

THE INSIDE STORY

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Of all the commandments and rituals prescribed by the Torah none is more mysterious than the burning of the parah adumah, the red heifer. As described in this week's Torah reading, the young red heifer must be completely free of blemishes and completely red; even two hairs of a different color disqualify it. There is also a set of other requirements that must be met before the heifer is considered eligible for its purpose. What is its purpose? It is slaughtered and burned, and its ashes are mixed with special water, which is then sprinkled on people who have become ritually impure, rendering them pure once again.

No rational explanation for this enigmatic ritual is given. The Sages labeled this mitzvah a chok, a commandment whose rationale is concealed from human eyes. Indeed, even King Solomon, the wisest of all men, could not fathom the significance of the red heifer. At the same time, however, our Sages tell us that Moses was able to penetrate to the true meaning of the red heifer. The immediately arises: If Moses could understand this commandment, why couldn't King Solomon as well?

Normally, when we seek to acquire knowledge, we follow the intellectual avenues of the learning process. We observe, we examine, we analyze, we study, we assimilate, and we memorize. But sometimes all this is simply not enough. Sometimes the material is so arcane and unfamiliar that no matter how much we try it remains impossible to assimilate. What happens then? Is there no choice but to throw up our hands in defeat? Or is there another approach that might be more successful?

A businessman often traveled to a certain primitive country where he owned a factory. It dawned on him that he could be make his investment far more profitable if only he could speak the native language and not have to be dependent always on his interpreters. He hired tutor after tutor, but it was all to no avail. Hard as he tried, he could not learn more than a few simple words. The system and structure of the language far completely beyond him.

"I have an idea for you," said his foreman, a wise old native. "Why don't you go live in a village for a few months? That will surely help you learn the language."

"You mean in a hotel?"

"Certainly not! You have to live with a native family in their hut, just as exactly as they live. No running water. The most primitive conditions. But you will learn the language."

The businessman took his foreman's advice, and within a few short months, he was indeed fluent in the language.

Why was the businessman able to learn the language only by living with a native family but not from his native tutors? Because his approach was entirely different. As long as he was attempting to learn from his tutors, he was an outsider looking in, an observer from the distance. Much knowledge can be acquired that way, but for most of us, something so obscure as a thoroughly alien language cannot be acquired by a purely intellectual approach. We have to come much closer, to experience the object of our study from the inside, to become connected to it. Only then can we gain the knowledge that could not be captured by our intellectual antennae.

Knowledge of the Torah follows the same patterns. There are some aspects of Torah knowledge that we can perceive from a purely intellectual viewpoint, but some are so profound and mysterious that our intellectual faculties alone cannot grasp them. We can only acquire this knowledge through intimate experience. We cannot simply stand apart as detached intellectual and gather information. Rather, we must step right into the Torah with total attachment and immersion so that we can view it from the inside, so that we can experience the knowledge rather than just observe it.

This is where Moses differed from King Solomon. Moses was the most humble man that ever lived. Completely devoid of an independent ego, he was able to attach himself to the Torah with a totality that was impossible for any other human, including the wise King Solomon. Therefore, he alone was able to fathom the profoundly obscure meaning of the ritual of the red heifer.

In our lives, we can apply this concept to every aspect of the Torah. Although most of the commandments can be understood on a purely intellectual basis, they are nonetheless all part of the unfathomable mysterious spiritual wonder known as the Torah. As such, they are full of infinite meaning and significance which we cannot even begin to perceive with our intellectual faculties. However, if we embrace the Torah, if we experience it and make it an intimate part of our lives, we can begin to perceive glimpses from the inside. We can discover a spectacular new world which can only be seen by those who experience it. Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of [the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center](#).