

## Is Religion Rational?

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The legendary King Solomon was gifted with unlimited intelligence. His fabled intellectual talents drew curious tourists from across the globe. Not only did he master the classic fields of learning, but he also studied the secret languages of the natural and animal kingdoms. Nothing lay beyond his penetrating intellect, except for the logic of one solitary divine commandment, which perplexed him.

Even with his scintillating intellect, Solomon failed to decode the great mystery of parah adumah, or the red heifer ceremony. Ashes taken from a burnt red cow, mixed with natural spring water, applied twice during a one-week interval, eliminates halachik impurity from someone who had contact with a corpse. Once released from this legal state of impurity, the person can return to the Temple precincts.

Understandably, this bizarre service baffled the smartest man to ever live. Not only is the ceremony irrational, but it is also enigmatic and counterintuitive. Though the application of this watery mixture removes impurity from the recipient, it introduces impurity to the officials who administer this sacred suspension. The parah adumah ritual is a riddle wrapped in an enigma, and it bewildered the greatest brain in the history of Mankind.

Surrendering to this mystery, Solomon lamented: "I had hoped to acquire this knowledge but, alas, it remained distant from me". The red heifer ceremony is the classic model of an irrational religious commandment so inexplicable that it remained impervious even to Solomon's wisdom.

Though the red heifer ceremony is exceptional, it is also iconic. This ceremony, devoid of any apparent logic, demonstrates, that all commandments, even the so-called logical ones, lie beyond the grasp of human comprehension. The red heifer ceremony merely accentuates the inner illogic of every divine command.

## Are Commandments Logical?

Though the Torah rarely provides direct or clear reasons for commandments, each divine instruction possesses a purpose and

provides a benefit, either material or spiritual. God doesn't issue arbitrary or capricious mandates, but provides us invaluable guidelines for human behavior. Throughout history, supreme confidence in the rational nature of divine commandments inspired persistent efforts to map the hidden reasons behind divine commandments. Some commandments such as moral laws and the rules governing society appear to be rational, while most commandments such as rituals, dietary laws and marital regulations appear to be less logical.

Many scholars, most prominently Maimonides, attempted to uncover the hidden reasons behind all divine commandments. Maimonides' efforts were highly controversial and elicited significant opposition. Some of the backlash stemmed from concerns that attaching reasons to commandments could, potentially, contextualize them and undermine their authority. Opponents of Maimonides worried that when divine instructions are hinged to a particular reason, they are more easily miscast as obsolete once the reasons fade. For divine commandments to be timeless they must be untethered to any specific context, set of customs, or time period.

Ironically, Solomon himself failed this test, by misconstruing the reason for a Biblical injunction and incorrectly assuming it didn't apply to him. He justified that the Biblical injunction against marrying an excessive number of wives was only geared to prevent distractions from a king's national responsibilities. Confident in his own ability to attend to his royal duties, Solomon violated this injunction, married too many women and, ultimately, was sidetracked.

Solomon's failed gamble is a cautionary tale. Tracing commandments to specific reasons can undermine their timelessness and subject them to selective performance.

### Piety and Obedience

Additionally, asserting a rational basis for the performance of a divine obligation may dilute the piety of the experience. Divine mandates condition us toward unconditional submission to God and His will. Fulfillment of a divine obligation without fully understanding its underlying reason or without deriving any personal benefit fosters obedience and piety. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, CS Lewis,

articulated, "when we have said that God commands things only because they are good, we must add that one of the things intrinsically good is that rational creatures should freely surrender themselves to their Creator in obedience. ....the mere obeying is also intrinsically good, for, in obeying, a rational creature... reverses the act by which we fell, treads Adam's dance backward, and returns. " The highest "intrinsic good" is to express our obedience to a Higher being.

For this reason, the red heifer ceremony is intentionally programmed without rhyme or reason. This illogical ceremony, which rescues us from the world of death, underscores the fact, that humans don't possess all the answers. Just as we have no solution for death, we are similarly limited in our understanding of many other truths. Religion asks us to submit our own limited intellects to a Higher authority whose wisdom lies "beyond", whose thoughts aren't our thoughts and whose ways aren't our ways.

Though we strive to discover logic within divine commands we never condition religious observance upon human understanding. Every religious command is similar to the red heifer ceremony: a leap into the unknown, beyond human logic and beyond human comprehension. Ultimately, religion is dependent upon a leap of faith.

### Science Never Leaps

The modern world is far too rational for leaps of faith. In an ancient world which was dark and confusing, it was obvious that deeper wisdoms lay beyond the reach of human intellect. In that frightening and unpredictable world, truth could only be found at the delicate intersection between ration and irrationality. Truth was always a blend between observed facts and articles of faith. Great leaps of the imagination were necessary just to survive.

Contemporary culture has been completely reshaped by five centuries of scientific revolution. Our rational world only attributes validity to the facts which empirical experimentation and sensory experience confirm. As John Locke asserted "the only true knowledge that could be accessible to the human mind was that which was based on experience". Strict scientific analysis, based upon unprejudiced experimentation is the only pathway to truth. In our world of stark empiricism, irrational

religious leaps of faith seem, to many, foolish and outdated. Empiricism discourages the unverifiable, and therefore, in the modern secular city, religion has gradually collapsed.

Very little about faith can be proven. Ironically, once we assume that God spoke with us at Sinai it is completely logical to obey His commands and His word. However, proof of that foundational moment or of the seminal act of creation lies beyond empirical experimentation. It takes courage and higher intellect to accept non-empirical truth.

### Artificial Intelligence and Human Identity

The rise of Artificial Intelligence may have unintended positive consequences for religious belief. Many religious people are legitimately concerned about how AI will affect our religious practice, our view of human identity, and ultimately, our commitment to religion. Ironically AI may help restore the value of non-rational elements of human identity. By creating higher beings of intelligence, whose rational capacities far outstrip human potential, we may more deeply value the non-rational capabilities which make us uniquely human. If rational and cognitive faculties are endowed to machines, they can no longer be viewed as central components of human identity. By offloading rational processing to robots, we may better appreciate human immortality and the distinctly human ability to take leaps of faith and to accept delivered truths from others.

Machines can never discern Higher intellect. We, alone, are touched by God, and we alone can find Him through courageous leaps of our imagination.

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