

## Parshat Parah: The Triumph of the Illogical

Parshat Parah begins with the iconic phrase of זאת חקת התורה. The term חוקה refers to any seminal or foundational concept. For example, the Torah introduces the laws of korban pesach with the phrase זאת חקת הפסח, since this korban lies at the foundation of Jewish identity. Likewise, parah adumah is similarly “foundational” as it addresses the impurity of death. Any mitzvah which helps us navigate death is seminal.

Additionally, the term חקה refers to a mitzvah which is irrational. Parah adumah is the prototype חוק since its logic remains impenetrable. Both Moshe and Shlomo failed to decipher the inner logic of this mysterious practice. No human logic can rationalize why burnt ashes of a pure red cow, mixed with water, removes the halachik impurity of death. Not only is para adumah illogical, it is also an enigma. Those who administer the process of removing tumah, themselves become ritually impure. Parah aduma is a dual “chok” – it is both foundational and completely irrational.

Irrational religion strains the human imagination. Naturally, our imaginations migrate to those experiences we understand and from which, we easily draw meaning. Adhering to irrational mitzvot demands piety and conviction. In his comments to the first verse of ‘parshat parah’ in Chukat, Rashi comments that the Satan derides this and other irrational mitzvot. Every religious person hears this “inner voice” of the Satan which questions the function of illogical rituals.

We never question the meaning of rational mitzvot. It is obvious that without charity, respect for law and admiration for elders, society will crumble. Mitzvot of chagim strengthen our collective historical memory. Moral laws such as the violations of murder, theft and false testimony uphold the oral integrity of society.

By contrast, irrational religious rituals are often perplexing and demand faith and conviction. Knowing that we obey a higher Will provides the courage to perform the irrational. If anything, adherence to illogical mitzvot often feels more reverent and subservient. Obedience based

on divine logic rather than human intuition creates greater passion and piety. We all hear the gnawing inner voice of Satan which questions the validity of irrational mitzvot.

After mentioning the derisive voice of Satan Rashi describes a second voice- the voice of nations who disparage Jewish religion and ritual. This mocking voice is less obvious. Judaism has been mocked for centuries, but the scorn has taken on very different forms. It isn't a constant shrill but a cacophony of ridicule which changes throughout history.

In the early stages of Jewish religious history, it is unlikely that parah adumah attracted distinctive ridicule. Most of the world was mired in the dark world of ancient paganism, witchcraft and black magic. Illogic dominated this chaotic world of fear and uncertainty. Though Jewish rituals weren't mocked a different part of Jewish religion was challenged- the bold notion that one G-d was solely responsible for creating our vast world. This concept was incomprehensible to the pagan mind and elicited disbelief. The world felt too diverse and too dichotomous to be attributed to one G-d, and to an invisible non-physical one at that. We weren't mocked for a particular ritual but rather for our brazen theological revolution.

Centuries later, the Roman empire transitioned humanity from paganism to monotheism. An empire which initially spoke of an army of mythological gods, ultimately converted to monotheism. Despite this transition, Jews still faced ridicule, as we appeared to be on the losing side of history. Evicted from Yerushalayim and persistently subjugated, we were cast as a cursed people. As Christianity and Islam quickly spread, Jews wandered the globe, downtrodden and occupying the margins of society. We were derided as the 'formerly chosen people' who had forfeited its favored status and had been replaced by other races and other religions. Our denial of the "modern prophets" doomed us to perfidy. We weren't just mocked, we were despised.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the world shifted away from mystery and toward reason. Science unveiled a world of order, predictability and ration. Knowledge and reason replaced ritual. The notion of rational mitzvot still resonated, but the world of ritual and of irrational mitzvot was derided as ancient and outdated. Sadly, for the first time in history the mocking affected the Jewish imagination as many Jews abandoned their

fidelity to classic halacha and ritual. The disdain of modern culture for the irrational was too much for many Jews to bear. Facing centuries of derision, many Jews surrendered.

Ironically, in the post-modern era, we face a different form of mockery. The good news is that Judaism is no longer being disproportionately scoffed at. The bad news is that, in our world of individualism and “identitylessness”, religion in general, is being disparaged. A religious university student once complained to me: "I wish my teachers and fellow students would mock Judaism. Instead, they mock all religion and any article of faith. It is all cast as outdated, tribal and irrelevant." In this environment it is even harder to maintain steadfast religious conviction.

The mocking will soon end. The modern State of Israel is slowly turning jeers into cheers. Across the Jewish world, hope and faith are being renewed. It may not yet express religiously, but, one day it will. Jewish pride in the state of Israel foreshadows a revival of revitalized religious desire.

The international world remains divided into two. The mockers are increasing the volume of their ridicule by assailing the moral integrity of Israel and through their constant negative caricatures of Jews. On the bright side, much of the world no longer ridicules but admires. They admire both how we have survived and the state we are fashioning.

One day everyone will gather in Yerushalayim. It will be loud. But the noise won't be a cacophony of ridicule but a symphony of song. Loud clapping and universal admiration. It will then be quiet and peaceful. No more mocking.