

“This is the statute of the Torah...and they shall take to you a perfectly red cow.” (19:2)

The parsha that addresses the concept of chukim employs the halachos, laws, of the Parah Adumah, Red Cow, as its standard. Jewish religious thought divides Divine commandments into two categories: “rational” laws, known as mishpatim; and “edicts” or chukim. Making a related distinction, Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon speaks of mitzvos sichliyos, those commandments required by reason, and mitzvos shimiyyos, commandments mandated by Revelation. In truth, as the Sefas Emes explains, the overriding approach to mitzvah observance should be in the perspective of chukim, whereby one observes all commandments simply because they constitute an expression of Hashem’s Will.

The Piaseczner Rebbe, z.l., follows in the path of the Sefas Emes in his tendency to minimize the distinction between mishpatim and chukim. He contends that the notion of mishpatim is based upon the existence of an autonomous human intellect, which is capable of moral reasoning. The Rebbe writes at a time when the Nazi atrocities against the Jews in particular, and humanity in general, were raising the question of the legitimacy of relying on intellectual cognition. One’s intellect is bound by his essential character. In other words, an individual’s understanding is a function of his essential personality. This is true especially with respect to such prohibitions as robbery and murder, which have always been considered to be rational mitzvos. In the category of mishpatim, we see that certain nations have rendered rationales permitting — and even advocating — murder and plunder of those whom they consider to be lesser beings.

One’s approach to mitzvos should be based upon pure faith. The Jew’s faith comes from the spirit of holiness within him. His faith grants him access to reach higher than what he could grasp through his mind. When one experiences the pressure of pain and anguish, the multitude of sufferings can cause his faith to waver – if he is not strong. The function of a Jew is to abrogate his autonomous critical rationality by totally surrendering his being, thereby enabling him to withstand the questions to his faith which emanate from his suffering.

The Piaseczner Rebbe emphasized this idea in a homily delivered on Shabbos Parashas Parah 1942, when the chapter of the Parah Adumah was read. Rashi explains the word chukah to be the result of our response to the Satan and the nations of the world who taunt us, asking, “What is this command? What is the reason?” Hashem responds, “It is My decree; emanating from Me; you have no right to question it!” The Rebbe posits that the purification effected by the Red Cow, and the prohibition against questioning the reason for the commandment, are not two independent matters. Rather, the prohibition of questioning is in itself a component of the purification.

At the end of the Talmud Yoma 85b, Rabbi Akiva posits “Just as a mikveh, ritualarium, purifies the unclean, so does Hashem purify Klal Yisrael.” A mikveh effects purification only as long as one’s entire body is immersed in it. If even one tiny part remains outside, the purification is not valid.

Likewise, we must subject ourselves totally to Hashem, entering into His domain with our entire beings. Whoever views himself as a distinct being, with his own mind and thought processes, remains outside of Hashem. We must abrogate ourselves, acknowledging that we are naught and our minds are naught. Hashem and His holiness are everything. However He conducts the affairs of the world and whatever He commands is good and we have no right to question.

This is why the term chukah is applied to the Parah Adumah, implying that here, too, one may not question. Rather, we are to believe that since Hashem made things happen in this manner, then this is the way it is supposed to be. In this way, the Red Cow purifies, since we enter with our whole being, without question, surrendering ourselves to Him. The paradoxical nature of the chukim, commandments, and the abstruse nature of Hashem's actions in the world are profoundly related: both require a surrender of autonomous reason and an absolute and total submission to the Divine Will. Accepting chukim is tantamount to submerging one's mind in the purifying waters of the Divine being.