RED COW DISEASE

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This weeks parsha, Chukas, begins with the laws of Parah Adumah, the red heifer. This is the purification process that one must go through after having come in contact with a dead body.

"Zos chukas haTorah- this is the 'chok' of the Torah (19:2)." A 'chok' is a mitzva whose meaning has not been revealed to us. Why is this referred to as the 'chok' of the Torah, as opposed to referring to it as a 'chok' of either impurity or purity laws?

There is another seeming contradiction that we find. As a 'chok', the true meaning of this mitzva is inaccessible to us. Yet, Rashi (19:22) quotes from the medrash that the parah adumah atones for the 'chet ha'egel', the sin of the golden calf. "It can be compared to a child of a maidservant who dirtied the palace of the king. The mother is commanded to come and clean the dirt of the child. So too, let the parah (the mother) clean the dirt of the egel (the child)." Rashi then, with painstaking detail, shows how every aspect of the parah adumah process is connected to the 'chet ha'egel'.

How can it be the 'chok' and then be explained in greater detail than most mitzvos?!

The Beis HaLevi explains that it is called the 'chok' of the Torah because it sheds light and perspective on the whole Torah. We often think that we have a good understanding of certain mitzvos. This, dangerously, leads us to decisions of when and to what degree must we observe certain mitzvos in certain situations. "The 'distancing' laws of niddah are necessary for people who don't have so much self control, whereas my wife and I ...", and other such gibberish.

"Zos chukas haTorah!", the Torah shouts out! Do you have an understanding of parah adumah? Was even King Solomon, the wisest of all men, able to fathom how its contact purifies those who are impure, at the same time that it defiles those who are pure!?!? All of the mitzvos are interconnected. Without a clear grasp of them all, one cannot have a clear grasp on even one of them. "Zos chukas haTorah!" Yes, of the whole Torah! Because this reveals and demonstrates to us that the whole Torah must be adhered to as we would adhere to a 'chok'.

With this, the Beis HaLevi explains how this 'chok' atones for the 'chet ha'egel'. We've discussed back in Shemos that the root cause of the 'chet ha'egel' was an unbridled, free-lance quest for spirituality. I'll draw close to Hashem my way.

They wanted to construct a dwelling where the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, would rest in this world. This was a truly noble desire, as was validated by the subsequent command to build the

Mishkan. However, with the giving of the Torah, Hashem instructed us how to enhance spirituality. Any other means ends up being counterproductive.

This realization drawn from parah adumah, that full understanding of the entire Torah is beyond our grasp, serves to correct, and thereby atone for, the sin prompted by our mistakenly applying our limited understanding of the Torah. In that way, the epitome of the 'chok' clearly connects to and atones for the specific act of the 'chet ha'egel'.

Our parsha also contains the sin of Moshe and Aharon which provoked the decree of their not entering Eretz Yisroel. "Kach es hamateh", (take the staff) ... and speak to the stone... "v'nasan maymav", (and it will give its water) and you will bring out for them water from the stone. And Moshe took "hamateh" (the staff) from before Hashem, as he was commanded. And Moshe and Aharon gathered the congregation before the stone. "Vayarem Moshe es yado", (and Moshe lifted his hand) and hit the stone twice "b'matehu" (with his staff), and brought out much water (20:8-10).

Rashi explains that the sin was hitting the stone as opposed to speaking to it. There are many varying explanations offered (the Ohr HaChaim brings 10 and then his own!) but most begin with the same questions: 1) Why was Moshe commanded to take the staff if he was supposed to speak to, and not hit, the stone? 2) Why is there the seeming redundancy of "v'nasan maymav" (and it will give its water) and then "you will bring out water from the stone"? 3) Why was Aharon punished for Moshe's error of hitting the stone?

The Kli Yakar offers a beautiful explanation. He begins by quoting the Chizkuny that Moshe was commanded to take, not his own staff but rather, the staff of Aharon. That staff which had been placed before Hashem along with the staffs of the other tribes. Only Aharon's staff had blossomed, flowered and grew almonds. After Moshe had shown this to all of the tribes, clearly showing that Aharon's tribe was 'chosen', his staff was returned to the Ohel Moed where it stood as a lasting testimony.

The fact that the pasukim refer to this as the staff, not your staff, and that it was "before Hashem" indicate that Moshe was, in fact, commanded to take this staff of Aharon and not his own.

This was a dry piece of wood without any moisture, yet, miraculously, things began to grow from it. Hashem's decree brought water from a parched, arid piece of wood. Moshe was commanded to take this staff to show that, in the same way, Hashem could decree that the rock should stream forth water.

This is what the pasuk meant by "speak to the stone v'nasan maymav". Moshe and Aharon were commanded to speak to the stone and tell it the words "v'nasan maymav"! "And it gave its water!" Hey stone... do the same thing as the staff! Upon saying that, Moshe would be drawing water forth from the stone. The staff was brought to demonstrate what had previously happened, not for any

hitting to be done! This is alluded to by the fact that "selah", stone, and "etz", stick, have the same numerical value!

Moshe erred and hit the stone with "matehu", with his staff. Why was this such a tremendous sin?

By krias Yam Suf, the splitting of the sea, Hashem told Moshe "hareim es matecha, un'tay es yadecha". This is usually explained as lift your staff and extend your hand. However, the Kli Yakar explains 'hareim' to mean, not lift but rather, remove the staff. Bnei Yisroel entertained thoughts that it was this 'magical' staff that had brought the plagues onto Egypt. In order to dispel any such doubts, Moshe was told to remove the stick, drop it! and split the sea by extending just your arm.

Now, many years after krias Yam Suf, the new generation was having the same doubts. Here was Moshe's chance to show them that Hashem's powers aren't bound by any staff. However, here he did the opposite of what he had done by krias Yam Suf! "Vayarem Moshe es yado vayach es hasela!" Moshe removed (didn't use) his hand and instead hit the stone with his alleged magical staff! A double error was committed. Had they spoken to the stone, its adherence to their words would have caused a tremendous kiddush Hashem. Bnei Yisroel would have understood that if this stone that doesn't speak, doesn't hear and doesn't need sustenance, fulfills the words of its Creator, certainly we must. Not only didn't they speak and thereby strengthen Bnei Yisroel's faith, Moshe hit it with his staff, weakening the faith in Hashem and substantiating their theory of a magical staff.

There are many who say that in Neveh Zion we have a magical staff (sorry). However, the truth is that there are vibrant wellsprings of Torah within seemingly dry individuals. May we merit to find, channel and enhance these fountains of potential and growth.

Good Shabbos.

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