

BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The gentiles challenged the Jewish people about the Parah Adumah, Red Cow that is the archetypal Chok, a mitzvah whose meaning is a mystery. The classical Jewish response to this attack was: "It is a decree issued onto me. You have no right to question this!" (Rashi, Bamidbar 19:2).

Human understanding can never be the determining factor when it comes to mitzvah observance. Torah is the life-force of creation. Thus, it could not rest upon the acceptance of man - whose selection today does not preclude his subsequent de-selection tomorrow. That is why in spite of the Jewish readiness to embrace the Torah, as immortalized in their proclamation naaseh v'nishma, "we will do and we will understand" (Shemos 24:7), nevertheless G-d coerced them to accept the Torah or else face destruction (Shabbos 88a).

Every mitzvah is by "royal appointment".

Every one of the 613 commandments is a divine decree of the Supreme King whose edict is to be obeyed come-what-may. The mitzvah as the loyal fulfilment of the king's decree is reason enough.

The Maharal (Tiferes Yisrael Ch.6) explains how the underlying principle of mitzvah performance is for man is to connect to G-d on His terms.

A Jew's outlook to a mitzvah has to be from the viewpoint of G-d, not man. That means his starting point to mitzvah observance cannot be because it appeals to his rationale, because of its societal impact, because he relates to its beauty, because of the benefits involved, or even because of the reward promised. Were this to be the case, this attitude would render observance on man's terms.

This is profoundly unacceptable because it undermines the metaphysical properties of the Infinite, transcendental world of Torah. Worse still, it drags the exalted word of G-d down onto the infinitesimal level of man, where it loses its "divine quality" and becomes subject to the scrutiny of the prevailing human standards and prejudices.

By contrast, where the underlying factor is of man fulfilling the divine command, the Jew supernaturally transcends his physical existence to develop an eternal relationship with G-d; man exclusively relates to Him where it is on His terms. This all-important element is prominently missing where the "decider" or determining factor is man himself.

When the focus is doing a mitzvah that comes from Him because of Him, there is no danger or concern lest one misconstrue the commandments as residing in man's domain. The Jew dares not

tamper or humanize the mitzvah in any manner whatsoever. Instead, He strives to be "like a servant who observes the master's directive with no concern of the reward" (Avos 1:3). There is no self-interest or personal motives in the knowledge "the commandments were not given for [man's] benefit" (Nedarim 16b).

Whatever the benefits and goodness that mitzvah observance bring, the Jew never loses sight that he exists merely to advance the prestige of his Creator, not his own.

Nor does he overlook how the 613 commandments are "by royal appointment".

The course is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of SET IN STONE (2004: Targum) about the meaning of mitzvah observance and PEOPLE OF THE BOOK (2007: Targum) about the biblical personalities. A London-based writer and educator, he learned at the Gateshead and Mir Yeshivas, holds a Bachelor of Science (Honors) business degree from London's City University, and is a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.