

# TIMEPIECE

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

*"This is the decree [Hukat] of the Torah, which Hashem commanded" [Bemidbar 19:2]*

The laws pertaining to the Red Heifer that was burned to produce an ash and water combination used to purify the spiritually impure are the most difficult statutes of the Torah to comprehend. Even King Shelomoh, who was the wisest of all men, said, "All this I tested with wisdom; I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me." Kohelet, 7:23] The Gemara explains that King Shelomoh studied the reasons for all the commandments of the Torah and was successful in understanding all -- except the Red Heifer. The law is paradoxical. The one who sprinkles the waters becomes contaminated, while the one who is sprinkled with the waters becomes pure.

On an intellectual level one can come to terms with the discrepancy by accepting that the Torah reveals the "thoughts" of the "Supreme Intellect" --Hashem -- and that being the case, there are concepts that are beyond the understanding of limited mortals. Rebbi Yohanan explained, "It is not the corpse that causes contamination nor the ashes of the cow that cause purity. These laws are the decrees of G-d and man has no right to question them." A wise person realizes that man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue.

A question arises. Shelomoh Hamelekh studied all of the Torah until he was able to make the honest statement that he truly understood the reason behind 612 of the 613 commandments. In the verse above from Kohelet, Shelomoh confessed that since he did not understand the reasons behind the misvah of the Red Heifer he did not really correctly comprehend the reasons for any of the commandments at all. Why did his inability to grasp only one commandment invalidate his understanding of the others?

My grandfather, a'h, was a dapper dresser. All the photographs that we have of him, regardless of the occasion, show a man who was meticulous in his attire and grooming. Many of the pictures show his watch chain draping from his belt to his pocket. I remember as a boy going with grandpa to the watch repair man and staring in awe as the European technician opened the back of grandpa's antique gold timepiece to make the necessary adjustments. Hundreds of little mechanisms, intricately intertwined, interacted to move the hands of the watch second by second. The inaccuracy of even only one component would make the watch run either too slowly or too rapidly. Only when ALL of the pieces functioned in synchronized perfection did the timepiece keep accurate time.

The Torah is not a to do list or a menu from which one can set priorities or choose preferences. It is

the unit given to man as a revelation of the will of Hashem which, when observed completely, will produce a human being running in perfect synch. The laws are interdependent. Shelomoh Hamelekh realized that one who does not accept to perform the TOTAL Torah -- one who observes only what he or she understands -- is making a huge mistake in his or her approach to observance. That individual does not only lack understanding of a small detail of the Torah -- that person has no understanding of the Torah at all!

## **TABLE TALK -- QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION AT THE SHABBAT TABLE**

*"Balak, son of Sipur, saw all that Israel had done to the Amoree" Bemidbar 22:2*

King Balak saw the victory of the Israelites over Sihon the King of the Amorite people and became fearful of the Jewish onslaught. His solution was to hire the wicked gentile prophet Bilaam to curse the Jews so that he would be able to defeat them in battle. Ultimately, Hashem intervened and the words of Bilaam were blessings rather than curses.

Question: Why was it that Balak became afraid when he heard about the defeat of Sihon -- why didn't he tremble when he heard about the miraculous downfall of Og the Giant at the hands of Moshe? Og was defeated first!

Answer: In the battle with Og the Torah refers to the people of Israel in the plural "THEY beat" [Vayookoo] and "THEY inherited" [Vayirshoo]. (Bemidbar 21:35) The plural indicates a lack of unity amongst the Jewish people. In all of the travels through the desert, except for the rest period at Har Sinai, the verse says Vayahanoo "and THEY camped". When the Jews arrived at the holy site and prepared for the acceptance of the Torah, the Torah says Vayihan "and HE camped" in the singular. This slight change in grammatical syntax indicates that the people reached a state of unity unsurpassed in all of their travels and thereby merited the receiving of the Torah. In the war with Sihon the Torah says, Vayakehoo -- "And HE beat him" and Vayirash -- "And HE inherited" (Bemidbar 21:24) in the singular syntax. Balak realized that the Jews were not unified when they defeated Og -- but were now unified--as they approached his borders -- a unit in the eyes of G-d that was invincible. He understood the power of unity amongst the Jews and therefore, feared their approaching mass -- an indivisible army of G-d fearing people who cannot be beat.

Shabbat Shalom

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