

# LIVING WITH QUESTIONS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*This is the decree of the Torah...take a completely red cow...*

Be'er Yosef: *Parah adumah*, the red heifer, is the quintessential example of a *chok*, of a mitzvah that we cannot understand. We accept it for no other reason than our readiness to listen to Hashem's edicts, comprehensible or not. We are told that Shlomo, the wisest of men, attempted to fathom the meaning of this mitzvah, and found it elusive.

On the other hand, we find statements in Chazal that Moshe was granted understanding of this mitzvah, and that in the Messianic future, the reason would be revealed to all. Chazal clearly believed that the arguments in support of the *parah adumah* are not beyond human comprehension. We should wonder, therefore, why the reasoning behind this mitzvah is withheld from people between Moshe and the final redemption.

We suggest that HKBH has an extremely practical objective in keeping the reasoning behind the *parah* hidden from the vast majority of mankind. *Parah adumah* offers people a wonderful exercise in living with questions for which answers are not available. Life – Torah life in particular – presents us with much that is difficult to comprehend. As humans, we can never fully comprehend the ways of Hashem. When people ponder certain issues like theodicy, unanswered questions sometimes lead people to doubt Hashem's ways and His justice. (Even Moshe found himself troubled by such questions. According to Chazal<sup>[2]</sup> when Moshe asked to see G-d's "front" he specifically meant aspects of Hashem's conduct towards the world, including righteous people living tragic lives, and evildoers who enjoy prosperity and tranquility.)

The antidote to the toxic power of unanswered questions is *parah adumah*. Practicing its precepts trains people to do what they are commanded despite carrying the burden of deep-seated questions. *Parah adumah* can be seen as a vital practice exercise in the art of living with questions.

It is a particularly well-chosen exercise. Until such time as Moshiach ushers in a new kind of world, we will all witness death. There will be lots of it to go around, and no end in sight to the occasions that will call for the use of *parah adumah* ashes to purify people and utensils that have come into contact with death. Virtually everyone will have to grapple with the enigma of a *parah adumah* that purifies the impure, and paradoxically defiles the pure. They will learn – by doing – that people can live with questions, and continue to remain committed to halachah.

The gemara juxtaposes two stories about Moshe and R. Akiva. In the first, Moshe becomes distraught while listening in on a *shiur* by R Akiva in the future, which He (Moshe) cannot follow. Hashem reassures him by having Moshe continue to watch as R Akiva is challenged on a crucial point, and can only defend his position by claiming that it is a teaching going back to Moshe himself. In the second episode, Moshe argues that perhaps R Akiva ought to be the one who presents Torah to the people rather than Moshe himself. Once again, Hashem shows Moshe a different scene, in which R Akiva dies through excruciating torture, and his flesh is sold in the marketplace. Incredulous that such a fate befall such a holy person, Moshe is silenced with, "So it has formed in my thought to do."

The connection between the two stories is tight and organic. The upshot of both is that there is much that we cannot understand as mortal, limited human beings. Indeed, we will sometimes observe things that shake us to the core, such as the treatment of R Akiva. Moshe is told that this is simply the way things need to be. Humans cannot comprehend the Divine plan. Yet Hashem does not expect Moshe to accept this argument without some prior help. He therefore shows Moshe a class of the future, in which a great R Akiva is able to discern great wisdom from the Torah, utilizing even the crowns of certain letters. Yet this same R. Akiva is forced on occasion to concede that he does not fathom a particular point, and must accept it simply as the Divine Will communicated to Moshe. This exercise makes it easier for him to understand that he will not be able to comprehend the rules of Hashem's justice, and will at times have to accept situations as part of an inscrutable Divine plan. For us, the exercise is *parah adumah*.

Magen Avraham<sup>[3]</sup> notes a custom to fast the Friday of Parshas Chukas in remembrance of the great tragedy of the burning of twenty cartloads of gemara manuscript scrolls in Paris. Through special communication from the Beyond, we learned that the fast should not follow the calendar date of the event, but always be observed on the day before the reading of our *parshah*. Why is this so? We always follow calendar dates.

We can offer the same kind of explanation. A tragedy of this sort can punch holes in a person's *emunah*. The antidote again is the lesson of *parah adumah*: learning to live with unanswered questions.

Ramban asks why Aharon was bypassed in the very holy work of preparing the first *parah adumah* in favor of his son Elazar. Why wasn't Aharon accorded this honor? Ramban offers two reasons, but we can add a third. During the great celebration of the inauguration of the Mishkan, Aharon sustained a terrible loss as two of his sons were struck down. It was hard for people to understand why Hashem would spoil his party by injecting this dissonant note. The loss was greatest to Aharon as father of the two victims. Nonetheless, Aharon accepted the Divine edict in silence. He did not second-guess HKBH; his only reaction was one of self-criticism for his own sins possibly having contributed to the tragedy.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, when the Bnei Yisroel were given the mitzvah of *parah adumah* to help them accept the paradoxes of life and not resent the ways of Divine Providence, Aharon was left on the

sidelines. This mitzvah was not for him; he had already mastered its message.

We now understand as well why the cloud of darkness hovering over this mitzvah will be lifted in the messianic future. Chazal<sup>[5]</sup> tell us that the reasoning behind the *parah adumah* will be made available at that time. According to our approach, there will no further reason to keep the reason hidden! The gemara<sup>[6]</sup> contrasts our present state of affairs with that of the future. At the moment, we make different berachos on hearing good news and bad; in the future, all news will be met with the *berachah* that we now reserve for good news alone. Although we believe that everything Hashem does is for the better, we cannot honestly recite a *berachah* today for what we perceive as tragedy as if we were able to recognize the good in it. This will change in the future, when we will have enough clarity about Hashem's ways that we will see the good clearly.

When that happens, there will be no more need to have *parah adumah* teach us how to live with questions. We will have all the answers. *Parah adumah's* secret can then be revealed.

<sup>[1]</sup> Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 19:2

<sup>[2]</sup> Berachos 7A

<sup>[3]</sup> Orach Chaim 580

<sup>[4]</sup> Sifra

<sup>[5]</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6

<sup>[6]</sup> Pesachim 50A