

The Red Heifer and Other Mysteries

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, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

The Torah differentiates between three different kinds of knowledge. When Moshe is informed that Betzalel is going to design the *Mishkan* (portable sanctuary), Hashem informs him that He has "...filled him [Betzalel] with the spirit of *Elokim*, with *chachmah*, *tevunah* and *da'at*." (*Sefer Shemot* 31: 3) Rashi (1040-1105) explains *chachmah* as "knowledge" since it refers to "that which a man hears from others and learns from it," whereas *tevunah* refers to the ability to extrapolate and apply that knowledge. *Da'at*, in his view and in this context, refers specifically to the *ruach hakodesh* (holy spirit) that was bestowed upon Betzalel to enable him to fulfill his awesome and noble task.

Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch *zatzal* (1808-1888), in his commentary on the Siddur, explains two of the above-mentioned terms somewhat differently. For Rav Hirsch, *da'at* "...denotes the true perception of the real nature of things and conditions." *Binah* (a variant of *tevunah*), in contrast, "is the insight into the interrelationships of things, to be gained by logical judgment." He further contrasts these two terms in the following manner:

Da'ath, to a great extent, is a talent given to man which develops by itself in and through experience. But he cannot acquire *binah* without an effort on his own part. Therefore [in

the fourth *bracha* of the *Amidah*] the term *melamade* [teach] is employed with reference to *binah* instead of *chonen* [that which is given in kindness]... The acquisition of *binah* requires strenuous effort to which man may not be equal and for which he may well lack the strength; for this reason he cannot attain *binah* without the help of G-d.

In summary, for Rav Hirsch, *da'at* is the ability to accurately perceive the real nature of the world. It is gifted to man. *Binah*, however, is difficult to acquire and something that one must constantly strive to attain. This struggle can only be won with the help of our Creator.

Chazal (our Sages) teach us in a variety of sources that *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) was the wisest man who ever lived. He was the master of all known *chachmah*. He received the greatest *da'at* (following Rav Hirsch's understanding above) from Hashem. Moreover, with G-d's help and love, he acquired the most profound *binah* that any man could ever attain. Nonetheless, the explanation of one *mitzvah* forever eluded *Shlomo Hamelech's* phenomenal intellect: the *Parah Adumah* (the Red Heifer), as presented in this week's *parasha*. This *mitzvah* defied his understanding because of its paradoxical nature, i.e. it ritually purifies the impure while simultaneously rendering the ritually pure impure. Even *Shlomo Hamelech* could not solve this conundrum. It is a "riddle" that remains unsolved until our own time.

I believe there is a reason why no one has ever been able to logically explain the *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah*. I believe that it is Hashem's gentle way of teaching and reminding us that we must remain humble before Him; it is His way of teaching us that try as we may, complete understanding of the Torah will forever elude us. After all, the Torah is *divrei Elokim mamash* (the actual words of G-d) and, since He will always remain unknowable

to us, so too, will His words, on occasion, defy our finite comprehension. This is as it should be. In a sense, it is a small glimmer of His divine plan and, thereby, a window into the Infinite.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to live in the time of *Mashiach* (the Messiah) when the “world will only be involved with [trying to] know Hashem,” and the Jewish people will be “great wise men [people] who will know secret matters and achieve knowledge of their Creator according to the highest ability...” (Rambam, Maimonides, 1135-1240, *Hilchot Melachim* 12:5) With Hashem’s help, may the authentic knowledge of Hashem and His Torah manifest itself throughout the entire world, and the hearts and souls of mankind – soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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