

Parashat Chukat 5779, 2019:

The Message of the Parah Adumah

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The *mitzvah* of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) is the focal point of the beginning of our *parasha*:

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.” ... 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 Bible 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*.

Sefer Melachim I: 3:12 teaches us that *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon), the wisest individual who ever lived, was blessed by Hashem with the greatest *da'at* (native intelligence) and most profound *binah* (insight into the interrelationship of things) that anyone could ever achieve: “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.” Yet, even he was stymied by the Red Heifer’s irreconcilable contradictions and poignantly lamented: “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” specifically refers to the *Parah Adumah*.

The great 19th century sage, Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892), in his Torah commentary, *Beit HaLevi*, on *Sefer Shemot*, Chapter 31, presents an exposition of the *Parah Adumah* that helps us understand its essential meaning. 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 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, [as this verse suggests,] the entire Torah is a statute (*chukah*) [that defies our understanding]. (This and the following translations my own.)

Rav Soloveitchik proceeds to elaborate upon this statement:

And the explanation of this concept is the following; behold all of the *mitzvot* are inextricably connected 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 any of the *mitzvot*].

Given these thoughts, the Red Heifer emerges as a protection against man’s natural hubris and potential for 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*. 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*].

In Rav Soloveitchik’s view, there is only one way to demonstrate acceptance of, and loyalty to, 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 provides us with a conceptual model for approaching all of the other *mitzvot*, as it reminds us, perhaps more than any other commandment, that Hashem is the measure of all things. With the Almighty’s help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Him with humility and devotion as we strive to fulfill His holy Torah. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria *Etengoff* and the *parasha*’s name.

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>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women 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.