd, that Solomon had asked this thing. And G-d said to him, "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked for yourself long life; neither have you asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked the life of your enemies; but have asked for yourself understanding to discern judgment. Behold, I have done according to your word; behold, I have given you a wise and understanding heart; so that there was none like you before you, nor after you shall any arise like you." (1:3:9-12, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Many sources suggest that *Shlomo Hamelech* sought to understand all of the *mitzvot*. Yet, even though he 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 declared: "All this I tested with wisdom; I said, 'I will become wise,' but it was far from me." (*Sefer Kohelet* 7:23) According to a variety of Midrashim, the word "it" in the phrase "but it was far from me," specifically refers to the mysterious *Parah Adumah*.

Although we can never approach King Solomon's depth of knowledge, we can try to emulate his passion for understanding. What approach should we pursue in order to better understand the *mitzvot*? The Rambam (1135-1204) provides us with a deeply philosophical analysis of what we ought to do when contemplating the *mitzvot*. In *Hilchot Meilah*, he states: "It is proper for an individual to meditate upon the laws of the holy Torah and to know the depth of their meaning according to the limits of his intellectual acumen." (8:8, This and the following translations and brackets my own) He follows this approach throughout the entire corpus of his writings and, most famously, in his *Moreh Hanavuchim* (*The Guide for the Perplexed*). This is a challenging journey: Finite man, by definition, is incapable of fully comprehending infinite G-d. The Rambam warns us, therefore, to avoid the pitfalls of treating *mitzvot* whose reasons escape us in a facile and flippant manner. Ultimately, even when the rationale of the *mitzvah* remains elusive, we must nonetheless eagerly and lovingly perform His will, "a matter [*mitzvah*] wherein one does not find a reason and does not know its rationale should not become frivolous in his

eyes and he should not burst forth against Hashem.

The Rambam utilizes classic halachic reasoning to prove his contention:

Come and see how strict the Torah is in the Laws of Trespassing (*Meilah*): Just like wood, stones, dust, and ashes, once they are sanctified with the name of the Master of the Universe through words alone, and all who treat them in a profane manner commit a trespass [against G-d] even if this is inadvertent, and will have to seek atonement, all the more so (*kal v'chomer*) in the case of a commandment that the Holy One Blessed be He has commanded us – wherein man may not rebel against them simply because he does not understand their reasons. (Ibid.)

Next, the Rambam warns us against inventing ingenious, but specious, reasons for the *mitzvot*: “And he should not attribute (literally “pile on”) false rationalizations [for the *mitzvot*] against Hashem.” Finally, he concludes this line of reasoning with a this powerful warning: “And one ought not to think concerning them [the Commandments] in the manner in which he thinks about everyday profane matters.”

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892), one of the greatest Lithuanian Torah scholars, expands upon these ideas in his *Beit HaLevi*, an incisive and original analysis of the Torah. In his commentary on *Sefer Shemot* 31, he presents an exposition of the *Parah Adumah* in which he notes that the phrase “This is the statute of the Torah 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 Red Heifer is singled out as being the “statute of the Torah.” He 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 views regarding the search for the rationale of the *mitzvot*:

... 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 other *mitzvot* as well]. (This, and the following translations and brackets my own)

The Beit HaLevi further develops this analysis, noting that 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 *mitzvot*; to prevent him from erring in their regard if he were to follow his [mere] intellect and thereby burst forth [against the Commandments] and declare: "I am the one who is able to know their rationale!" In this manner, one would be able to err and [G-d forbid,] add or subtract [from the Torah].

According to the Beit HaLevi, 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 [perforce] the case since; he himself recognizes that he does not comprehend the depth of these matters...

In sum, the *Parah Adumah* may be viewed as the *mitzvah* that in many ways teaches us much about all the *mitzvot*. Perhaps more than any other commandment, it reminds us, that G-d is the measure of all things and man is but His servant. With the Almighty's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Him with humility and heartfelt devotion, and ever remember before Whom we stand. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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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:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim*