

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## CHUKAS

### The Chok of Parah Adumah

זאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לְאֹמֶר דְּבַר אֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה

*This is the statute (chok) of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a red heifer."<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION: MOSHE RABBEINU'S PARAH ADUMAH

Our parsha opens with a discussion of the mitzvah of *parah adumah* (red heifer), which is described as the quintessential *chok* of the Torah, that is, a mitzvah whose reason cannot be fathomed by the human intellect.

Throughout our history, there have been numerous *parah adumahs*, of which Moshe's was the first. And yet, the Midrash<sup>2</sup> informs us that Moshe's *parah adumah* impacted on all subsequent ones, for some of the ashes of his parah were mixed in with the water of every subsequent parah adumah. This statement requires our contemplation. Was not each subsequent red heifer that was used a *parah adumah* in its own right? Why should it need some ashes from Moshe's original heifer? Was the *parah adumah* in Moshe's time redder than those of subsequent times?

#### DOES THE PARAH ADUMAH ATONE FOR SIN?

The Gemara in the beginning of Maseches Yoma<sup>3</sup> makes a point of stating that the *parah adumah* does not come to atone for any sin, it comes only to purify from *tumas meis* (impurity through contact with the deceased). Thus, even when verse nine refers to it as a "*chatas*", which normally means an offering that atones for sin (*chet*), Rashi explains that here it means that it wipes away (*mechateh*) the *tumah* impurity.

However, the Gemara elsewhere indicates very clearly to the contrary. In Maseches Moed Katan,<sup>4</sup> it states that from the Torah's juxtaposition of the death of Miriam with the *parah adumah*, we learn that just as *korbanos* bring atonement, so too does the passing of the righteous. The Gemara is explicitly categorizing the *parah adumah* with other offerings that offer atonement! How is this to be reconciled with its non-

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 19:2.

<sup>2</sup> See Midrash Tanchuma Parshas Chukas sec. 8 with Commentary Eitz Yosef.

<sup>3</sup> 2a.

<sup>4</sup> 28a.

offering status as emphasized above?

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE FIRST PARAH ADUMAH

The Netziv<sup>5</sup> explains that, in fact, Moshe's *parah adumah* had a quality that did not exist with any of the later ones. In addition to the normal function of the *parah*, which we classify as a *chok*, the first heifer had the additional function of atoning for the sin of the Golden Calf, as the Midrash states,<sup>6</sup> “Let the mother [the Red Heifer] come and clean up the mess of the son [the Golden Calf].” This was relevant specifically for that first time, for the Jewish people who had recently worshiped the Egel.

Indeed, this additional element within the first *parah adumah* even finds practical expression in the way the Torah commanded its procedure to be performed. Verse three states “You shall give it to Elazar the Kohen.” The Gemara<sup>7</sup> notes that on this occasion, the *parah adumah* was to be given over specifically to Elazar – the deputy Kohen Gadol – to oversee, while on subsequent occasions, there is no such insistence: its service can be entrusted to any Kohen, including the Kohen Gadol. Why was this time different? The Midrash explains that since Aharon was physically involved in the making of the Egel – albeit for idealistic reasons – his deputy needed to perform the procedure, but he could not be involved. Thus, we see the unique nature of this first *parah adumah* affecting the halachos that applied to it.

## IN THE REALM OF PARSHANUT: A TWO-TIERED INTRODUCTION

This idea will also explain the order in the introductory verse: Hashem tells Moshe:

זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה וּגְוִי

*This is the statute (chok) of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying, “Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a red heifer etc.”*

The commentators point out that the phrases in this verse appear out of order, for is the idea that the *parah adumah* a *chok* not also part of what Moshe was to tell the people? If so, the verse should have read “Speak to the Children of Israel saying, ‘This is the stature of the Torah... and they shall take a red heifer etc.’”<sup>18</sup>

Rather, says the Netziv, once we recognize the unique nature of this first *parah adumah*, we can understand the order within the verse. Hashem opens by telling Moshe “This is the statute of the Torah,” which is a categorization that applies to the *parah adumah* generally. However, this is not part of what Moshe is to tell the people, since the *parah adumah* at hand will include elements that are beyond the *chok* designation of the mitzvah!

## RETURNING TO OUR OPENING QUESTIONS

We can now understand how the Gemara can derive from the juxtaposition of Miriam's death with *parah adumah* the idea the passing of the righteous atones like *korbanos*, even though elsewhere it states that there is no atonement associated with the *parah adumah*. The latter statement refers to the *parah adumah* generally, which exists only for purity, but not atonement, while the former statement relates to the original *parah adumah* which helped achieve atonement for the Chet ha'Egel.

---

5 Haamek Davar, beginning of Parshas Chukas.

6 Tanchuma Chukas sec. 8, cited in Rashi to verse 22.

7 Yoma 42b.

8 In fact, there is a more nuanced point here, for the phrase “[This is the statute... ] which Hashem has commanded,” referring to Hashem in the third person, implies that these are actually part of Moshe's words to the people! If so, why is it placed before Moshe is commanded to speak to them? See Commentary of Ramban *ibid*.

We can also understand why some of Moshe's *parah adumah* ashes were mixed in with all subsequent ones. We asked, are they not *parah adumahs* in their own right? Why should they need ashes from Moshe's? In light of our discussion, we see that Moshe's *parah adumah* did indeed contain an element not present within any others, namely, atonement for the Chet ha'Egel. Although atonement for that sin was effectively achieved in Moshe's time, nevertheless, the Gemara states that the atonement was not complete, rather, it is an ongoing process, and that every generation receives some measure of retribution for that sin. This ongoing atonement is represented by mixing in some of the ashes of the original *parah adumah* whose goal was to atone for that sin, into all later *parah adumahs*.



## WILL WE EVER KNOW THE REASON FOR PARAH ADUMAH?

As we have mentioned, the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is looked upon as the classic *chok*, that is, a mitzvah whose reason we cannot understand. However, there is a very intriguing comment in the Midrash<sup>9</sup> which states that it is only beyond our understanding in this world; in future times, the reason for this mitzvah will be revealed to us.

From a certain point of view, this idea actually makes the *parah adumah* even more puzzling. If its reason would be completely and fundamentally beyond human understanding, then that would be that. However, now that we discover that the reason will become revealed to us in the future, apparently it is something we *can* understand. Why, then, can it not be revealed to us already in this world?

## WHEREIN LIES THE CHOK?

To answer this question, we need to examine what we mean when we say that the *parah adumah* is a *chok*. While we tend to look upon the totality of *parah adumah* as a *chok*, the Gemara<sup>10</sup> interestingly identifies one specific aspect of the mitzvah which is responsible for its *chok* designation, namely, that it generates two opposite and counter-intuitive effects:

- ▷ On the one hand, the impure person upon whom the water with the *parah adumah* ashes is sprinkled becomes pure.
- ▷ At the same time, any pure Kohen who comes into contact with the water becomes impure.

The Gemara states that it was with regard to this contradictory effect of the *parah adumah* that Shlomo Hamelech exclaimed: “אִמְרָתִי אֲחַכְמָה וְהִיא רְחוּקָה מִמְּנִי – *I thought I would be wise, but it is beyond me.*”<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is the aspect of the mitzvah that currently remains elusive, but yet will be revealed in the future. What does all of this mean?

## A CHOK IN THE TORAH FOR THE CHUKIM OF LIFE

A very beautiful and profound explanation of this matter is presented by R' Yosef Zvi Salant.<sup>12</sup> Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish people, not only as a source of instruction for how to lead their lives, but

---

9 Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6.

10 Niddah 9a.

11 Koheles 7:23.

12 Be'er Yosef, Parshas Chukas.

also as a source of strength with which to do so. In this vein, the Midrash<sup>13</sup> explains that the verse “ה' עז לעמו יתן – Hashem will give strength to His people”<sup>14</sup> refers to the Torah. Yet life itself, in the current imperfect state of the world, is often baffling, mystifying and confounding, with the most vexing question of all being the righteous who sometimes experience suffering in this world and the wicked who so often seem to prosper. It is a question whose full answer cannot be fathomed within our current frame of life. Yet in the absence of the answer, we need the fortitude to persevere in the presence of the question.

Our faith in and faithfulness toward Hashem in all of life’s confusing situations comes from the mitzvos known as *chukim*, whose reasons likewise are unknown to us. At the center of this category of mitzvah is the *parah adumah* which contains a contradiction, whereby the impure becomes pure and the pure becomes impure. This mirrors those situations when life itself seems to act in a contradictory way – purifying and rewarding the impure while generating impurity and hardship for the pure.

This idea is expressed in the verse in Tehillim,<sup>15</sup> by David Hamelech, who himself experienced many hardships, often in hiding from those who sought to kill him:

זְמֵרוֹת הָיוּ לִי חֻקֵיךָ בְּבַיִת מְגוּרָי

*Your statutes (chukim) were a song for me, in the place of my sojournings.*

The sojournings to which David refers were all the places where he needed to find refuge from his opposers and enemies. At those times, with so much of his life containing adversity and hardship, the *chukim* of the Torah were his song, and from them he drew strength in engaging with the *chukim* of life.

## STATUTES AND DECREES

Indeed, perhaps the relationship between these two types of “statutes” can be seen in the Sages’ formulation regarding the *chukim*:

חוקה חקקתי, גזירה גזירה גזרתי, אין לך רשות להרהר אחריהם

*I have established statutes, I have issued decrees. You do not have permission to question them.*<sup>16</sup>

What is behind the double expression, “statutes... decrees” with regards to the *chukim*? Are these not one and the same? Rather, Hashem is informing the Jewish people that He has established unfathomable statutes (*chukim*) in the Torah, paralleling the equally unfathomable decrees (*gezeiros*) He has issued to the world as we know it – for it is the former that give strength regarding the latter.

Indeed, this idea may give us insight into an intriguing comment of the Midrash which links the terms used to describe the *parah adumah* with the exiles of the Jewish people:

- ▷ *Heifer* – this is Egypt.
- ▷ *Red* – this is Babylon.
- ▷ *Completely* – this is Persia.
- ▷ *Who has no blemish* – this is Greece.
- ▷ *Who has never carried a yoke* – this is Rome.

13 Yalkut Shimoni Parshas Beshalach sec. 242.

14 Tehillim 29:11.

15 119:54.

16 Bamidbar Rabbah.

Nowhere is life more inexplicable and unpredictable than when the Jewish people are in exile. Their evil oppressors appear to be enjoying boundless success while they themselves endure hardship. It is for these exiles especially that *parah adumah* is given as a *chok*.<sup>17</sup>

## TOWARD REDEMPTION

We can now understand why although the reason for *parah adumah* cannot currently be made known to us, in the future it will be revealed. When the Jewish people are finally redeemed and the world achieves its rectified state, not only will the confounding “decrees” of life no longer occur, we will even be able to understand in retrospect how all the experiences of the exile were for our ultimate benefit. In this state, with no *chukim* in life, there will be none necessary in the Torah, and the reasons for all mitzvos can be revealed.<sup>18</sup>

May the transfer of this mitzvah from *chok* to *mishpat* occur speedily in our days!

---

17 This may give us further insight into the statement of the Sages that the *parah adumah* comes to clean up the mess of the child, namely, the sin of the Golden Calf. The Gemara informs us (Eiruvin 54a) that had we not sinned with the Golden Calf, the world would have reached its rectified state and we would never have incurred exile. If so, we would never have had to endure the type of situations that require the reason for *parah adumah* to remain withheld from us. However, having committed that sin, the mother comes to clean up its mess in the form of a *chok* to help us with the *chukim* of life that we now need to endure.

18 See also, Beis Halevi, Parshas Bo s.v. Vayomer (12:43).