

INTELLECTUAL REASONING AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

by Abraham M. Jeger

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What is the relationship between Parshas Pekudei and this week's haftorah of Parshas Porah? I would like to offer an explanation for this linkage based upon the analysis of Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik (1820-1892; Sefer Beis Haleivi, Parshas Ki Sisa) on the parallels between the "mishkan" (the holy tabernacle built by the Jews in the desert) and the "porah adumah" (the red heifer, whose ashes were used for purification of the defiled).

Parshas Pekudei is devoted to reviewing all details pertaining to the construction of the "mishkan." The Beis Haleivi observes that the phrase, "k'asher tzivah Hashem es Moshe" -- as G-d commanded Moshe -- follows virtually every activity and component delineated in connection with building the "mishkan." Why is this necessary? What is the message in the repetition? His answer embodies a major philosophical theme in the Judaic approach to spiritual development and observing "mitzvot" (G-d's commandments).

The Bais Haleivi begins by first posing another famous question: How did our forefathers in the desert, who are referred to as the "dor de'ah" (the generation of wisdom), trip up and commit the cardinal sin of idolatry through creation of the "Egel HaZohav" (golden calf)? In response he offers the following analysis.

It is well established that each of the 613 "mitzvot" (commandments) encompasses numerous rationales, meanings, and meditations, which reflect their hidden mystical purpose. The positive consequence of proper observance of a "mitzvah" is a rectification and enhancement of spiritual forces in "higher worlds" -- accomplished through the metaphysical impact of the behaviors inherent in performing the specific commandment.

The commandments pertaining to the building of the "mishkan", which ultimately provided a base for revelation of the divine spirit, clearly embodied the secrets of the entire universe. Each detail of each component of the "mishkan" and its utensils represented multiple lofty purposes. Their combination and completion as an integrated "whole" culminated in the optimal setting for channelling the divine presence.

Indeed, some of the symbolic meaning inherent in each component of the "mishkan" and its utensils, including the specificity of their dimensions, is well documented by the major classic commentators on the Torah (see, for example, the entire analysis of the Kli Yokor on Parshas T'rumah, beginning on

Shmos, 25:10). A more contemporary commentator, Rav Gedalya Schorr (1910-1979), of blessed memory, (in his "Sefer Ohr Gedalyahu," Parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei) elaborates on the theme that building the "mishkan" had its parallel in the creation of the universe. The name of the major builder, "B'tzalel", is a contraction of the words "b'tzel (k)el" -- translating into "shadow of G-d." It is said that Betzalel possessed the spiritual knowledge involving the permutations of the Hebrew alphabet (each letter being a distinct mystical force) that G-d employed in creating the heaven and earth. With the completion of the "mishkan" the purpose of creation was actualized.

The Bais Haleivi continues, that if a unique person existed who has mastered all of G-d's secrets and manifested the necessary mystical knowledge, he would theoretically, by his own deduction, be capable of constructing the "mishkan" with all its requisite details. This thought brings us back to the golden calf and the intent of the Jews in its creation. Once they saw that Moshe, who was their intermediary to G-d, had not returned, they sought to establish a distinct setting worthy of G-d's spiritual revelation, as the "mishkan" had ultimately accomplished. Through their greatness and profound mystical knowledge they attempted to devise a course of action. Not relying exclusively on their own wisdom, they sought counsel from Aharon, who they perceived as spiritually superior. Their intent was noble -- namely, to establish a vehicle for divine manifestation.

If so, what was their error? While it is the case that human behavior in the "lower world" impacts upon -- i.e., rectifies and enhances -- the higher spiritual worlds, as this was G-d's decree in the creation of the universe, this relationship is limited to activities whose performance is commanded by the Torah. Any action arrived at purely through one's own intellectual means is not capable of eliciting G-d's spiritual revelation. Positive spiritual consequences can only result from fulfilling G-d's will. Any other motive cannot serve as a spiritual catalyst. On the contrary, it resulted in the golden calf -- despite all the lofty intentions.

Likewise, by the "mishkan", the spiritual goals can only be achieved when the details of its implementation are a direct response to G-d's commandments. In the merit of fulfilling G-d's will, it can provide the setting for divine revelation. This answers the initial question about the need for the constant repetition of the phrase, "k'asher tzivah Hashem es Moshe" -- that every activity was solely a direct response to G-d's commandment, without any impetus of intellectual reasoning. The actions of the "mishkan's master builder" -- B'tzalel -- despite his greatness (as noted above) were informed exclusively by the motive to implement G-d's commands to Moshe.

The above analysis also sheds light on the well-known doctrine that a purpose of the "mishkan" was to serve as forgiveness for the golden calf. For example, contribution of gold jewelry for constructing the "mishkan" rectified the previous offering of their gold jewelry for creating the golden calf (Medrash Rabbah, Parshas Vayakhel, 48:7). Since the essence of their sin was an attempt to devise a spiritual entity catalyzed by their own intellectual reasoning, the necessary antidote was constructing every detail of the "mishkan" guided by the overarching commitment to fulfilling G-d's commandments.

The philosophical underpinning of the above analysis contains major practical implications. A person whose performance of a "mitzvah" is based on his/her intellectual understanding of it, has a greater likelihood of ultimately deviating from its true observance. The Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 21b) cites Rav Yitzchok who stated that the rationale for "mitzvot" were generally not revealed in the Torah, because on two occasions where the Torah revealed a reason, the greatest of all people tripped up. This refers to Shlomo Hamelech (King Solomon) in connection with the commandments that a king should not have too many wives nor possess too many horses. He concluded that the reasons for these prohibitions, as stated in the Torah, do not apply to him, and was not careful in their adherence. Ultimately, he fell victim to the negative consequences associated with their transgression.

It follows that by not knowing the reasons for a "mitzvah" there is greater security in achieving strict adherence -- without exception or even minor deviation. It fosters a total commitment to G-d's will and unconditional acceptance of "halachic" requirements. Once that commitment is in place, there is still virtue in seeking a deeper understanding of the metaphysical basis of the Torah. However, it should be approached with special sensitivity and care to avoid the pitfalls of human reason and its limitations.

This was the optimal sequence reflected in the statement of "n'aseh v'nishma" (we will act and we will listen) which was uttered by our forefathers prior to receiving the Torah. We made a commitment to perform G-d's will and adhere to His commandments regardless of any knowledge of their underlying rationale. This can then be followed by "nishma," which the Bais Haleivi interprets as gaining "understanding" by seeking to uncover the metaphysical and mystical secrets inherent in each "mitzvah," while always keeping in mind that observance should never be contingent upon understanding. The sin of the golden calf represented an antithesis to this commitment. It constituted a regression from "n'aseh v'nishma" by attempting to resort to human reasoning, in lieu of waiting for G-d's commandment as to the appropriate course of action.

The haftorah of "porah adumah" is linked to the "mishkan" since they share a common purpose: the facilitation of forgiveness for the golden calf. The symbolism is that the mother (i.e., cow) must come and clean up after its child (i.e., calf), as noted in Medrash Rabbah (Parshas Chukas, 19:4). Furthermore, Rashi in Parshas Chukas (Bamidbar ,19:22) elaborates on this theme by citing Rav Moshe Hadarshan who pointed to the many parallels between the specific commandments pertaining to the red heifer and the sin of the golden calf. Some examples include: it had to be purchased from communal funds to atone for the fact that the calf was created with public contributions; it was red, since red signifies sin; it had to be burned, just as the calf was ultimately burned; and, it ritually disqualifies all who handle it as was the case with the golden calf.

Furthermore, the Bais Haleivi poses another fascinating question: "porah adumah" is referred to as "chukas ha'Torah" -- epitomizing the commandments for which no apparent reason exists -- as the word "chok" is defined as a law without an obvious human rationale. Even King Solomon alluded to

"porah adumah" as "rechokah mimeni" -- far from me (Koheles, 7:3) -- namely, it being the most elusive commandment. Yet, this is paradoxical since "porah adumah" appears to have more explicit reasons, vis-a-vis its role in eradicating the sin of the golden calf, than most other commandments.

He posits that this is precisely the "dialectic." The "mitzvah" for which many reasons are offered is selected to exemplify "chukas ha'Torah" -- conveying the message that the entire Torah should be approached as a "chok," ignoring any surface reasons. Initially, King Solomon thought that he understood all the "mitzvot," with the exception of "porah adumah." However, once he was baffled by "porah adumah," which the Torah calls a "chok," he recognized that he barely understood the other "mitzvot" for which even fewer overt reasons are offered.

The message of "porah adumah" serves as a deterrent to the golden calf. It is an antidote to human arrogance that seeks to rely on intellect to achieve spiritual elevation. It is therefore a very fitting haftorah for Parshas Pekudei which offers a parallel message -- namely, that the construction of the "mishkan" was actualized "just like G-d commanded Moshe."

In conclusion, both "porah adumah" and the "mishkan" represent a return to the level of "n'aseh v'nishma," "we will do and we will understand" which remains our ultimate fortitude. Our insurance to maintain a commitment to authentic Torah observance and defense against its perversion through contemporary "innovations" lies in the internalization of "n'aseh v'nishma." The path to true spiritual development requires that we be firmly rooted in the foundation of "n'aseh" before we can proceed to "nishmah."

Good Shabbos.

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