

Parashat Parah 5783, 2023:

## *The Mystery of the Mitzvot*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the Kedoshim of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *mitzvah* of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer), the focus of this week's additional Torah reading, is the best-known example of our inability to comprehend the underlying reasons for the *mitzvot*. We do, however, know that the outcome of this commandment is the halachic purification of an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) due to contact with a corpse. Since the *Parah Adumah* purifies those who are *tamei*, while simultaneously rendering those who are *tahor* (ritually pure) *tamei*, it is intrinsically paradoxical and mystifying in nature. Even *Shlomo HaMelech*, blessed with the most prodigious intellect and insight in history, was stymied by the Red Heifer's seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. As he plaintively declared: "All this I tested with wisdom; I said, 'I will become wise,' but it [that is, the *Parah Adumah*] was far from me." (*Sefer Kohelet* 7:23, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

While many Rabbinic sources suggest that *Shlomo HaMelech* was successful in ascertaining the rationale inherent in all *mitzvot* other than the *Parah Adumah*, we are far from his level. What approach, then, can we follow to try to comprehend Hashem's *mitzvot*? Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (1080-1145) teaches in his *Kuzari* that humankind is, by

definition, incapable of comprehending infinite Hashem and His works. Little wonder, then, that the Rambam (1135-1204) urges us to avoid the pitfalls of treating the *mitzvot* whose reasons escape us in a facile and flippant manner:

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, lest He burst forth against him. Additionally, his thoughts in this matter ought not to be like his thoughts in profane matters. (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah* 8:8, this and the following translations my own)

The Rambam utilizes classic halachic reasoning to buttress 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 will have to seek atonement, even if the act was done inadvertently, all the more so (*kal v'chomer*) in the case of *mitzvot* 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.

In addition, the Rambam warns against inventing ingenious, but specious, reasons for the *mitzvot*: “And he should not attribute (literally “pile on”) false rationalizations [for the *mitzvot*] against Hashem. He concludes his presentation by warning, “And one ought not to think concerning them [the *mitzvot*] in the manner in which he thinks about everyday profane matters.”

In his incisive exegetical study, *Beit Halevi*, on *Sefer Shemot* 31, Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892) posits an exposition of the *Parah Adumah* that expands upon the Rambam’s approach. 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...’” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 19:2) is very unusual, since the *Parah*

*Adumah* is singled out as being the “statute of the Torah.” Consequently, he asks: “At face value, the *Parah Adumah* is simply one of the [613] *mitzvot* of the Torah. Why, then, is it given the unusual label of the ‘statute of the Torah?’” His answer expresses some of his central beliefs concerning the search for the underlying 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 eludes our understanding] And the explanation of this concept is the following, behold all of the *mitzvot* are inextricably attached to, and interwoven with, one another. Moreover, each one depends upon the other ... [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*].

For the Beit HaLevi, since all the *mitzvot* are inextricably interwoven, if the *Parah Adumah* is incomprehensible, it is impossible to truly understand any other *mitzvah* of the Torah. As such, the *Parah Adumah* emerges as a protection against humankind’s 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 [merely] follow his intellect and thereby burst forth [against the *mitzvot*] and declare: “I am the one who knows their rationale!” In this manner, one would be able to err and add or subtract [from the *mitzvot*].

The Beit HaLevi, therefore, concludes that there is only one way to demonstrate our acceptance of, 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 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... (Translations and brackets my own)

Perhaps more than any other *mitzvah*, the *Parah Adumah* reminds us that Hashem is the

measure of all things. With the Almighty's help, and our fervent desire, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Him with heartfelt devotion as we 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/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* 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: [The Rav](#)