

THE POWER OF PURITY ALSO EXISTS TODAY

The mitzvah of the “red heifer” has no logical reason behind it. It is called a chukah, as the Sages have taught: “The Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel by saying, ‘What is this command and what reason is there for it?’ The Holy One, blessed be He, says: ‘I have laid down a statute; I have issued a decree! You cannot transgress My decree!’” True, the mitzvah of the red heifer is a decree that has neither a reason nor an explanation for it. Our Sages said that even King Solomon wanted to understand the reason behind it, and he thought that he might succeed. Yet in the end, he was forced to admit that it was beyond him and that he understood nothing, as he himself said: “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (Ecclesiastes 7:23).

All the same, we note several things in this mitzvah that are both amazing and surprising, things that may teach us lessons for daily living, even today. First of all, the heifer must be completely red, and even two black hairs will disqualify it. Why is this so? What does it matter if the color of its hide is not entirely red? Secondly, the heifer must never have been worked, as the verse says: “Upon which a yoke has not come” (Numbers 19:2). This also requires an explanation.

In addition, the Sages say that the ashes of the red heifer render the impure pure, and the pure impure. This means that when the ashes of the red heifer were sprinkled on a person who was impure, he was rendered pure. Yet at the same time, a pure person who came into contact with the ashes (or the one performing the sprinkling) was rendered impure. This is very odd. Why do we find something and its opposite here, since we could have inferred that because the ashes purify the impure, then they should certainly not render the pure impure, but rather leave him pure!

In addition to all this, we need to understand something fundamental. We know that the red heifer atones for the sin of the golden calf, as the Sages have said: “This may be illustrated by a parable. A handmaiden’s boy polluted the

king’s palace. The king said: ‘Let his mother come and clear away the filth.’ In the same way the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Let the heifer come and atone for the incident of the calf’” (Bamidbar Rabba 19:8). Now this seems difficult to understand, for we know that Hashem repays measure for measure, with the rectification being in exactly the same area as the sin. Now since the Children of Israel sinned by making the golden calf, the rectification of that sin should also have been done by a calf, not by a heifer (i.e., by a cow, which is the mother of a calf).

My friends, this teaches us that today also, in our generation, we can attain purity as during the time when the ashes of the red heifer were available. To purify and sanctify ourselves, we simply need for some prior conditions to be met.

An ordinary individual is filled with imperfections, be they sins, moral defects, or simply unpleasant character traits that he must correct. The sad thing, however, is that a person does not see his own shortcomings. He cannot really see his deficiencies. This is why the Torah comes and tells us that the heifer must be completely red, without the least amount of black hairs. This means that before all else, we must repair our inadequacies and become perfect and whole in our character traits and mitzvot performance. It is only in this way that we can achieve complete purification and sanctification, and as such we can come closer to Hashem.

In addition, a person must put a devoted effort into improving his character traits by firing himself up with enthusiasm for serving Hashem. This is alluded to by the color of the heifer, for red is a sign of fervor; it is the color of the sacred fire for serving the Creator. It is only with fervor that a person can achieve purity.

We also need to meet another condition: The red heifer must never have carried a yoke. Our Sages say, “Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah – the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly cares are removed from him” (Perkei Avoth 3:5). One who agrees to devote himself to the Torah and become purified through it, all obstacles

in his service to Hashem are removed. If a person has not carried the yoke – that is, if he wears no other yoke, such as the yoke of materiality – and if he turns away from material concerns and the pleasures of this world, then the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the yoke of Torah, and with it he purifies himself and comes closer to Hashem.

At the same time as all this, we must still remember a basic principle. It sometimes seems that we have perfected ourselves in all aspects of our service to Hashem, with nothing more to improve. In fact we may have already begun studying Torah, performing mitzvot, and conducting ourselves according to the dictates of the Torah and tradition. We may be giving to tzedakah and helping people both through our direct efforts and our money, and therefore we may already seem perfect and without reproach, holy and pure without defect. We may even think that we already deserve a tiny part of Gan Eden, both below and above. This is why a certain detail regarding the law of the red heifer tells us that although its ashes can purify one who is impure and bring him closer to Hashem, its ashes can also make those who are pure – those who already consider themselves perfect, with nothing to improve – impure. The red heifer renders such a person impure, for he has no desire to sanctify or purify himself further, since he already thinks that he is perfect.

Above all, the last condition teaches us that the sin must be rectified not through the calf itself, but through its mother. This teaches us the power of our holy forefathers and the tzaddikim in every generation, for it is only by their merit that every Jew may sanctify and purify himself, and thus come closer to the Creator.

Let us adopt these principles as our own. Let us better ourselves by fervently correcting our defects, by completely accepting the yoke of Heaven – without allowing ourselves to think that we are already perfect – all while relying on the tzaddikim and our holy forefathers. In this way we will merit becoming truly pure and holy. Amen, may it be so!

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Man is Fundamentally Good, But the Evil Inclination Leads Him Astray

“They shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish” (Numbers 19:2).

Two great philosophers were once discussing man’s fundamental nature and his tendencies. One philosopher believed that by nature man is completely good, without defect of any kind. He felt that if we sometimes see a person adopting deviant ways and committing evil, it is solely external influences that prompt him to do so; his intrinsically good nature remains untouched. The other philosopher, however, believed that man was fundamentally evil, with all his desires and tendencies pushing him to do as much evil as possible. This philosopher felt that when we encounter people who do good, it is a purely superficial phenomenon.

Our holy Torah already gave its view on this subject thousands of years ago, and King Solomon addressed this issue in his wisdom: “This I did find: G-d has made man simple, but they sought many intrigues” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). King Solomon addressed the issue in question, informing us that by nature man is fundamentally good and upright, without any mixture of evil. If we encounter someone who is far from the right path, it is only because the evil inclination has led him onto the wrong path.

Solomon’s father David said the same: “Only goodness and kindness will pursue me all the days of my life” (Psalms 23:6). Man’s inner tendency is solely to do good and express generosity, but there are external factors that stop him, encouraging him to do the very opposite.

This marvelous principle appears in our parsha. The Sages interpreted the verse, “They shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish” in the following way: “ ‘Cow’ – this is Israel, as it is written: ‘Israel has strayed like a wayward cow’ [Hosea 4:16]. ‘Red’ – this is Israel, as it is written: ‘Whose complexion was more red than rubies’ [Lamentations 4:7]. ‘Completely’ – this is Israel, as it is written: ‘My dove, My complete one’ [Song of Songs 5:2]. ‘Which is without blemish’ – this is Israel, as it is written: ‘You are completely fair, My beloved, and no blemish is in you’ [ibid. 4:7].”

What the Midrash is saying seems surprising. At first it interprets the verse to Israel’s detriment, comparing it to a rebellious cow, but then it interprets the verse in Israel’s favor! In fact what the Midrash is telling us is that the Holy One, blessed be He, testifies that Israel’s fundamental, inner nature is uniquely good – there is no defect in it – to the point that Hashem calls Israel, “My dove, tamati [My complete one]” (Song of Songs 5:2). The Midrash states: “Rabbi Yanai said, ‘It means, as it were, teumati [My twin]’ ” (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:2§2). It is as if the Holy One, blessed be he, were saying to Israel: “You are My twin. I am not greater than you, and you are not greater than I.” From this we learn just how precious Israel is to Hashem, to the point that He calls Israel “My twin.” This because Hashem knows that the Jewish people are holy and pure, and that their nature consists only of good, just like a cow that accepts its master’s yoke and is ready to carry out his will at all times. Similarly, a Jew is the faithful servant of his Creator.

When a Jew acts like a rebellious cow and rejects the yoke of Heaven, it is only because the evil inclination, located at the entrance of his heart, is controlling his desires. As the Sages have said, “Our desire is to do Your will, but the leaven in the dough prevents us!”

Performing Mitzvot Even Without Understanding Them

“They shall take to you a completely red cow” (Numbers 19:2).

The Gemara recounts the story of a non-Jew by the name of Dama ben Netina, a man who was meticulous with respect to honoring his parents. The Sages of Israel wanted to purchase some precious stones from him for the ephod of the High Priest. However the stones were kept in a safe, and the key to the safe was lying under the pillow of his father, who was sleeping soundly. Dama ben

Netina had no intention of disturbing his sleep, and therefore he lost the sale. Hashem rewarded Dama ben Netina the following year, for a red heifer was born in his herd. When the Sages of Israel went to buy it from him, he said to them: “I know that even if I were to ask you for all the money in the world, you would agree to pay it. However I am only going to ask for the money I lost because of the honor I showed my father” (Kiddushin 31a).

The Chiddushim HaRim of Ger asked, “Why was it precisely a red heifer that Dama ben Netina merited for having respected his father? It is because when he lost a great deal of money, he raised a tremendous accusation in Heaven against the Children of Israel: How was it possible for the nations of the world to honor their parents more than the Children of Israel, since on Mount Sinai they received the mitzvah to honor their parents? This is why Dama ben Netina was given a red heifer as a reward, in order to teach the nations that it is not so difficult to be meticulous with regards to a logical mitzvah, such as honoring one’s parents. It was also to teach the nations the greatness of the Children of Israel, since they are willing to expend a great deal of money for mitzvot such as the red heifer, mitzvot that are impossible to understand through intelligence or logic, and whose reason is not at all given by the Torah.”

You Shall Not Profane My Holy Name

“Because you did not believe in Me...you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Numbers 20:12).

The commentators put a great deal of effort into explaining the exact nature of the sin of Moses and Aaron, which the above verse mentions. Rashi explains that their sin lay in the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, had commanded them to speak to the rock, not to strike it. If Moses had done so, G-d’s Name would have been sanctified before the entire community, and they would have said, “This rock – which can neither speak nor hear, and does not require sustenance – fulfills the word of the Omnipresent. How much more should we do the same!” Thus by striking the rock, Moses diminished the honor of Heaven, and that was his sin.

From this we learn just how much a person must pay attention to sanctifying Hashem’s Name, and to an even greater extent he must not profane it, which an extremely grave sin. On this subject, a person once entrusted his friend with \$100,000 and asked him to bring it to a certain place. However his friend, instead of doing what was asked of him, went to a gambling establishment to try his luck and attempt to double the money he was given and deliver the capital to its rightful owner. He lost everything, however, and was left without a single dollar. When the person who entrusted him with the money learned of this, he hired a lawyer and asked him to recover the whole amount from his friend, for he had caused him a terrible loss. The lawyer told him that there was a good chance that he could recover the money, since it could be proved that his friend had gambled with money that was not his own. “Nevertheless, you must realize,” the lawyer added, “that in such a case your friend’s picture will appear in the newspaper and he’ll be sent to prison.” The person was now afraid, for this friend of his – the person who had caused him such a great loss – was a Jew with a beard and payot, and he truly looked like a ben Torah. If his picture were to be published, it would result in a terrible chillul Hashem. In his embarrassment, the man asked some leading Torah figures for advice. One of them, in Israel, said that it was clearly forbidden, for it would result in precisely that – a terrible chillul Hashem – which is the worst kind of sin. Thus the man was forced to annul his plans to bring his friend to court, even though it cost him a large sum of money, all in order to avoid a desecration of Hashem’s Name. Let’s think about this!

Continual Soul Searching

“Therefore they that speak in parables say: Come to Heshbon” (Numbers 21:27).

The Gemara states: “Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “What is the meaning of the verse, ‘Therefore hamoshelim [they that speak in parables] say: Come to Heshbon’? Hamoshelim – those who rule

their evil inclinations. ‘Come to Heshbon’ – come, let us consider the account [heshbon] of the world: The loss incurred by the fulfillment of a precept against the reward secured by its observance, and the gain gotten by a transgression against the loss it involves” (Bava Batra 78b).

Here the Torah teaches us that every action taken in daily life must be evaluated. We must weigh each thing, asking ourselves if it is worth doing or not. Every sin removes a portion from a person’s share in the World to Come, and every mitzvah adds to his share in the World to Come. The Chafetz Chaim used to say, “It is forbidden to be worse than merchants, who always do their accounting and record their budgets, comparing their expenses to their revenues in order not to go bankrupt. A Jew must conduct himself in exactly the same way, evaluating the loss caused by mitzvah in comparison to its reward – and even more with regards to the loss incurred by a sin – so as not to be greeted with a surprise upon arriving in the World to Come.”

A doctor went to see a great Rav in Bnei Brak. He told him that one morning some police officers had showed up at his door with an arrest warrant. The doctor was obviously alarmed, yet he learned that on that morning his car had been stolen, and that the thief – not content with his theft – was also trying his luck. That is, the thief got into an accident with the doctor’s car and injured people, and then he fled the scene. The police were called and identified the car’s owner by the license plate. They had therefore shown up at the doctor’s home to arrest him for fleeing the scene of an accident, a particularly serious crime. The doctor had come before the Rav in order to ask him why he deserved such troubles.

The Rav asked him if he ever made trouble for other motorists when he was driving. The doctor replied that he had, for since his job was to save lives, he sometimes allowed himself to cut people off while driving. Just before his car had been stolen that morning, he drove to a place other than the hospital, yet he still drove recklessly and without justification. He had caused a traffic jam and made people lose time, resulting in a loss of Torah study.

“Things are therefore clear,” the Rav told him, “for there is a Judge and a judgment!”

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

By the Merit of Holding His Tongue

“Anyone who was bitten will look at it and live” (Numbers 21:9).

We have a marvelous story that proves, better than a thousand witnesses ever could, all that we stand to gain by avoiding Lashon Harah.

The story occurred in Tiberias, to a family whose home was situated on a hill. In fact their children would amuse themselves in the yard by sliding down the hill. One of their children, a 10-year-old boy, was playing tranquilly in the yard one day, sliding down the hill as usual. During one of his slides, however, he struck a rock and the force of the collision dislodged it. Nobody noticed at the time, but a venomous serpent about 6 feet long emerged from a hole that the rock had been covering, and it bit the boy. Later on, the boy’s younger brother said that he had seen a pretty “rope” moving along the ground.

The boy who was bitten began to vomit and eventually fainted, and his situation was deteriorating with every passing moment. The family, which was unaware that he was suffering from a snakebite, didn’t know what to make of his condition at first, and it was only after he got worse that they brought him to a doctor. The doctor detected the bite and immediately sent the boy to the hospital.

During the first night at the hospital, the boy remained unconscious and the doctors expressed reservations at his chances of recovery. The next morning, however, the boy opened his eyes and cried out to everyone around the bed: “I promise that I’ll never speak Lashon Harah again,” and then he closed his eyes. After that, the boy began to get better, until after a few days he completely recovered. The doctors were amazed at his sudden recovery, confirming that they had never seen anything like this before.

Need we say more?

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

A Tiny Flaw May Constitute a Fundamental Defect

Concerning the waters of Kadesh, Hashem states that the reason why Moses and Aaron were punished by not being allowed to lead the Children of Israel into the land was “because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me” (Numbers 20:12). The Rishonim discuss the nature of the reprimand aimed at Moses and Aaron, whether it was due to the fact that Moses struck the rock despite Hashem telling him and Aaron, “Speak to the rock before their eyes” (v.8), or because when Moses and Aaron assembled the people, they said to them: “Listen now, O rebels” (v.10), which contained a trace of contempt or anger.

According to the principle, “These and these are the words of the living G-d” (Eruvin 13b), we understand that this discussion of the Rishonim dealt precisely with the way of expressing, in the most vivid way possible, what was asked of Moses and Aaron. Yet evidently, concerning the very heart of the issue, there was no debate as to the meaning of the expression, “You did not believe in Me to sanctify Me.”

From here the Sages learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, is extremely exacting with those who are closest to Him. Our verse is exacting to a hairsbreadth in stating, “You did not believe in Me to sanctify Me,” for an act that deviates even by a hairbreadth – by an angstrom, as it were – from what Hashem demands will cause fundamental harm. The Sages have said that the difference between one who studies a chapter 101 times and one who studies it 100 times is the same as one who serves G-d and one who does not (Chagigah 9b). The Gemara explains, according to Rashi, that one who studies 100 times does so by rote, whereas one who adds to his studies by reviewing a chapter (if only once more) submits himself to the service of G-d and escapes from routine.

In education, we often meet parents and teachers who pay little attention to flaws that are seemingly trivial, flaws such as stealing small sums, saying things that are not exactly true, and so on. However even in an action that is trivial in nature, the principle behind it is not. A person who learns that minor theft “isn’t so bad,” is learning in a general way that theft itself “isn’t so bad”! The same applies to all things that contain a lack of exactitude and a fundamental contempt for Hashem’s word.

A TRUE STORY

A Law That Makes No Sense

It is written, “They shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish” (Numbers 19:2).

The Midrash recounts the following story: “An idolater asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, ‘These rites that you perform look like a kind of witchcraft. You bring a heifer, burn it, pound it, and take its ashes. If one of you is defiled by a dead body, you sprinkle two or three drops upon him and say to him, “You are clean!”’ Rabbi Yochanan asked him, ‘Has a demon of madness ever possessed you?’ ‘No,’ he replied. ‘Have you ever seen a man possessed by this demon of madness?’ ‘Yes,’ said he. ‘And what do you do in such a case?’ ‘We bring roots,’ he replied, ‘and make them smoke under him, then we sprinkle water upon the demon and it flees.’ Said Rabbi Yochanan to him: ‘Let your ears hear what you utter with your mouth! Precisely so is this spirit a spirit of uncleanness, as it is written: “I will also remove...the spirit of uncleanness from the land” [Zechariah 13:2]. Water of purification is sprinkled upon the unclean and the spirit flees.’ When the idolater had gone, Rabbi Yochanan’s disciples said to their master: ‘Master! This man you have put off with a mere makeshift, but what explanation will you give us?’ Said he to them, ‘By your life! It is not the dead that defiles, nor the water that purifies! The Holy One, blessed be He, merely says: “I have laid down a statute; I have issued a decree! You cannot transgress My decree!”’ (Bamidbar Rabba 19:8).

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Red Heifer

It is written, "They shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish" (Numbers 19:2).

The mitzvah of the red heifer is one of the most mysterious in the Torah, a mitzvah whose reason defies logic. All the same, we must perform it as a chukah (decree), as Rashi states: "The Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel by saying, 'What is this command and what reason is there for it?'" This is why it is expressed as a chukah, a decree that we have no right to dispute. Furthermore, the reason for the red heifer has never been discovered. It is among the mitzvot that are impossible to understand, for the ashes of the red heifer render the pure impure and the impure pure. Only Moses knew its true reason, and even King Solomon – the wisest of all men and knowledgeable in every field – was unable to discover its secret. The verse, "I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23), deals with this very subject, the mitzvah of the red heifer. There exists an amazing allusion in this verse, for the words *hi rechoka* ("it is beyond me") have exactly the same numerical value as the expression *para aduma* ("red cow").

The Sefer HaChinuch states, "Although my heart pushes me to give some reasons for the mitzvah that are found in allusion, I find myself powerless before this mitzvah. I fear saying anything, even according to the plain meaning of the text, because our Sages have spoken at length on the profundity of the secret it contains, and the degree of its importance."

Yet despite all the lofty secrets it contains, the Sages have still given us a reason for this mitzvah. As Rashi states in the name of Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan: "This may be compared to a handmaiden's boy who sullied the king's palace. The king said: 'Let his mother come and clear away the filth.' So too does the cow, which is the mother of the calf, come to rectify the sin of the golden calf." Rabbi Yitzchak of Varka gave a marvelous explanation for this mitzvah, which is that the sin of the golden calf resulted from a lack of faith in Hashem. Therefore the Children of Israel were given the mitzvah of the red heifer, a chukah, which is incomprehensible. By performing it, they would demonstrate their complete faith in Hashem, and thus the sin of the golden calf would be rectified.

One prerequisite for this mitzvah is that the heifer must be completely red, meaning that even two black hairs disqualify it from use. The Chiddushei HaRim said in regards to this: "We may learn a great lesson here. Insofar as the requirement for the heifer to be completely red is concerned, two hairs suffice to disqualify it. Yet insofar as the perfection of a Jew who received the mitzvah of 'You shall be perfect with the L-RD your G-d' [Deuteronomy 18:13] is concerned, even the equivalent of a single hair is enough to disqualify him!" Another reason why the heifer must be red is because sins are compared to this color, as it is written: "If your sins are like scarlet...if they have become red as crimson, they will become as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). The heifer must also be without blemish, just as Israel is without blemish, whereas by the sin of the golden calf Israel became infirm. The fact that the heifer cannot be used if it has worn a yoke alludes to the Jewish people, for all its transgressions stem from its rejection of the yoke of Heaven.

Nine red heifers were burned from the time of Moses until the destruction of the Second Temple: Moses burned the first, Ezra the second, Shimon HaTzaddik the third and fourth, Yochanan the High Priest the fifth and sixth, Chanamel the Egyptian the eighth, and Yishmael ben Piabi the ninth. Mashiach will burn the tenth red heifer, which will come to purify the entire Jewish people, speedily and in our days. Amen.

EISHET CHAYIL

The Daughter of the King is all Glorious Within

The book Ma'alot HaMidot states that women must conduct themselves with great discretion, as it is written: "The daughter of the king is all glorious within; her raiment is of golden settings" (Psalms 45:14). In the Yerushalmi (Shabbat, Perek Bema Isha), our Sages said that a woman must not go out into public places on a weekday all decked out in her finery, for in that case she will draw people's attention, and it is to her great shame for people to stare at her. Jewels are only given to a woman so she may adorn herself at home before her husband, in order to please him. This is why she should remain at home in her finery. She should not go around with it everywhere, thereby putting herself and others in danger. This is what happened to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. Because she did not stay discreetly at home, she brought misfortune upon herself. King David said, "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine in the inner chambers of your home" (Psalms 128:3), for a woman's entire praise is that she remains inside the home and not appear in public.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher – The Baal HaTurim

Rabbi Yaakov, the Baal HaTurim, was born to Rabbeinu Asher (known as the Rosh) in Germany in the year 5030. He studied with his father and soon became known as a Torah great. All the leading Torah figures of his generation based their Torah rulings on his words, and he was eventually recognized by the entire Diaspora. Hence a law or custom based on the words of the Baal HaTurim is not subject to discussion.

Following persecutions in Germany, Rabbi Yaakov was forced to leave the country with his father, traveling until they finally arrived in Spain. It was there that Rabbi Yaakov studied Torah in poverty. Even when he had nothing to eat, he did not wish to draw a salary from public funds.

With his vast intelligence, Rabbi Yaakov wrote his famous work Arba'ah Turim, which covered all areas of Halachah. His books encompass all the laws of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, as well as the responsa of the Geonim. He sometimes based himself on the remarks of his father, and sometimes he differed with them. It was on his Arba'ah Turim that the commentary Beit Yossef, by Rabbi Yossef Karo (the Mechaber), was later written, as well as Beit Chadash by Rabbi Yoel Sirkis.

Rabbi Yaakov also composed a commentary on the Torah, which contains amazing explanations on every parsha. However in our Chumash, only a small portion of his remarks and gematriot are published. The Baal HaTurim passed away in Toledo, Spain on Tammuz 13, 5103. May his merit protect us all.