

# The Mystery of the Unknown and the Unknowable

A Dvar Torah on *Shabbat Parah*

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IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE GREAT FESTIVAL of Pesach, five special Sabbaths, each marked by the reading of an additional, distinctive Torah passage, explore momentous and important themes.

The first of the five, *Shabbat Shekalim* [the Sabbath of Shekels], focuses on the poll tax of a half-shekel for building a tabernacle in the wilderness. In Mishnaic times, this one-time donation became regularized as an annual donation required of every Israelite (M. SHEKALIM 1:1). The Sabbath of Shekels deals in essence with nation-creating and community-building.

*Shabbat Zakhor* [the Sabbath of Remembrance], the second of the series, with its recollection of the battle against the Amalekites and its connection to the festival of Purim, underscores the theme of historical meaning and historical memory; the survival of the nation of Israel through the vagaries, uncertainties, and vicissitudes of history, guided by divine providence.

The fourth Sabbath, *Shabbat HaChodesh* [the Sabbath of the Month], recited on or immediately preceding the New Moon of Nisan, the beginning of our season of liberation, explores the themes of freedom and redemption.

Finally, the great Sabbath immediately preceding Passover, *Shabbat HaGadol*, underscores the theme of messianism, that period beyond history that is heralded by Elijah the Prophet, a time which the Prophet declares will be marked by the reconciliation of parents with children and children with parents.

Community, history, freedom, and messianism are surely weighty themes in the lexicon of the Jewish people.

And what about the third Sabbath, known as *Shabbat Parah* [the Sabbath of the Red Heifer]? Does the account of a red heifer whose ashes are used for ritual purification really deserve to be part of this august lineup?

I would like to suggest that it does.

If I were to summarize the theme of *parashat Parah* I would call it “the mystery of the unknown and the unknowable.”

In the regular Torah portion that is usually assigned to *Shabbat Parah*, namely, *parashat Ki Tissa*, (Ex. 30:11-34:34), Moses implores God to reveal Himself to him:

*Now, if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know Your ways, that I may know You and continue in Your favor... Oh, let me behold Your presence!* (Ex. 33:13, 18)

Moses is met with the reply:

*I will make all goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But, He said, you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live.* (Ex. 33:19, 20)

So in *Ki Tissa* Moses confronts the limits of human apprehension in theological speculation. The additional *maffir* reading, taken from *parashat Hukat* (Num. 19), forces us to confront the limits of human apprehension in religious practice. The juxtaposition of the two readings is a powerful one.

As is well known, the rabbis understood the red heifer [*parah adumah*] as part of a larger category of commandments called *hukim* [ordinances], whose reasons are not known to us. The red heifer is not just one of the *hukim*; it is the quintessential *hok*. In Numbers Rabbah (19:8) and in the Gemara in Tractate *Yoma* 67b, the rabbis describe *hukim* as commandments against which Satan and the nations of the world will throw arguments at us, challenging us to justify their continued observance — and to which our sole reply must be that “these are decrees from the Almighty and we have no permission to think evil thoughts about them.”

I must confess that the rational side of me has greater sympathy with Satan in these circumstances than with the rabbis. For how much tolerance do we really have for the unexplained and the inscrutable?

We Jews are not at ease accepting matters entirely on faith, since this runs counter to the basic human urge for coherence and comprehension. Our ancestors — who hadn't read John Locke and John Stuart Mill — may have responded spontaneously to the divine decree with *na'aseh v'nishma* — “we will do and we will obey.” (Ex. 24:7) But even they had a rocky response when it came to unquestioning obedience. For us, as heirs to the Western philosophic tradition of individualism and liberty, even more so this response does not come naturally.

The search for *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* [reasons for the commandments], particularly those which seemingly defy understanding, has a long and voluminous lineage. Both classical and contemporary commentators have come up with explanations for just about every mitzvah, even the *parah adumah*. These explanations range from the traditional (Rashi), which sees the red heifer as atonement for the sin of the golden calf, to the contemporary which conceive of it in psychological or social terms. What concerns us here, however, is the intensity of the effort to find reasons. In the history of Jewish thought, the attempt to eliminate the non-rational and the irrational has had a long and voluminous lineage.

Medieval Jewish philosophers were troubled by the apparent inconsistency between two seemingly opposite sources of truth — the revealed tradition that they had inherited from Sinai and the equally valid source of philosophic truth that they had received from non-Jewish (namely, Greek and Arabic) philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. Medieval Jewish philosophy is largely about the attempt to reconcile these two sources of authority and the fashioning of an understanding of Jewish tradition in a manner that does away with philosophical incongruities.

The tenth century Saadia Gaon, in his master work, *Sefer haEmunot ve-haDeot* [*The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*], made a distinction between *mitzvot sikhivot*, rational commandments, positive or negative, whose reasons are self-evident and which every orderly society requires (prohibitions against murder and violent crime, for example), and *mitzvot shimiyot*, commandments whose sanction and whose comprehensibility is based solely on the revealed Will of God. Even mitzvot in the latter category have reasons, although one sometimes needs to dig a little to come up with them.

Maimonides, in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, completely eliminated the category of the non-rational. Every mitzvah, even the most seemingly abstruse,

has its reason or justification, whether to foster human perfection or to eliminate idolatry. This is rationalism carried to its extreme.

In the modern period, Jewish thinkers in Central and Western Europe (most notable was Moses Mendelssohn — but there were others, such as Nafali Hertz Wessley and Hermann Cohen) faced a similar challenge to that of their medieval counterparts in their quest to reconcile Judaism with the spirit of the age. However, the context was very different. In the enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jews and Judaism were lured by the promise of emancipation and the granting of full political and social rights in their host nation states. Jewish philosophers sought to justify Judaism's place in the world by ridding it of superstitions and the non-rational — elements that were seen as major barriers preventing Jews from participating fully in European culture and society. Not only was Judaism not the superstitious, exclusivist religion that its detractors had maintained — argued Jewish philosophers — but, properly understood, Judaism was the perfect embodiment of the religion of pure reason.

And what about us?

Our generation, perhaps like no other in history, is the least bound by external forces of authority. Our connection to our faith, our tradition, and our community is entirely voluntary. We have unparalleled access to sources of scientific information, an access that is instantaneous and global. We consider ourselves rational beings par excellence. Of all generations, one would have thought, ours would have zero tolerance for the unexplained and the mysterious.

As it turns out, that is not exactly the case. The allure of certain forms of belief and practice that rely on our non-rational faculties is very great indeed. The growth and spread of Kabbalah centers is only one small manifestation of this trend. The staying power of the non-rational elements of faith is strong because, as complex and multi-dimensional beings, we are more than simply the sum of our intellectual capacities. Whether historically or culturally conditioned, or derived from nature, there seems to be a need, buried deep within the human psyche, to hold onto the mysterious elements of faith that are unexplainable by rational enquiry.

We are witnessing this today in the controversy over the recent documentary “The Lost Tomb of Jesus” and the fierce reactions of believers to an

archaeological discovery that seems to challenge some of the oldest doctrines of Christian theology. These reactions suggest that a deep religious conviction, even one held by intelligent people, survives the challenge of contrary evidence despite, or perhaps because of, its imperviousness to reason. The evidence is simply dismissed at best as unproven and unreliable, at worst as a misguided attack on the faith. Far from losing faith, the believer's creed is fortified.

All three of the major mono-theistic religions contain non-rational or irrational elements. Islam has the notion of *jihad*, the return of the supernatural *mahdi*, the elimination of rational discourse and total reliance on faith in Wahhabism and other Islamic sects. In Christianity, there is the doctrine of the virgin birth or the resurrection of the crucified messiah from the dead. In Judaism, leaving aside the numerous strands of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah with all of its strangely magical and superstitious elements, much of the irrationality of our faith is tied into the notion of *hukim* — those peculiar mitzvot which are to be observed by virtue of divine command alone — and epitomized by the *parah adumah*.

Far from being out of place among the five special *parshiyot* that precede Passover, *Shabbat Parah* can now be seen as supplying a crucial element in the theology of Judaism. Taken together, these readings focus our attention on the great ideas of the Jewish people — community, history, freedom, messianism, and the mystery of the unknown and unknowable.

As my teacher, Rabbi David Hartman, once wisely observed, "It's not whether any particular religion contains irrationality or not — because all of them do. It's *which* irrationality you choose!"

Science, too, is not immune to the forces of mystery and some of its greatest exponents have, through the tools of science, come to recognize, appreciate, and express the power of mystery that lies beyond the visible and the comprehensible. In a famous essay, "The World as I See It," Albert Einstein wrote the following:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise

to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms — this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness.

There are many things that we do as Jews which elevate us spiritually but which contain an element of mystery that we are often at a loss to understand, let alone to explain. Whether it is the healing power of prayer or the restorative power of a ritual (such as *mikvah*), the non-rational is very much a part of our inner core as Jews.

Many of us have real difficulty accepting anything on faith and incorporating into our lives practices that we don't fully comprehend. *Shabbat Parah* reminds us of the limits of human understanding, the boundaries of human knowledge, the unexplained, the unknowable, the unfathomable. It challenges us to find a place for those elements of our tradition that do not appeal solely to our intellects or which we do not completely comprehend — the power of prayer and ritual, the observance of mitzvot which ennoble our souls and which create a sense of connection with our past and our future and, ultimately, the mystery of the transcendent Being whose inner essence, whose plan for the Jewish people, and whose design for humanity will always elude us.



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