

## And they shall take to you a Red Cow. (19:2)

The *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow (heifer), is considered the quintessential *chok*, *mitzvah* whose reason defies human rationale. There is an aspect to this *mitzvah*, which although paradoxical in nature, is symbolically perceivable. Indeed, at first glance, the *Parah Adumah* incorporates two opposites. On the one hand, it must be totally red: even two black hairs render it invalid. This is puzzling, since the color red is usually identified with sin. Red is the symbol of blood. The *Navi Yeshayahu* (1:18) says, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Why should a cow whose function is to purify be the color of sin? Should a cow that must be free of any blemish be red? Is the color of sin not a blemish in its own right?

**Horav Nissan Alpert, zl**, looks at another of the requirements of the *Parah Adumah* as a source from which to derive an explanation for this difficulty. The Torah requires the *Parah Adumah* to be an animal, *Asher lo alah aleha ol*, "Upon which a yoke had not come." We might be able to apply this concept to human endeavor and a Jew's collective responsibility for his brothers and sisters. We often encounter individuals who have been blessed with incredible talents and strengths, acumen and personality, that could be of critical assistance to others. Yet, they do not apply these G-d-given gifts for the public good. They use them for themselves, for self-glorification, personal advancement, as a reason to lord over those who are not as blessed as they are.

One who is blessed, but uses his blessing for the wrong purpose, is misappropriating G-d's gift. Indeed, the very talents with which he has been endowed become the source of his own downfall. It is very much like an individual who is given a shiny, beautiful gold ring, who, instead of wearing it, places it in the nose of a pig.

In *lashon hakodesh*, Hebrew, we refer to the obligation of the Jew to accept responsibility for his fellow's needs as, *laseis b'ol im chaveiro*: to carry the yoke with one's friend; to empathize with his pain; to carry his burden with him. Hashem carries the pain of the unfortunate. He expects the high and mighty of this world to get off their high perch and lend a hand, to assist another Jew. Who has greater superiority than Hashem? Yet, He feels the pain of the depressed and oppressed, commiserates with them, and sympathizes with them in their time of need.

Despite the Jew's inherent obligation to reach out and help, some individuals think that they are too good, too high, too special, too mighty, to act in such a manner. They snub anyone who is not as blessed as they are. For some "reason," they are never available; they just cannot seem to find the time to help the Jew who does not share equal standing on their social strata with them. For these people, the talents with which they have been blessed are nothing more than a *kardom lachpor bah*, "A spade with which to dig." They do not realize exactly what it really is that they should be "digging."

Let us take a look at the purification process of the person who has become spiritually

contaminated by a corpse. The Torah writes (*Bamidbar* 19:6), “The *Kohen* shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson thread, and he shall throw them into the burning of the cow.” We find hyssop used as a tool for the purification of the *metzora*, spiritual leper. *Rashi* (*Vayikra* 14:4) explains its significance as being indicative of what must occur within the *metzora* in order for the process to work. It is important that the *metzora*, whose sin of slandering people resulting from his haughtiness, his feeling better than others, must descend from his lofty perch to the level of humility – which is the antidote and foundation of his penance and resulting atonement. Hyssop is a lowly bush; thus, it symbolizes humility.

*Rav Alpert* supplements this idea by pointing out that one single hyssop is insufficient. He must take a bundle, an *agudah*, because, as he suggests, it indicates togetherness, solidarity, uniting Jews together through empathy and care for one another. The high and mighty must unite with the powerless and weak; the successful with those do not seem to make it; the strong with those who are vulnerable to anything and everything.

One should not view himself as being better than others, distinct from society. The issues which plague segments of our community should be viewed as issues which plague the entire community. We must bond together to rid our community of its spiritual filth, its moral bankruptcy, the unethical and the immoral. Every problem should be viewed through the lens of the community – not of the individual. We are called “*Klal*” *Yisrael* for a reason. We are all one large community, whose members work together to solve the issues that plague us all.

Having said this, we turn to the *Parah Adumah* and how the above thesis can explain the anomalies of its purification process. One who has become defiled by contact with a deceased human being can be purified only through the process of being sprinkled with *Mei Chatas*, purification water, of which the ashes of the *Parah Adumah* is the primary ingredient. Only a *Parah Adumah* can purify one who is *tamei meis* – which is the highest degree of *tumah*. *Rav Alpert* suggests a profound thought which gives rationale to the extreme level of *tumah* “achieved” by a *meis*, corpse. The deceased is no longer a part of society. He is eternally separated from the living, and, thus, unable to share in their burden. The extreme level of spiritual defilement is sadly reached when one can no longer associate with others. He is, regrettably, in a world all his own.

How can one who is at the highest level of spiritual achievement connect with one who is far below him? Can he who has achieved spiritually elite status ally himself with one who is relatively spiritually unsophisticated and base? They live in two disparate worlds with nothing in common. How can they come together?

*Rav Alpert* turns to the *pasuk*, *Vayikchu eilecha Parah Adumah*, “And they (the people) shall take to you a Red Cow.” The people should go to Moshe *Rabbeinu*, their quintessential leader, who, by his very demeanor, teaches us the error of our assumption that the “high” and the “low” cannot network and join with one another.

Can we find anyone who achieved more than Moshe? Was there ever a greater, loftier, Jew than Moshe? Indeed, there never was – nor will there ever be – another Moshe. Yet, he devoted all of himself, his talents, acumen and strengths, to descend to the people, to demonstrate by personal example and teaching that one can come down. Not only was he the most elevated of all men, but he was also the most humble. He came down. Once (for whatever reason, which is beyond the scope of this paper), he became angry with *Klal Yisrael* when they demanded water and responded with *Shimu na ha'morim*, "Listen now, O rebels." His punishment was losing his opportunity to join his people in entering *Eretz Yisrael*.

*Rashi* teaches that the *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah* is compensatory for the sin of the Golden Calf. "Let the mother come and clean up the mess made by its calf." We think of the sinners of the Golden Calf as being the individuals who created the molten image, who danced before it and debased themselves in response to their new "intermediary." While it is true that it was the mixed multitude who instigated and actively participated in a leading role in worshipping this idol, they were relatively few in number in light of the overall punishment sustained by the entire nation. Indeed, they constituted but a minority of the nation.

This bit of information illuminates for us why the *Parah Adumah* specifically provides the most appropriate medium for catalyzing atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. Veritably, it was a minority which bore the brunt of punishment for their direct responsibility in creating the Golden Calf. This does not mean, however, that the majority did not carry any onus of guilt for their "part" in the sin. If they did nothing, how could they be blamed?

In truth, it was specifically their non-involvement which was the basis of their need to provide atonement. A lack of involvement which manifests itself by self-righteous individuals lamely standing by the wayside, while a minority of wicked people carry out a gross *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's Name, is a sin. When they heard that part of the *tzibbur*, community, was actively involved in sinful behavior, they plugged their ears, closed their eyes, and went about their business as usual. It had nothing to do with them. They were expressing that it was none of their business. This is a form of arrogance which is unforgivable, because their inactivity allowed a *chillul Hashem* to go unchecked and unchastised. As a result, their non-involvement was unpardonable.

Those who delude themselves into thinking that, as a result of their elite status, they do not share a common fate with the rest of society are sadly mistaken. As the majority of the *klal* could lower themselves "to carry the burden with the rest of the *tzibbur*" during the sin of the Golden Calf, something for which they were punished, so, too, will all those who think that they are "above it" discover that they are not.