

# MEVASER TOV

*Essays on the weekly parsha by the Biala Rebbe shlita  
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## ∞ THE CLEANSING POWER OF HUMILITY ∞

- PARSHAS CHUKAS -

Shlomo HaMelech said, “I sought wisdom, but it eludes me.”<sup>1</sup> Our Sages explain this verse as a reference to the *parah adumah*, which was unfathomable even to Shlomo, the wisest of all men.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of *parah adumah* was deliberately hidden from us, since by its very essence, this mitzva must defy human reason.

Some mitzvos, such as the prohibitions against theft or murder, are well understood and appreciated even by the gentiles; but mitzvos such as *parah adumah* are called “*chukos*” – decrees of the King which we cannot understand but must obey simply because Hashem so commanded.<sup>3</sup>

When a person presumes to understand the meaning of a mitzva, he fulfills it because he decides for himself that it is important. It then ceases to be an expression of obedience to the Creator. However, when a person fulfills a mitzva only because Hashem so decreed, even though he does not understand it, it becomes an act of humble submission.

Our Sages tell us that in the merit of Avraham Avinu having said, “I am but dust and ashes,”<sup>4</sup> his descendants merited the ashes of the *parah adumah*.<sup>5</sup> This was not so much a reward for his humility as a natural consequence, since the essence of the *parah adumah* and its power to purify is nothing other than humility itself. To the degree that Avraham instilled in his descendants a sense of humility, so were they able to be purified by the waters of the *parah adumah*.

Accordingly, Rashi explains the significance of the cedar wood and hyssop branch that were thrown into the fires of the *parah adumah*: “The cedar is the tallest of trees,

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<sup>1</sup> *Koheles* 7:23

<sup>2</sup> *Yoma* 14a

<sup>3</sup> Rashi, *Bamidbar* 19:2

<sup>4</sup> *Bereishis* 18:27

<sup>5</sup> *Sotah* 17a

while the hyssop is the shortest of bushes, thus signifying that if a person's conceit causes him to sin, he should humble himself like the hyssop and be forgiven."<sup>6</sup>

## 2

### Torah Flows to the Humble

*"Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying, 'This is the decree of the Torah that Hashem commanded, saying: Speak to Bnei Yisrael and they shall bring you a completely red cow.'"*<sup>7</sup>

The verse refers to the *parah adumah* in a general sense as "*Chukas HaTorah* – the Decree of the Torah," implying that its lesson of humility is a fundamental principle of the entire Torah. None of the Torah's mitzvos can be properly observed by a person whose soul is tainted with arrogance. The Gemara thus states:

R' Chanina bar Idi taught: Words of Torah are compared to water, as it is written, "*Let all who thirst go to water.*"<sup>8</sup> Just as water abandons the heights and flows down to the depths, Torah abandons the haughty and flows down to the humble.

R' Oshia taught: Words of Torah are compared to water, wine and milk... Just as these three liquids are preserved in simple earthenware jugs, Torah is preserved only by the humble.<sup>9</sup>

A person with haughty confidence in his own infallible reasoning can never reconsider his outlook to accept the Torah's wisdom. Nor can he reconsider his own life to recognize his flaws and try to correct them. He is unable to receive the purification of the *parah adumah*, since in his conceited fancy he imagines his impurities to be the height of perfection. He cannot admit his mistakes and let go of them. Therefore, the cleansing waters of the *parah adumah* are wasted on him.

We can thus understand why the *parah adumah* is called the *Chukas HaTorah*, since both the *parah adumah* itself and Torah study in general are effective only to the degree that a person sweeps his heart clean of arrogance and pretension.

Torah study, like the *parah adumah*, is essentially a means of spiritual purification, as the Gemara states:

R' Chama bar Chanina taught: Why are tents juxtaposed with rivers in the verse, "*Like flowing streams, like gardens planted beside the river, like pitched tents*"<sup>10</sup>? To teach us that just as immersion in a river lifts people

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi, *Bamidbar* 19:22, citing R' Moshe HaDarshan

<sup>7</sup> *Bamidbar* 19:1-2

<sup>8</sup> *Yeshaya* 55

<sup>9</sup> *Taanis* 7a

<sup>10</sup> *Bamidbar* 24

from impurity into purity, so too do the tents in which Torah is studied.<sup>11</sup>

The Yehudi HaKodesh of Peshischa taught that studying Gemara with Tosefos's commentary before davening serves as a mikvah to purify the mind. As a person stretches his thoughts to understand the Gemara, he allows its wisdom to enter his mind, thus dissolving his foolish notions, driving away his impure desires and awakening his dormant reserves of spiritual strength.

The Mishna lists several kinds of mikva'os that are suitable for various levels of impurity. Some kinds of impurity can be cleansed in a pit filled with drawn water; some require rain water that fell directly into the pit; others can be cleansed only in a natural spring.<sup>12</sup>

The same is true of Torah study. There are various levels of Torah study which serve to purify the soul from differing degrees of spiritual disorder. The ability of Torah to cleanse and heal the soul, like the purification afforded by the *parah adumah*, depends on a person's honest recognition of his own deficiencies.

### 3.

#### The Wholeness of a Broken Heart

As many Tzaddikim have said, there is nothing so whole as a broken heart. By means of a contrite, broken heart, one can merit the great gift of spiritual purity, as the Toldos Adam writes:

We say in our Rosh Hashana davening, "Man is like a broken shard of earthenware." Whereas other kinds of vessels can be purified through immersion in a mikvah, an earthenware vessel can only be purified by breaking it.<sup>13</sup>

Man is thus compared to an earthenware vessel, since he can only be purified and healed of his spiritual maladies by breaking his heart in sincere remorse for his mistakes. He thus merits the fulfillment of the verse, "*Hashem is close to the broken hearted and rescues those of humble spirit.*"<sup>14 15</sup>

When a person internalizes the realization that he is as flawed as a broken shard, his heart breaks with the honest and humble recognition that man is made from earth and is

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<sup>11</sup> *Berachos* 15b, according to the rendition of the *Meor V'Shemesh*

<sup>12</sup> See *Mikva'os* chapter 1

<sup>13</sup> *Mishmayos: Keilim* 2:1

<sup>14</sup> *Tehillim* 34:19

<sup>15</sup> *Toldos Adam, Rosh Hashana*

destined to return to the earth. He thus brings healing and purification upon himself, for as we have explained, humility is the very foundation of spiritual purity.

The expression “*Chukas HaTorah*”, used in reference to the *parah adumah*, can also be understood in light of the Torah’s ability to engrave (“*chokeik*”) wisdom into the innermost recesses of the heart, leaving a lasting and substantial impression. However, this depends on the humility and contrition through which man opens his heart to absorb the Torah’s wisdom.

#### 4.

#### The Parah Adumah of our Times

The Torah portion discussing the *parah adumah* is called “*Taharasan shel kol Yisrael - the purification of the entire Jewish people,*”<sup>16</sup> not just, “the purification of the impure,” since the essentials of humility that underlie the *parah adumah* apply equally to us all. No one is perfect. Through honest, humble introspection we can recognize our faults, improve our lives and cleanse our souls from the stains of selfishness and conceit.

The verse states, “*Speak to Bnei Yisrael and tell them to bring you a completely red cow.*”<sup>17</sup> Rashi comments that the words “*bring you*” imply that the *parah adumah* used in the Desert, along with every *parah adumah* that would ever be offered, would be attributed to Moshe. Though it was the Kohanim who officiated over the *parah adumah* ritual, its power to purify depended on Moshe Rabbeinu, who taught Bnei Yisrael the lesson of humility that is integral to the *parah adumah*’s effectiveness. “*Moshe was the most humble man on the face of the earth.*”<sup>18</sup> He thus served as a model of humility for the entire nation for all time to come.

We have no actual *parah adumah* today, but its ability to purify is still available to us each year as we study the parsha of *parah adumah* and contemplate its relevance to our lives. The Kozhnutzer Maggid writes:

Although we have no Beis HaMikdash in which to offer sacrifices, we can still study the Torah portions associated with the sacrifices and thus be credited as if we had offered them. The same is true of studying the Torah portions associated with the *parah adumah*. This study purifies us as if we had been sprinkled with the cleansing waters of the *parah adumah*...

The verse, “*Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying, ‘This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded to say...’*”<sup>19</sup> implies that Hashem commanded us to just say the parsha of the *parah adumah*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi (Megillah 25b)*, cited by Rashi, *Megillah 29a*

<sup>17</sup> *Bamidbar 19:2*

<sup>18</sup> *Bamidbar 12:3*

<sup>19</sup> *Bamidbar 19:1-2*

When there is no actual *parah adumah* by which to be purified, the mere recitation of its verses will suffice.

The *parah adumah* symbolizes teshuvah, which purifies a person who is sullied by sin, but only if he recognizes his impurity and regrets it. The *parah adumah* is thus ineffective for those who are so blind as to waste their days in useless pursuits and imagine that they have done no wrong. For those who imagine themselves to be perfect, there is no atonement or purification.<sup>20</sup>

May Hashem grant us the merit to soon witness the day when a spirit of purity will pass over the entire earth, allowing us to return to Hashem in perfect and sincere teshuvah.

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<sup>20</sup> *Avodas Yisrael: Parshas Parah*