

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summary of Points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

פרשת צו פרשת פרה תשל"ג ד"ה וידבר.. זאת חוקת התורה בלתי מוגה

Published for Shabbat Sedra Tzav, Parshat Parah

20 Adar II 5784, 30 March 2024¹

MITZVAH BEYOND REASON

THIS SHABBAT IN THE MORNING SERVICE TWO TORAH SCROLLS ARE taken from the Ark. In the first, the Sedra of the week is read; then for Maftir, a passage is read from the second Scroll². This passage³ presents the law of the Red Heifer, the mysterious procedure which purifies a person who has come in contact with the dead. The approaching Pesach festival is a time when the family would travel to Jerusalem and visit the Temple. A person who is impure from the dead cannot enter the Temple precinct, hence people would make sure to be purified in time for the Festival.

This explains why we add this Torah reading at this time of year. It begins 'And G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: this is the statute of the Torah...' Chassidic teachings ask why it says 'this is the statute of the Torah'. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to say 'this is the statute of the Red Heifer..'? The text seems to imply that the Red Heifer law is the prime 'statute' of the entire Torah.

In a sense, it is indeed that. Many of the laws of the Torah seem fully comprehensible, such as the prohibition of theft. There are other laws which are considered 'Statutes', meaning that they have no obvious 'reason'. The law of Shaatnez, forbidding one to wear a garment in which wool and linen are mixed, is in that category. But the law of the Red Heifer is described by the

¹ Maamar Vayedaber.. Zot Chukat HaTorah 5733 (1973). It was printed in Dvar Malchut Tzav 5784. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² If only one Torah Scroll is available, after the Sedra has been read, the Scroll is rolled to Sedra Chukat and then the Maftir is read.

³ Numbers 19:1-22, Sedra Chukat. A perfectly red cow which had never had a yoke would be taken outside the camp (later, outside Jerusalem), slaughtered, its blood sprinkled towards the Sanctuary or Temple, burnt, and then its ashes mixed with water would be sprinkled on the person who is impure, bringing purification.

Sages as being in a further category of its own, even further beyond understanding. One aspect of this, is that the purpose of the Red Heifer procedure is to purify those who are impure. But the process by which the Priests prepare the Red Heifer actually makes them impure⁴. The Sages state that the Red Heifer ‘purifies the impure, but defiles the pure’⁵. Indeed, the Sages explain a verse in Kohelet as meaning that King Solomon himself declared he could understand every Mitzvah – except for that of the Red Heifer⁶.

This might help us understand what distinguishes the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer from other statutes of the Torah (see below).

A further point, however, is that *all* the laws of the Torah demand our acceptance in a way which might well transcend Reason, and our natural desire. Hence the Sages comment ‘do not say I do not like pork, but rather that I *do* like it, but what should I do – my Father in Heaven has forbidden me to eat it!’⁷ The self-restraint that the person imposes on himself or herself to avoid giving in to their natural desire is an example of submitting to the yoke of Heaven, despite the fact that Reason (and/or biological desire) tempt the person towards forbidden food or other kinds of forbidden behaviour.

This means that every Mitzvah has an aspect whereby it is a ‘statute’. So, a more general question implicit in this discourse is: what is the significance of *any* law which imposes Divine Will on a person’s natural understanding and desire? Why does the Torah ask us to keep laws which, not only might not be understood, but which also defy our natural Reason and inclinations?

To understand this, we need to consider the subtle implications of a biblical verse: the Prophet Jeremiah said ‘Thus says G-d, were it not for My covenant day and night, I would not have set the statutes of Heaven and Earth’⁸.

The term ‘My covenant’ can be understood as the Torah which one should study day and night, and the Talmud suggests that what this verse implies is that the existence of Heaven and Earth depend on the Jewish people keeping the Torah⁹. Indeed, the Talmud there presents the idea that the Earth was frightened that the Jews might not accept the Torah at Sinai, and the world would be returned to

⁴ See Numbers 19:7-10, Sedra Chukat, which indicates that the Priests involved in its preparation become impure and have to purify themselves in a Mikveh, ritual pool.

⁵ See Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah, ch.19.

⁶ See Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:23 at the end, commenting on Kohelet 7:23.

⁷ Rashi to Leviticus 20:26, Sedra Kedoshim. Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters*, chapter 6, and Chassidic teachings advise that in many areas of life one can and should train oneself not to desire things forbidden by the Torah. But there are always likely to be areas where one’s natural desires have to be restrained, by ‘acceptance of the yoke of Heaven’.

⁸ Jeremiah 33:25.

⁹ Avodah Zara 3a, see Rashi ‘im lo briti’.

Chaos. When they did accept the Torah, the Earth could rest, knowing that its existence was assured¹⁰.

Chassidic teachings¹¹ analyzing this verse from Jeremiah discuss the meaning of the term ‘statutes of Heaven and Earth’. The word ‘statute’, *chok* in Hebrew, relates to the word *chakikah*, which means ‘engraving’. The difference between engraving and writing, is that in a written text the ink is a separate entity which has been inscribed on the base, such as parchment. As such it can also be removed. The scribe can erase what he has written. By contrast in the case of an engraved text, the base (such as a stone tablet) and the text are a unity.

Jeremiah’s verse uses the term ‘statutes of Heaven and Earth’, which implies *engraving*. But how can one speak of the existence of the physical universe in terms of ‘engraving’? To use the term engraving would imply that when looking at any aspect of existence one sees its unity with its Divine base. Now it is true that this can be achieved through a process of contemplation. Knowing that the Divine life-force is the essential nature of existence, one can contemplate the sun, moon and stars, or the sea, the forest, a pebble – and be aware with one’s mind’s eye that its existence is based on its Divine source. The problem is, that this is not the normal way that most people see the world. They see it more as a ‘written’ text, which they think is separate from the Divine, just as the ink is separate from the parchment. In fact they might forget the Divine basis for existence altogether.

At this point we can understand the significance of Jeremiah’s verse, connecting the existence of the ‘statutes’ of Heaven and Earth, the engraving of Heaven and Earth, with the Torah. The function of the Torah and its Mitzvot is to reveal the engraved aspect of existence, its utter unity with the Divine.

The Maggid R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch¹² explains that this idea is expressed in the verse introducing the Ten Commandments: ‘And G-d spoke all these Words, saying’¹³. The ‘Words’ signify the Ten Commandments, the Torah. ‘Saying’ expresses the Ten Sayings (sometimes called Utterances) with which the universe was created¹⁴. The goal of life is to join together the Torah and the universe, so that the universe reveals its inner Divine nature. Instead of being seen as ‘written’, ink on parchment, which, in people’s imagination, can easily be separated from its Divine source, the universe is seen as ‘engraved’, something in which the inner Divine nature is unmistakable.

¹⁰ Avodah Zara 3a, explaining the verse ‘From Heaven You taught judgement [ie: Torah], and the Earth which [had been] frightened was [now] calmed’ (Ps.76:9).

¹¹ See the beginning of the Rebbe R. Shalom Dovber’s discourse ‘Zot Chukat’ 1906.

¹² The second leader of the Chassidic movement, after the Baal Shem Tov. Rabbi Dov Ber passed away on 19 Kislev 5633 (1772).

¹³ Exodus 20:1, Sedra Yitro. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Likkutei Torah*, Chukat 57c.

¹⁴ See Ethics of the Fathers 5:1.

Now we come back to the question of statutes among the Mitzvot, and the way that every Mitzvah has within it an aspect of being a statute.

Just as there are the two categories of writing and engraving as two different ways of seeing and relating to the universe in relation to the Divine, so too there are these two categories regarding Torah itself and also the Mitzvot.

The division of Torah into ‘Written Torah’ and ‘Oral Torah’ is well-known. But on a higher level, there is Torah as the Will and Wisdom of G-d (which includes both the Written and Oral aspects), and could be considered ‘written’, as ink on parchment, like the Torah Scroll [and also the many volumes of the Oral Torah, such as the Talmud].

But there is also Torah as an expression of the Essence of the Divine, which is like the engraved aspect of Torah, the divinely written words of the Ten Commandments on the Tablets of stone. Indeed *all* Torah teachings when approached on that level can be recognized as completely transcending human understanding¹⁵.

The same logic applies to the Mitzvot. On one level we appreciate most of them as ‘making sense’ and being ‘reasonable’. This is the ordinary way of approaching the Mitzvot, as ‘rational’ at least on some level. As if they were a written text, ink on parchment or paper. One can focus on the text, and forget the medium on which it is written. Thus a person might forget about the Divine ‘base’ of the text, the Divine origin.

But then there is the higher way, to see them as expressing the Essence of the Divine, completely beyond our human understanding (even when we are thinking about a ‘rational’ kind of Mitzvah). This means keeping the Mitzvot as ‘engraved’, direct expressions of the Infinite Essence.

Why is the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer so significant in this context? What makes it different from other Mitzvot, including those we also term statutes? Why is it called ‘the statute of the Torah’?

One explanation of the verse ‘this is the statute of the Torah’ is that there has to be the concept of the *statute* before we approach Torah study and the Mitzvot of the Torah. We have to know that through Torah and Mitzvot we can approach the infinite Divine Essence, utterly beyond human understanding.

¹⁵ Although the Torah also has to be studied by us in this world, using our human minds as much as we can. But then we realise that really the Torah in its infinite essence is completely beyond our finite human comprehension.

Further, concerning the Red Heifer itself, the paradoxical nature of this Mitzvah was mentioned earlier: it purifies the impure, but the procedure for preparing it for use temporarily defiles the pure. In this it is like the very exalted Mitzvah of Teshuvah, Repentance.

Repentance is a very exalted concept in Jewish teaching. But generally the way one can attain Repentance is through sin. Because a person sinned, he or she repents. Even more, the sin provokes the person to a feeling of bitterness, of regret. Generally, one should serve G-d with joy. But bitterness can be the spur which brings one to the step of Repentance.

Further, Chassidic teachings mention the idea of the Tzaddik, the righteous person who reaches 'down' to the individual who is trapped in realm of negativity, and helps him or her to climb up and be transformed. For the Tzaddik, this 'descent' is in order to raise others. But it still could be termed a 'descent'.

This paradoxical process is at the heart of the meaning of existence in relation to the Divine Essence. The Essence is concealed by materiality, or even by sin, but ultimately is revealed, a process which will be fully achieved with the coming of Moshiach. The paradox of the Red Heifer typifies this: despite, or because of, the negativity of existence one can transform impure to pure, and reveal the Essence of the Oneness of the Divine.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care