

And they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish. (19:2)

The *mitzvah* of *Parah Adumah*, Red Cow, which is used to purify one who is *tamei meis*, spiritually defiled by coming in contact with a dead body, has become known as the paradigmatic *mitzvah* whose reason is beyond human cognition. Actually, this is true with regard to all *mitzvos*. We have no idea of the reason for any one of the 613 *mitzvos*; it is just that some are easier to relate to, because they are common-sensical. The laws of *Parah Adumah* are replete with anomalies. The most difficult to accept is the fact that the *Kohen* who carries out the purification process himself becomes contaminated, while the subject of the process is rendered *tahor*, spiritually clean. The *Talmud Kiddushin* 31a records a well-known story relating to *Parah Adumah*, which is pertinent to our *parsha*.

The *Talmud* asks how far one must go to carry out the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av*, honoring one's father, properly. *Chazal* cite a story from which they derive the extent to which one should go in fulfilling this *mitzvah*. In the city of Ashkelon, a gentile by the name of Dama ben Nesinah lived, whom the sages approached concerning a business deal. He explained that the key to his storage room lay beneath his father's pillow, upon which he was presently sleeping. The sages were prepared to spend 600,000 *shekel* for stones required for the *Eiphod*. He was willing to forgo the extraordinary profit in order not to disturb his father's rest. A year later, his herd produced a *Parah Adumah*, which would obviously warrant a high price from the sages. When they approached him again, he said, "I know that I can charge you anything that I want. All I ask, however, is the amount of money I lost due to the *kavod*, honor, I gave my father." The question is obvious: Hashem could have rewarded Dama ben Nesinah with any form of compensation. Why did Hashem choose the *Parah Adumah* as His medium?

The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl* (quoted by *Horav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, zl*), explains that the answer lies in Dama's response to the Sages: "I know that you will give me all that I ask." When a gentile is prepared to forgo a huge compensation in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of honoring his father, it presents a demanding allegation against the Jewish people. [Our devotion and commitment to Hashem is under scrutiny when a gentile who does not live by Torah values and is impacted by societal mores also demonstrates strong commitment.] In order to remove this implication from *Klal Yisrael*, Hashem provided the *Parah Adumah* as Dama's financial remuneration. For the most part, the *mitzvos* which Hashem has commanded us to observe are *sichliyuis*, logical. They make sense and do not challenge our way of thinking. *Chukim* are those *mitzvos* for which a facile and logical rationale is unavailable.

Dama ben Nesinah had not been commanded to honor his father. He did so simply out of logical deduction, as repayment for his father having raised him. Gratitude was his motivator, not *mitzvah*. Thus, while Dama was prepared to lose money in order to honor his father, it was not to be compared to the extent to which a Jew will go to carry out Hashem's command – even when it

defies rationale, such as with the *Parah Adumah*. When the sages visited Dama and offered to pay him an enormous sum of money for his *Parah Adumah*, they manifested true Jewish commitment to a *mitzvah*. What the gentile did was for something he understood to be appropriate. What *Chazal* did was for something they did not understand, but rather, for something in which they believed.

This is a powerful lesson for us. It is not about reward. We serve Hashem because we are His chosen children. Children neither question a father (or mother), nor do they have to understand why they are being told to do something. (Obviously, this is a broad statement and requires qualification according to the specific case.) “Why?” is a question that plagues everyone at one point or another. “Why suffering?” “Why me?” “Why this *mitzvah*?” There is no end to the “whys.” I saw an insight from *Horav Shlomo Freifeld, zl* (*Reb Shlomo*, by Rabbi Yisrael Besser), that is inspiring. *Rav* Freifeld would visit a certain school that addressed the spiritual educational needs of students who were encountering challenges in these areas. During one such visit, he asked the students whether they had any questions for him. These are some of the questions that troubled them: “Have the Jews not suffered enough?” “Why must we continue to suffer?” “I want so badly to be religious, to keep *Shabbos*, but my parents fight me every step of the way. Why does Hashem make it so difficult for me?”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* listened and was visibly moved by their sincere questions: “I wish I had such profound questions as you do. Truthfully, I really do not know the answers to your questions. You see, every one of us confronts challenges, *nisyanos*, trials, which makes his particular job/mission very difficult. Our responsibility is to persevere, not to figure out why we have these trials and tribulations. Success means to try to be normal, to enjoy life as much as possible even with these obstacles in our path. We just have to face each day with a smile and do our jobs, not understand why. Remember, we are here to enjoy life.”

I would like to present one more aphorism which is pertinent to this Torah thought. *Rav* Freifeld quoted his revered *Rebbe, Horav Yitzchok Hutner, zl*, “My *Rebbe, zl*, explained the two phrases in the *brachah, Asher bachar banu*, ‘That He chose us,’ and *u’nasan lanu es Toraso*, ‘and He gave us His Torah,’ as follows: The first part, that Hashem chose us, refers to the fact that we are *Yidden*; the second part is thanking Him for giving us the *mitzvos*.

“I believe that, in the early part of the century (twentieth), the *nisayon*, the struggle, was for the second part of the *brachah*. Every single man, woman and child felt like a *Yid*. They took pride in their identity as Jews. They thanked Him, *Asher bachar banu*.

“Their battle was for *kiyum ha’mitzvos*, the second part of the *brachah*. It was difficult for them to keep the *mitzvos b’poel*, practically. Today, we have it so easy. We no longer have to struggle to keep *mitzvos*. (We are able to serve Hashem wherever we want.) The battle has shifted to the first part: *asher bachar banu*. The struggle today is to be *Yidden*.

“We must remember: Without the *asher bachar banu*, there is no *v'nasan lanu*. We must be *Yidden* first.” Bearing the mantle of Judaism means that one is proud of his chosenness, of his distinction. His commitment to serve Hashem demonstrates this pride; it is the only way.