

Why? Because.

Category: Bamidbar, Chukas

What is the lesson from the strange mitzvah of the red heifer?

The Occasional Red Heifer

From time to time, we read in the papers that a red cow is born at a specific Kibutz in Israel. Everyone is happy and excited and there are those who see in it a sign that Moshiach is coming, for in order to build the Temple and bring sacrifices, we need to be purified with water that is mixed with ashes of a red heifer.

But then, after a detailed inspection, they find that this “red cow” had a few back hairs and then we read again in the paper that this red cow is not so red after all.

The wait for a red cow starts again.

This week in the beginning of our Parsha, the Torah writes first about this Mitzvah. What is a person who came in contact with a dead body or a grave supposed to do? He needs to be sprinkled with the special water.

Parshas Chukas was written at the end of the 40th year. (We know this because in this Parsha it tells how Moshe hit the rock, which happened at the end of the 40th year.)

Commentaries ask: why does the Torah write the Mitzvah of the red heifer in our Parsha? It would seem more appropriate earlier, in the Book of Vayikra, which deals with all of the laws of purity and impurity.

Moreover, the first time they needed the red cow, was one year after leaving Egypt, when they celebrated the first Pesach in the desert. We are told that there were people who were impure because they were carrying Yosef’s coffin. (Some say they took care of the burial of Nadav and Avihu.)

And in general, a person who wants to bring a sacrifice has to purify himself beforehand. So, they must have known about the Mitzvah of the red heifer and it should have been written then. So why is it written only in the 40th year?

There is also another question: Why does the Torah write “this is the *chok* of the Torah” as opposed to writing “this is the *chok* of the heifer”?

The Death of the Greats

In this Parsha, something significant happens that changes the whole history of the generation of the desert.

We read about the deaths of the leaders of the generation. This week we read about the death of Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Moshe and Aharon, and at the same time we read about the death of Aharon and that everyone mourned him for 30 days. In addition to all of this, we read for the first time that Moshe would not merit to enter the land of Israel. So all at once, the Jewish people find that they are left without the three shepherds who cared for them in the desert. All of their necessities had been dependent on them: The water was in Miriam’s merit, the protective clouds were in Aharon’s merit and the manna was in Moshe’s merit. The Jews suddenly needed to start caring for themselves.

Therefore, Moshe wants to empower the Jews; the Torah wants to tell them how they would be able to stand strong through the coming years and generations. So the Torah comes and says “this is the *chok* of the Torah.”

What is a *Chok*? A *Chok* is something that is not understood with human intellect, it has no logical explanation. When we ask why we need to fulfill the Mitzvah of the red heifer and the logic behind it, the answer is “just because!” There is no explanation; we do this only because Hashem commanded.

Something like this is not acceptable in any normal society. For every event, there is always a logical explanation. Even when the logical explanation isn’t obvious, we are always searching for an explanation for our own peace of mind.

Here comes the Torah and teaches us that we don’t need explanations. The answer “Because” serves as an explanation and is good enough for fulfilling the Mitzvah.

Until that day, the Jewish people fulfilled the Mitzvos because that was the smartest and wisest thing to do. They were the generation that witnessed the revelations at Sinai and received the Torah; what is the surprise that they fulfilled

the entire Torah?

But now, when they are about to enter the land, we are talking about a new generation that didn't see with their eyes what happened at Sinai; now, there wouldn't be miracles and there wouldn't be the type of leaders that the Jewish people were accustomed to until then.

Moshe therefore gives them a guaranteed prescription to stand strong: "This is the *Chok* of the Torah" - you need to fulfill the Torah simply because Hashem wants you to and not for any other reason.

There will come days and situations where there won't be any other logical reason to keep Torah and Mitzvos, and on the contrary, according to logic it would make sense to leave Torah, and the only thing that would strengthen the Jew is "because", with no logical explanations. Only fulfilling the *Chok* alone will give him the strength to overcome all of the argument.

The Deeper Truth

The truth of the matter is that there is a depth here: when someone asks parents why they love their children, if they start to give reasons and explanations for their love they are not being truthful, because no reason is the true reason for their love. There are parents that will answer that they love their child because he is cute; if he wasn't cute would they not love him? Because he is smart; if he g-d forbid loses his knowledge would they stop loving him? The love of parents to their children is a love that has no reason or explanation, other than "because." There is no need for an explanation, because as soon as you start rationalizing it, you desecrate the bond and you minimize the greatness of this love.

The same is true here: the connection between a Jew and Hashem is not a connection based on logic, so when a person says that he is fulfilling a Mitzvah for a specific reason, this may not be false - but it is certainly not the whole truth. A person might keep Shabbos because he feels good when he does. It is a day of holiness and the whole family gets together and he looks forward to it all week. This is all nice and good — but would he stop keeping Shabbos if all of these reasons would be nullified?

The same is true of all Mitzvos: true, they each have reasons and explanations

that make keeping them easier but their true reason is that they are G-d's will. This is the deep and true connection between a Jew and Hashem — and the moment we give different reasons for Mitzvos we are desecrating the depth of that connection.

What is the lesson for us?

Many times, I am asked by parents, 'how do I explain to my kids that they need to marry a Jew?' Why should he give up on the love of his life only because she is not Jewish? There are many good reasons — such as, "married life is hard enough and having similar backgrounds makes things easier," or that we need to continue the Jewish nation etc. etc., but every logical reason can be argued like everything logical; such is the nature of human logic. But the true answer is "Because."

However, when parents themselves are examples to their children that they live their Judaism based on "because," they can anticipate that their children will also continue, just "Because."