



THE MEANING OF THE MITZVOT

THE SAGES TELL US THAT THERE IS A LINK BETWEEN THE 613 Mitzvot (Commandments) and the human body. They point out that there are 248 positive, active Mitzvot, things we *should* do, corresponding to the 248 limbs or parts of the body. There are 365 negative, restraining Mitzvot, things we should *not* do, corresponding to the same number of sinews. The purpose of the Mitzvot is to express holiness by means of our physical bodies, living daily life: living as a human being, yet expressing G-dliness.

In order to think about the meaning of the Mitzvot, let us consider the biological nature of the body. It forms an integral whole, each part playing a vital role in the working of the person. Over the years, medical research has revealed more and more about the functions of the various components of the body right down to the level of enzymes, hormones, the DNA molecule and genetic codes.

Yet there are still processes that are little understood. Even in our lifetime the practice of removing tonsils or adenoids “at the drop of a scalpel” has been curtailed because previously unrecognised uses of these organs have been discovered.

It is clear that the body is a marvellous unity. If there is something which cannot be understood about it at this time, the world has learned to expect that eventually we will discover more, and understand more. Every detail is significant.

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The same can be said of the Mitzvot, the Commandments of the Torah. Many can be understood, at some level. However there are some that cannot. These are classified as “Chukim” - unexplained statutes. There are quite a number of these in Jewish life.

The beginning of this week's Sedra¹ provides an important example which applied in Temple times. This is the purification procedure using the Red Heifer. A person who has been in contact with the dead, becomes impure in a special way, meaning that he or she may not enter the Temple. A few drops of water with the ashes of the Red Heifer are sprinkled on the impure person. Now he is pure, and can again enter the Temple. The Sedra uses the word Statute in describing this Mitzvah: “this is the statute² of the Torah”.

We do not “understand” the concept of impurity, nor why the red heifer procedure renders the person pure. The law of the Red Heifer symbolizes all the laws we cannot “understand”, such as Kashrut³.

Our service of G-d cannot be limited by our understanding. In daily life a person eats food long before they understand how the digestive process works. We use a computer even though we may have no idea how it works “inside”. We go to the doctor and follow his or her advice to take medicine, including herbal medicine, without understanding why it should have a curative effect⁴.

When we perform a Commandment without knowing its full meaning we demonstrate that we are doing this because we know it has been commanded by G-d in the Torah and we believe and trust that this is good for us as individuals and ultimately for the whole world. The Mitzvah bonds us to G-d, and also spiritually elevates and transforms the world. This is the true purpose of the Commandments. At the same time G-d tells us to use our intellect as much as possible in order to be able to understand more.

This also applies to the laws we think we *do* understand. In every Jewish teaching there are many levels, just as there are endless details to discover about each organ of the body and how it connects with the whole. Each Mitzvah connects us to G-d, and also spiritually illuminates the world, for the benefit of all humanity.

1. Numbers 19:1-22:1. 2. *Chok* means ‘statute’, *chukat* in construct form. 3. Concerning the spiritual effect of Kashrut, see Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Tanya* chapters 7-8. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Torat Menachem* vol.15, p.107.

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SEDRA CHUKAT

THE RED HEIFER (COW)

"Alright, boys, come this way please!" Mr Harris called out, motioning the three younger boys to keep walking down the path. Mr Harris was taking his three sons, Yoni, Daniel and Alex, on a trip to visit their Uncle Richard, who owned a farm in the countryside.

They visited the chicken in the coops. There was a rabbit hutch, and they took turns holding rabbits and stroking them gently. Yoni, Daniel and Alex loved animals. This was really a treat!

Uncle Richard led them to a big field with lots of sheep. Yoni walked along bleating, and some of the sheep followed him. It was fun. Now it was time for them to have a look at the cows.

The boys followed Mr Harris and Uncle Richard towards a large barn where the cows were sheltering.

"Ooh, it stinks!" Alex exclaimed, pinching his nose.

"Wow, look at this cow!" Daniel pointed, "It's double my height."

"Yep!" Uncle Richard patted the cow's back, "we have big, healthy, strong cows over here. Only the best!"

"Uncle Richard," Yoni asked, "Do you think you have any red cows?"

“Red cows? Have you ever seen a red cow?”

“Well, we learnt about it in school this week, during Sedra class, about the Red Heifer, and I was wondering if you had any, so I can see what they look like.”

“Well, Yoni, dear, my cattle are Jersey Cows, which are brown, or brown and white. There are some kinds of cow which are more red in colour. But I have never seen a real fully red cow like the one in the Sedra. That would be something!”

“Yes, even in the time of the Temple they were very rare and very expensive”, said Mr Harris. “In fact, from the time of Moses, only nine red heifers were prepared. Who knows when the tenth will be?”

“I know,” said Daniel. “In the time of Moshiach!”

“That’s right!” said Uncle Richard. “It will be used to purify people so that we will be able to go to the Temple.”

“But aren’t there any today?” asked Yoni. “I really wanted to see one!”

“You can try and find one!” Mr Harris said with a twinkle in his eye. “There are many complicated laws about it though. The Red Heifer had to be thoroughly checked by the Cohanim, the priests. Do you know that if the cow had even two hairs that weren’t red, it couldn’t be considered fit to be the Red Heifer!”

“Yes, I learnt that too,” Daniel said, “and it couldn’t have any blemishes either.”

“But don’t worry,” Uncle Richard reassured Yoni, “the Messiah will be here very soon, and I’m sure you will be able to see the Red Heifer!”

“Yes!” Yoni said, “I can’t wait!”

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