

Chukas Know-it-alls, and Filthy, Filthy Snakes

This is the mystery of the Torah that Hashem commanded, saying, “Tell the people of Israel to take a red cow, a perfect one, that has no flaw, and never had a yoke on it.”

Bamidbar 19:2

The mystery of the Torah¹² is that we can take a red heifer and burn it up, mixing the ashes with some hyssop and cedar bark, so that we can sprinkle the mixture on people who need to achieve purity. The whole thing is very tough to understand, and only one person ever truly understood it – Moshe. Yet, our Sages¹³ gave us a bit of insight in to this: “This can be compared to a maidservant’s child who dirtied the palace floor, and the king commanded the mother to come and clean up her son’s mess; so does the Red Heifer come and clean up the mess made when the Jews worshiped the Golden Calf. A calf is born of a cow, and thus, this mitzvah somehow corrects what was done when the Jews worshiped the Golden Calf. In fact, Baal Haturim¹⁴ even points out that the *gematria* of Para Aduma (Red Heifer) is the same as that of *zeh al avon egel* (this is because of the sin of the Golden Calf). And yet, this sounds quite strange. Is this red cow actually the mother of that Golden Calf? How are these two things conceptually connected, and what is the message to us?

Our Sages teach¹⁵ that the reason that we deserved the mitzvah of the ashes of the Red Heifer is because our ancestor Avraham said, “I am dust and ashes.”¹⁶ The Sfas Emes¹⁷ explains that this is because the commandment of the Red Heifer brings a person to humility. He points to Rashi,¹⁸ who tells us that the reason that we mix cedar and hyssop in with the ashes is because the cedar is the tallest of trees, and the hyssop, the smallest – to teach the arrogant person who sinned to make himself humble, and thus, be forgiven. Somehow, this whole thing is an exercise in humility. Yet, we remain in the dark.

When Adam and Chava sinned in Eden, the snake injected humankind with a spiritual filth, teaches the Talmud.¹⁹ But when the Jews stood at Sinai, it continues, that filth was cleansed from them. However, when

¹² Bamidbar 19:2

¹³ Bamidbar Rabbah 18:8 quoted in Rashi to Chukas 19:22. See also Tanchua, Chukas 8.

¹⁴ Bamidbar 19:2

¹⁵ Chullin 88b

¹⁶ Bereishis 18:17

¹⁷ Parshas Parah 638, s.v. *bitaam etz erez*

¹⁸ Bamidbar 20:6

¹⁹ Shabbos 145b

they worshiped the Golden Calf, says the *Zohar*²⁰ and Targum,²¹ that filth returned. But it did not return completely.²² Whatever this spiritual filth is – we have a path to remove it by the laws of the red heifer, which cleans up the mess that we made at the Golden Calf, bringing back a bit of that filth. Let us look a bit deeper.

Our Sages say that Hashem told only Moshe of the secret of the Red Heifer; nobody else was every privy to it.²³ Sfas Emes²⁴ explains that the reason for this is beyond normal logic, and thus, not attainable through the normal channels; however, by reaching it through non-logical channels, one can actually access it. By accepting that there is no logical reason, as we are normally trained to think there should be, says the Sfas Emes, we are, in fact, discovering the reason. *Shem Mishmue*²⁵ says something similar. He says that Moshe made himself completely humble and treated himself as insignificant, and thus, was rewarded with the knowledge. But why is the is the path?

Moshe was the humblest of men. He and only he understood that really, compared to God, none of us really understand anything at all. And that is the secret of the Red Cow. It is the deep awareness that we really understand nothing. When one understands that, one has understood a very great thing. As long as a person is not completely humble, and still tries to understand things with his own limited head, he can not understand the Red Heifer. Even the greatest of men, Shlomo, said about the read Heifer, “I tried to grow wise [regarding it] and it remained far from me.”²⁶ As long as you are trying to figure it out, it remains a step away.

When Adam and Chava ate from the forbidden tree, our great thinkers have all suggested ways to explain what they were thinking. Somehow, although Hashem had told them not to, they listened to the advice of the snake, and made a different decision. Just by being willing to *listen* to anything or anyone besides Hashem, they already brought that filth on to mankind, as Rashi²⁷ explicitly says! It was not the eating of the fruit that brought the filth on to mankind, the primary damage was thinking too much when God made His orders clear! That brought a spiritual filth onto man. But when the Jewish people stood at Sinai, and said “we will do, and we will listen,”²⁸ and they left behind their own human thoughts in favor of accepting the Truth from Hashem,

²⁰ *Zohar*, vol. 1, 52b

²¹ Tehillim 106:20

²² Chida, *Nitzotzei Oros to Zohar*, vol. 3, 14b. See also Alschich to Tehillim 68:19, where he explains that this return of the filth did not destroy their Sinai accomplishment completely. See *Nitzotzei Zohar (Zohar, ibid.)* where R. Margolios proves that this filth was not as severe as before. In fact, this is clear from the Talmud in Shabbos, *ibid.*, for the Talmud there explains that the reason Gentiles appear (to the trained spiritual eye) to be filthier than Jews, is because they did not stand at Sinai. Clearly, then, the Golden Calf did not set the Jews all the way back to a pre-Sinai state, for then, the Talmud’s statement would be unintelligible.

²³ Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6, *Psikta Rabbasi* 14. See Mizrachi and *Gur Aryeh* to Chukas 19:2.

²⁴ Parshas Para 631, s.v. *bamidrash mi yiten*. See also his comments to Chukas 632, s.v. *birashi*.

²⁵ Chanukah 5672, seventh night

²⁶ Koheles 7:23, as explained by Yoma 14a

²⁷ To Shabbos 146a, s.v. *kisheba*

²⁸ Shemos 24:7, as explained by Panim Yafos there.

it was then that they grew clean! Sfas Emes²⁹ explains that when they stood at the foot of the mountain, and they realized how distant they were from the Torah, that very awareness and humility is why they were taken from the bottom of the mountain to the highest of spiritual heights. And yet, the Jewish people once again slipped back to their old ways. They counted the days that Moshe was missing, and they began to think and make all sorts of calculations. They did not act with the humility that they ought to have learned from Sinai, a humble mountain. The humility to listen to and receive the Truth, even in times when all sorts of rationales are popping into one's mind, is what the Jews achieved at Sinai, and squandered, in part, when they made the Calf. And the filth returned...in part.

The Red Heifer is, indeed, the mother of the Golden Calf. The fact that there are things that the human mind simply cannot fathom is the very reason that can even make attempts to solve these questions. Were everything clear, there would be no confusion to struggle with. The sin of the Golden Calf was born out of the human discomfort with our faculties. We deeply want to understand. But the Red Heifer also helps us repair the mistake that we made, by telling us that humility – and the awareness that although we have some level of understanding in many areas, at the end of the day, we really are small, like the hyssop plant – is the answer. When we learn that we really do not understand all that much, we will then know something far greater than we ever could have imagined. As the philosopher once said,³⁰ “The goal of knowing Him is to know that we don't know Him.”³¹

²⁹ Sukkos 634, s.v. *biyom hashmini, atzeres tibiye lachem*

³⁰ Quoted in *Sefer Haikkarim*, 2:30. See also *Bechinot Olam*, 7:2.

³¹ See also *Toldos Yaakov Yosef* to Parshas Kedoshim, who makes this point beautifully. Some time after completing this piece, I discovered that R. Isaac Chaver, in his *Hagaddas Yad Mitzrayim* (to Dayenu, s.v. *ilu nassan lanu es haShabbos*), offers a remarkably similar explanation of the filth that came from the snake.