

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

20 Adar II, 5771 Vol. 12, No. 20

Parashas Shemini

“THIS IS THE ORDINANCE OF THE TORAH ...” (BAMIDBAR 19:2)

**These examples do not make sense to us**

THE REASONING behind the *mitzva* of *parah adumah* – using the ashes of a red heifer to purify someone of *tumah* – impurity – is beyond our ability to understand. On one hand, it purifies the *tamei* – impure person; on the other hand, the *kohein* that comes in contact with the ashes becomes *tamei* himself. Rashi (ibid.) tells us that it is a decree from Hashem and we are not allowed to question it. The Midrash Tanchuma (Chukas 3) gives many examples of how *tahara* – purity – arises in the face of *tumah*. These examples do not make sense to us, the Midrash tells us, but Hashem, our Creator, decrees that it should be so. Similarly, the Midrash continues, we may not question the logic of the law of the *parah adumah*. It is a decree of Hashem and we obviously do not have the ability to fathom His logic.

Why did the Midrash bring examples to prove that we cannot understand Hashem’s thought processes? It should be obvious that, with our limited level of understanding, we cannot sensibly think that we can argue with Hashem’s decrees. Why are these examples needed as an introduction before the Midrash states the conclusion that Hashem’s decrees are beyond our ken?

**We can easily lead ourselves to believe that our level of knowledge is beyond where it truly stands**

One of our human failings is, ironically, the habit of overestimating ourselves. Logically, we should be constantly aware of our intellectual limitations, our finite comprehension and our mortal frailties. However, it seems that we sometimes need a reminder. The Talmud (Berachos 4a) quotes the Mishna in Derech Eretz Zuta (chap. 3) which commands us, “Teach your tongue to say, ‘I do not know!’” Apparently, it takes training to overcome the natural inclination of our tongue (and mind) to assume we know and understand everything. We can easily lead ourselves to believe that our level of knowledge is beyond where it truly stands. “Most people cannot understand the deep mystical meaning of the *parah adumah*, but I have a glimpse of the true reasoning,” we can haughtily begin to imagine. That is why the Midrash brings several examples of concepts we cannot fathom, in order to burst our balloon of arrogance and to bring us humbly back to Earth. Then, and only then, can we begin to hear the message of, “The *parah adumah* is a divine decree and you have no right to question it.”

**Admitting we don’t understand is the first and most critical step**

It is certainly challenging to our ego to admit that we don’t know or don’t understand a certain concept. Our fragile self-esteem is on the line and we are afraid that by confessing our ignorance, we will lose respect in the eyes of others. Perhaps one strategy we can employ is to remind ourselves that all human beings have limited understanding – if not in one area, then in another. Only Hashem has perfect knowledge and understanding, and saying, “I don’t know,” is simply pleading guilty to being human, and being honest with ourselves. If anything, it will gain us respect in the eyes of others if we have the moral backbone and humility to confront our shortcomings and try to deal with them. Admitting we don’t understand is the first and most critical step on the path to true growth and learning, and one who is ashamed to ask, the Mishna in Avos (2:6) tells us, will never learn.

May we summon the courage and the humility to acknowledge our intellectual limitations, and admit when we don’t know, so that we can ask the questions that will enable us to grow and reach our potential in understanding Hashem, His world and His holy Torah.