

Parashat Chukat 5770, 2010:

The Majesty of the Mitzvot

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Protagoras, the fifth century Greek philosopher, boldly proclaimed: “Man is the measure of all things.” This idea was, and is, 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 is the measure of all things and man is but his servant.” While this notion is true for Judaism in general, it is particularly apropos regarding the Torah’s system of Mitzvot, and the commandment of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) in particular.

The mitzvah of the *Parah Adumah* is found at the beginning of our *parasha*. It is one of the best examples of man’s inability to truly comprehend the endlessly echoing Voice emanating from *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai):

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, upon which no yoke was laid.” And you shall give it to Eleazar the kohen, and he shall take it outside the camp and slaughter it in his presence. Eleazar the kohen shall take from its blood with his finger and sprinkle it toward the front of the Tent of Meeting seven times. The cow shall then be burned in his presence; its hide, its flesh, its blood, with its dung he shall burn it. The kohen shall take a piece of cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson wool, and cast them

into the burning of the cow. The kohen shall wash his garments and bathe his flesh in water, and then he may enter the camp, and the kohen shall be unclean until evening. The one who burns it shall wash his clothes in water and cleanse his body in water, and he shall be unclean until evening. A ritually clean person shall gather the cow's ashes and place them outside the camp in a clean place, and it shall be as a keepsake for the congregation of the children of Israel for sprinkling water, [used] for cleansing. The one who gathers the cow's ashes shall wash his clothes, and he shall be unclean until evening. It shall be an everlasting statute for the children of Israel and for the proselyte who resides in their midst. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 19:2-10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Clearly, the purpose of this commandment is to purify an individual who has become *tamei* (ritually impure) due to their contact with a corpse. Yet, it is intrinsically paradoxical and mystifying in nature since, during the process of its fulfillment, it ritually purifies the impure while simultaneously rendering the ritually pure impure.

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:

In Gibeon the L-rd appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and G-d said, "Ask what I shall give you." And Solomon said, "You have done Your servant David my father great kindness, as he walked before you in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; and You have kept for him this great kindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as (it is) this day. And now, O L-rd my G-d, You have made Your servant king instead of David my father; and I (am but) a little child; I do not know (how) to go out or come in. And your servant (is) in the midst of Your people which you have chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. 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."

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, and could not solve this conundrum. 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) According to a variety of Midrashim, the word "it" in the phrase "but it was far from me," specifically refers to the mysterious and mystical *Parah Adumah*. Hence, even King Solomon had a limit to his intellect and comprehension.

Many diverse sources suggest that *Shlomo Hamelech* sought to understand all of the Mitzvot. Although we can never approximate his depth of understanding, we should try to emulate him in this regard. What approach should we pursue in order to more effectively comprehend the Mitzvot? The Rambam (1135-1204) provides us with a cogent and deeply philosophical analysis of what we ought to do when contemplating the Mitzvot. In *Hilchot Meilah* 8:8, 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." (This, and all translations, 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 journey of understanding is a challenging one: Finite man, by definition, is incapable of fully apprehending and comprehending infinite G-d. The Rambam warns us, therefore, no less than three times, to avoid the pitfalls of treating Mitzvot whose reasons escape us in a facile and flippant manner. Man can never be the arbiter of that which is proper and fitting in the "eyes" of our Creator. Ultimately, even when the rationale of the mitzvah proves to be 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 lest He will burst forth against him. Additionally, his thoughts in this matter ought not to be like his thoughts in profane matters. (*Hilchot Meilah* 8:8)

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 commits 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, in particular, 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 the reiteration of his earlier warning: “And one ought not to think concerning them [the Commandments] in the manner in which he thinks about everyday profane matters.”

In commenting on this halacha, Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), notes in his glosses on the *Mishneh Torah*, entitled *Kesef Mishneh*: “The words and approach of our teacher are essential matters of belief (*emunah*) and they are proper and fitting for him.” Extrapolating from this statement, and in light of the actual words of the Rambam, we gain a new and crucial understanding of the intrinsic meaning of the Mitzvot. The Rambam's presentation underscores the divine nature of the Commandments and their self-validating status. In other words, while one is indeed duty-bound to try his/her best to understand the Mitzvot, their performance is never contingent upon our success or failure

in this arena of intellectual endeavor and understanding. Moreover, failure to comprehend the Mitzvot in no way alters their status or validity as *tzivui Hashem* (commands of G-d). They remain eternally holy and, like Hashem Himself, *laleh u'laleh* (beyond our complete intellectual grasp).

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892) was one of the greatest European Torah scholars and the author of the *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* that builds and expands upon the above-presented ideas of the Rambam. 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 beliefs regarding 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 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 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 sees to know their rationale!" In this manner, one would be able to err and add or subtract [from the Mitzvot].

In Rav Soloveitchik'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... (Translation and emphasis my own)

In sum, the *Parah Adumah* may be viewed as the mitzvah that in some ways teaches us a great deal about all of the other mitzvot. It reminds us, perhaps more than any other mitzvah, that G-d is the measure of all things and man is but his servant. With G-d's help, may we all be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Him with humility, integrity, and heartfelt devotion as we fulfill His majestic Mitzvot. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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