

Parashat Chukat 5784, 2024:

The Mystery of the Parah Adumah

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Our *parasha* begins with the *mitzvah* of the *Parah Adumah*:

This is the statute of the Torah that Hashem commanded, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid.” ... It shall be an everlasting statute for the children of Israel and for the proselyte who resides in their midst. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 19:2 and 10, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The goal of this commandment is to purify an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) as a result of contact with a corpse. It is intrinsically mystifying in nature, since in the course of its fulfillment, the individual who has come into contact with a corpse becomes *tahor* (ritually pure), whereas the one who assists in the purification process is paradoxically rendered *tamei*.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892), known as the “Beit HaLevi,” after the name of his published works, presents a conceptual groundwork for understanding the meaning of the *Parah Adumah*. He notes that the phrase, “this is the statute of the Torah that Hashem commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow...’” is very unusual, since the *Parah Adumah* is singled out as being the “statute of the Torah.” As such, the Beit Halevi asks: “At face value, the *Parah Adumah* is simply one of the [613] *mitzvot* of the Torah. Why, therefore,

is it given the appellation, the “statute of the Torah?” His answer presents a fundamental axiom of *ta’amei hamitzvot* (ascertaining the underlying rationale of 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] of any *mitzvah* of the Torah, since [as this verse suggests,] the entire Torah is a statute (*chukah*) [that eludes our understanding]. (All citations, *Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot*, Chapter 31, translations and emphases my own.)

In Brisker terminology, the Torah is one *cheftzah*, one holistic entity. As such, its *mitzvot* are inextricably intertwined. Therefore, the *Parah Adumah* teaches us that all commandments are beyond the pale of human understanding:

And the explanation of this concept is the following: Behold all of the *mitzvot* are inseparably interconnected 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 rest of the *mitzvot*].

Based on the Beit HaLevi’s analysis, the *Parah Adumah* emerges as a powerful protection against humankind’s natural hubris and the potential for intellectual arrogance that can impede acceptance of the divine, immutable nature of the *mitzvot*:

...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*. It prevents him from erring in their regard... and from bursting forth [against the *mitzvot*] and declaring: “I am the one who knows their rationale!” For were he to do so, he would soon err and add or subtract [from the *mitzvot*].

Therefore, in the Beit HaLevi’s view, there is only one way to remain loyal to the *mitzvot*:

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 all-encompassing rules of the Torah, and the established *halacha*, without any deviation whatsoever from the words of the *Shulchan*

Aruch. This is the case, since one recognizes that he does not comprehend the [true] depth of these matters...

With this understanding, we can view the *Parah Adumah* as the *mitzvah* that serves as a model for all the other *mitzvot*. Perhaps more than any other commandment, it reminds us that the *mitzvot* are from Hashem and, therefore, by definition, beyond human understanding. With the Almighty's help, may we be *zocheh* to faithfully fulfill His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** 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.