

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny Freedman

## **(Portion of Chukat)**

*Pure exhaustion; that was the only way to describe it; She sank down in the back seat of the yellow cab and let her eyes close. She did not know exactly where she was going, but trusted the cab driver to get her there, as she nodded off to sleep. The driver was talking, as New York cab drivers are wont to do, but the woman's thoughts were already far away, with her family in Israel, and her son in N.Y.U. medical center, all awaiting news that he would be able to have the complicated liver transplant he so desperately needed.*

*It was hard for her to imagine it had only been three weeks since he had been diagnosed; events since then had been such a whirlwind. Meir\* seemed so happy when she had let him stay home from school in order to take him to the medical center for a follow up visit. Her son had been having stomach pain, and she had taken him for blood tests a few days earlier; it had all seemed so ordinary; after all, with seven children this was not the first time one of her children needed blood tests.*

*And then, in an instant, her entire world turned upside down, and words like 'liver failure', 'transplant', and 'donor lists' had become a part of her daily routine.*

*More frightening, her son was now one of the many names floating around in charity letters begging for help; there was just no way they could afford the operation on her husband's meager Israeli salary, and, because of her son's rapidly declining condition, she was told his life could be measured in weeks.*

*So she had dropped everything and come to America to try and raise the unimaginable sum of sixty thousand dollars, the amount the hospital needed in hand in order to allow her son the bed and the number on the list, which would hopefully save his life.*

*She barely knew any English, and had never before left Israel, but as a deeply religious woman, she was determined to somehow raise the money necessary to save her son's life. She realized, with G-d's help, she was succeeding. These had been the most exhausting three weeks of her entire life; neighborhood by neighborhood, door to door, she had begged, cried, and explained her story, in broken English, hundreds if not thousands of times.*

*People often look at the beggar who shows up at the door as the lazy indigent not willing to work at making a living. But begging door to door is hard work. For every door that answers with a smile, you have to be willing to endure ten doors that either slam in your face, or don't even open at all. She had learned what it means to be ignored, to be humbled, and often to be the lowest priority on anyone's list. She had spent eighteen hours a day on her feet, not resting even on Shabbat, spending each weekend in a different community hoping to meet those who might help.*

*She had stayed every night with strangers who, though kind, often did not understand her, and she had allowed her tears to flow only late at night into her pillow as she fell into an exhausted sleep only to awaken again the following day at the crack of dawn, in order to visit yet another set of minyanim, morning prayer services, where businessmen on their way to work might have compassion for her plight.*

*Incredibly, with G-d's help, she had succeeded in raising over fifty thousand dollars, most of it in cash, which, with no local bank account where she could deposit the money, she carried in her purse, she took with her everywhere she went.*

*She awoke with a start; surprised she had fallen into such a deep sleep in a cab; the driver had come around to wake her up, and, bleary-eyed, she handed him the twenty-dollar bill she always kept in her pocket.*

*It was only after the cab had rounded the corner, that she suddenly realized what felt wrong: she had left her purse, with all the money, on the back seat of the taxi!*

*It took her a few hours on the phone to realize just how hopeless it really was: with no taxi medallion number, no driver's name, and lacking even the name of the taxicab company, it was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. So she did the only thing a person in her exhausted situation can do: she prayed. There is actually a special prayer (from the great Tannaitic sage, Rabbi Meir, the famous student of Rabbi Akiva) for finding lost objects, and after uttering the prayer with tremendous devotion, and a broken heart, she finally lay down before dawn and fell into an exhausted and troubled sleep.*

*Her hostess shook her awake in the morning with the announcement that there was a phone call for her. She was surprised, as no-one even knew she was there, much less had the number, and her surprise turned to shock and joy when she realized that the voice on the other end of the phone was none other than the same taxi driver from the night before!*

*With no name, and no telephone, he had tracked her down by recalling the address where he had left her, and they arranged to meet later that day.*

*The woman had not dared to ask if all the money was still there. Her shock turned to amazement when the cab driver returned her purse, intact, with every last dime. He wondered why she was carrying around so much cash, and after explaining in broken English, she offered him a reward, which he refused to accept.*

*"My mother told me to be nice to Jews", he said. "I don't want a reward, just give me a blessing."*

*So she gave him a brachah (blessing) that he should live a long, healthy, and fulfilling life.*

*That very night, the taxi driver suddenly became very ill. He was so sick that he could not go to his day job the next day ... at the World Trade Center. The night the fellow was ill happened to be September 10, 2001. And today, Meir \*(not his real name), after a successful liver transplant, is one of the star soccer players on his eighth-grade team.*

There are so many things in life that are impossible to understand, and yet every now and then, we are afforded the opportunity to get a glimpse, as if through a momentary clearing of the fog, of what it's all about. How important is it for us to comprehend all that we do? Where lies the balance between pure faith on the one hand, and our need to understand on the other?

This week's portion, *Chukat*, provides the ultimate example of that which is impossible to comprehend:

*"Va'yedaber Hashem el Moshe leimor: Zot Chukat ha'Torah asher tzivah Hashem leimor: Daber el B'nei Yisrael ve'yikchu' eilecha' parah aduma..."*

*“And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: This is the law of the Torah which Hashem commanded saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and they shall take to you a red cow (heifer)...” (Bamidbar (Numbers) 19:1-2)*

This law, the taking of the red heifer, is described as the law of the Torah; it is somehow unique amongst all the laws of the Torah. And, it seems, what makes it so unique, is that it is impossible to understand. **Rashi**, quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains:

*“The Satan (our own inclination) and the nations of the world ridicule the Jewish people saying: ‘what is this mitzvah, and what reason can it have? Therefore, the Torah writes that it is a “Chok”: a decree from before Me (G-d) and you have no right to ponder it.” (Rashi Bamidbar 19:2)*

In other words, this law, by nature is impossible to comprehend, and therefore one should not (perhaps even may not) attempt to fathom it; it is G-d’s decree and ours is simply to accept it and fulfill it as best we can.

In truth, the nature of this particular *mitzvah* is indeed difficult to understand, even bordering on the bizarre.

When a person comes into contact with a dead body, he is rendered “*Tamei*”, or spiritually contaminated (polluted?), and as such cannot enter the area of the temple or perform any *mitzvot* requiring ritual purity, such as eating tithes, or offering sacrifices. In order to again achieve a state of ritual purity (to be “*Tahor*”, or pure), he must undergo the ritual of the red heifer known as the *Parah Aduma*.

A *Parah Aduma* is a completely red cow (a heifer) that has never been used for labor of any kind, which is a very rare find. This cow, once found and deemed by the Rabbis to in fact be a *Parah Aduma*, is then ritually slaughtered, and burned. Its ashes are then gathered by someone who himself must be “*Tahor*” (in a state of ritual purity). And these ashes, which form the basis of the ritual (and the *mitzvah*) of the *Parah Aduma*, are kept in the Temple, and sprinkled on the person who is *Tameh* (impure), as a result of which he ultimately becomes pure, or *Tahor*.

(It should be noted that the entirety of the *Parah Aduma* ritual is much more complex, and this essay does not allow us to elaborate on all of the details of perpetration, timing and contents which are actually involved.)

Paradoxically, while the ashes of the *Parah Aduma* purify the person who is impure, they also cause the pure person (the *Tahor* who gathers the ashes in preparation) to become *impure*, and he must leave the camp for seven days until he can again become pure!

It is this incomprehensible phenomenon, that the *Parah Aduma* purifies the impure; while at the same time contaminating the pure (“*me’taher tameh, u’metameh tahor.*”) that causes the Talmud (Tractate *Yoma* 14a) to share the tradition that even King Solomon, considered in the book of Kings to be the wisest of all men, declares that he could not fathom the *mitzvah* of the *Parah Aduma*.

Indeed, the ***Sefer Ha’Chinuch*** (Book of Knowledge) one of the earliest commentators to regularly offer theological and philosophical explanations for even the most complicated *mitzvot*, notes that this *mitzvah*, (*mitzvah* 397) is impossible to understand.

In point of fact, there are many *mitzvot* that are very difficult, perhaps even impossible to fully comprehend, leaving us to wonder why it is specifically the *mitzvah* of the red heifer which is so unique that it alone, amongst all such difficult *mitzvot*, was unfathomable even to King Solomon (Shlomo Ha’Melech)?

It is worth noting that we are actually dealing with a particular type of *mitzvah* here, known as a *Chok*. Although Jewish tradition suggests that all of the 613 *mitzvot* we are given in the Torah are equally important, there are nonetheless different categories, which define the nature of these *mitzvot*.

One noticeable factor, which changes the nature of a *mitzvah* on a certain level, is our ability to understand it logically. Essentially, there are two types of *mitzvot*: ***Chukim*** and ***Mishpatim***.

***Mishpatim*** are those *mitzvot* that we can easily understand, though some are also referred to as *Torot*, or *mitzvot* we would not have thought of on our own, but which make a lot of sense once the Torah tells us to fulfill them, whereas some are called *mitzvot*, which we would have understood on our own even if the Torah had not told us to fulfill them.

***Chukim***, on the other hand, are *mitzvot* that we would never have come to on our own, and that make no sense even after the Torah asks us to fulfill them.

To clarify these differences, the prohibition against theft is a good example of an obligation we would most probably have come to on our own, as most societies do, even without having been commanded not to steal in the Torah, because it makes a lot of sense not to steal. If people had no rights to their own property, society would break down, and chaos would reign.

Shabbat on the other hand, the *mitzvah* to rest and consider the true meaning of life one day a week, is something we might never have thought of but for the Torah. But once the Torah tells us to celebrate Shabbat every week, it makes a lot of sense, which is why on some level, so many major religions and societies in the world readily embrace the concept of a six-day workweek.

And then there are *mitzvot* like not mixing meat and milk, which, even with the Torah's prohibition, seems so difficult to comprehend. Why, after all, can't we take perfectly kosher milk and absolutely kosher meat and mix them together? (Doesn't G-d know it all gets mixed up inside anyway?) This then, is a *Chok*, a *mitzvah* we can never fully comprehend.

This categorization leads us to a number of challenging questions, but one wonders why, this *mitzvah*, of *Parah Aduma* is apparently the paradigm par excellence of a *Chok*?

And why, incidentally, does the issue of the *mitzvot* that we cannot possibly understand, or *Chukim*, appear specifically in this week's portion (appropriately named *Chukat*, the *incomprehensible law*)?

Before we attempt to respond to these questions, there is actually a larger question we need to explore: why would Hashem (G-d) give us *mitzvot* we cannot possibly comprehend, and are we indeed prohibited from attempting to make sense of them?

Rashi, quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma*, seems to suggest that we are not allowed to attempt an understanding of *Chukim*:

"...Lefichach katav bah' chukah: **gezeirah hi' milfanai, ve'ein lecha' reshut le'harher achareiha'.**"

"...The Torah writes that it is a "*Chok*": "It is a decree from before Me (G-d), and you have no right to ponder it." (Rashi Bamidbar 19:2)

And yet, other commentaries do often attempt interpretations and understandings of *Chukim*, and even Rashi himself chooses to offer a measure of interpretation for this *mitzvah* (see Rashi on 19:22 here).

Perhaps the best example of the commentator who openly espouses the value of attempting to understand the unfathomable is **Maimonides**, (the **Rambam**) who suggests:

*“Even though all the Chukim in the Torah are decrees (“g’zeirot”)... it is worthy to peruse (explore?) them (“Ve’ra’uy le’hitbonen ba’hen”), and everything to which you can assign a reason (“liten lo’ ta’am”), give to it a reason. Indeed, our sages said that King Solomon understood most of the reasons of all the Chukim of the Torah.” (Hilchot Temurah 4:13)*

Of course, if indeed we are meant to at least attempt an understanding of all the *mitzvot*, one wonders what the ultimate difference between a *chok* and a *mishpat* really is?

In fact, regarding *Mishpatim* as well, the Rambam points out that:

*“Ra’uy le’adam le’hitbonen be’mishpetei ha’Torah ha’Kedoshah, ve’leidah sof inyanam kefi kocho. Ve’davar shelo’ yi’matzeh lo ta’am, ve’lo yeidah’ lo’ ilah, al yehi’ kal be’ainav...”*

*“It is worthy that a man should peruse (explore?) the Mishpatim of the holy Torah, and know their essence, as much as it is possible for him to do, according to his capabilities. And whatever (mitzvot) he cannot find a reason for and does not know its purpose should not be light in his eyes.” (Hilchot Me’ilah 8:8)*

And yet, the Rambam, quoting a verse in this very same halachah wherein we are obligated to fulfill all *mitzvot*: *Chukim* and *Mishpatim* alike, very clearly differentiates between *Chukim* and *Mishpatim*! Which leaves us to wonder: if a person succeeds in arriving at a deep understanding of a *Chok*, such as *kashrut* (the dietary laws), and yet cannot comprehend the meaning or purpose of Shabbat, does this mean that for him Shabbat is a *Chok*, and *Kashrut* is a *Mishpat*?

And the Rambam even seems to contradict himself, pointing out in *Hilchot Tefillah* (the laws of prayer 9:7, based on the Talmud in the tractate *Berachot*) that:

*“If a person says, in prayer: ‘May He who had mercy on the mother bird, prohibiting us from taking its eggs without sending it away, and (who had mercy on the cow), prohibiting us from slaughtering the cow and its calve on the same day also have mercy upon us’, we silence him (“meshatkin oto”), for these mitzvot are a written decree (“g’zeirat hakatuv”), and not based on mercy; for if these commandments were based on mercy (“rachamim”), we would not be permitted to slaughter animals at all...”*

So here it seems Maimonides is against trying to understand the underlying reasons for *mitzvot*, for after all, who are we to attempt to comprehend the will of G-d?

And yet, the Rambam himself, in his *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed 3: 48) seems again to suggest exactly the opposite:

*“...And so too, it is forbidden to slaughter an animal and its offspring (“oto ve’et b’no”) on the same day, which is a fence that distances us (from accidentally doing worse), lest we come to slaughter the calve in front of its mother which would be tremendous cruelty to an animal, for there is ultimately no difference between the anguish an animal feels for the loss of its young, and the anguish a human being would feel...”*

In other words, the **Rambam** here posits a reason for the very same *mitzvah* he suggests should not be reasoned with at all in his *Hilchot Tefillah*!

So, which is it? Should we be attempting to understand that which Hashem asks of us to do, or are we perhaps better off relying on pure faith, simply choosing the path of “*ours is but to do or die, and not to reason why*”?

To summarize, we have raised a number of questions:

Why it is specifically the *mitzvah* of the red heifer, which is so unique that it alone, amongst all such difficult *mitzvot*, was unfathomable even to King Solomon? Why is it the epitome of the *mitzvah* we cannot understand?

Why does the issue of the *mitzvot* that we cannot possibly understand, (*Chukim*) appear specifically in this week’s portion, appropriately named *Chukat*?

What ultimately, is the difference between the *mitzvot* we cannot (must not?) understand, and the ones we can (*Chukim* and *Mishpatim*)?

Indeed, why would G-d give us *mitzvot* we cannot possibly comprehend? Are we prohibited from attempting to make sense of them?

Of course, if we are meant to at least attempt an understanding of all the *mitzvot*, one wonders what the ultimate difference between a *chok* and a *mishpat* really is?

How are we to interpret the seemingly glaring contradictions in Maimonides (and for that matter in Rashi as well) regarding the understanding of *Chukim*?

Perhaps if we were to better understand the nature of the *chok* itself, and its placement here in the portion of *Chukat*, we might arrive at a better understanding of the questions we have raised.

It is interesting to note that this week’s portion is actually the bridge between the first generation of Jews who left Egypt, and the second generation, born largely in the desert, who are about to enter the land of Israel. In this week’s portion, *Chukat*, both Miriam and Aaron die (20:1; 22-29), and in the infamous events at *Mei Merivah*, Hashem decrees (20:12) that Moshe too, will not enter the land.

As such, it is strange that the laws regarding a person who becomes impure through contact with death are only mentioned now, on the eve of entering the land of Israel. One might have supposed that these laws would have been given to the first generation at Sinai. Which is just what the Talmud suggests (Tractate *Gittin* 60a): this *mitzvah* was given nearly forty years earlier, and yet the Torah chooses to place it here! Obviously, the essence of the *Chok* is what this portion is all about.

And indeed, a closer look at this portion reveals that the theme of this parsha (portion) is indeed the ultimate *chok*, the experience we can never comprehend, par excellence: death. This week’s portion, *Chukat*, is really all about death.

It's about coming into contact with death (*Parah Aduma*), the death of Miriam and Aaron, and the decree of Moshe's approaching death. Indeed, the verses even share with us (20:1; 21:10-13) some of the wanderings of the forty years in the desert, during which time the entire generation of Egypt die out as well.

And this is the first instance of war and conquest for the generation about to enter the land of Israel: the children of Israel conquer the Emorite kingdom of *Sichon*, (21:21-26) and the city of *Ya'azer* (21:31), and the *Bashan* kingdom of *Og* (21:33-35). What is war if not contact with death?

Most striking is the plague (21:4-9) of the snakes which comes as a result of the people's lack of faith, resulting in the death of "many of the people". In this story Hashem instructs Moshe to place a snake on a staff, such that when people look at it their lives will be spared. And Moshe, with no reference in the Torah to being commanded to do so, fashions the snake out of copper (*nechoshet*) whose word comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for snake (*nachash*).

So in order to be saved from the snakes that are killing them, they need to look at the snake which will save them, which seems to smack of the same paradox as the *Parah Aduma* (red heifer) which purifies the impure and makes impure the pure....

Indeed, the snake, more than any other creature, echoes the concept of death all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when it was the cause of the introduction of death into the world, and the leaving of the Garden of Eden, associated with eternal life.

Ultimately, there is no portion more fitting for the concept of the *mitzvah* I cannot understand as this week's portion of *Chukat*, which is all about death, the ultimate mystery, and the ultimate paradox. And it is similarly no accident that this week we encounter the concept of the righteous who suffer, when the three leaders of the Jewish people (Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam) are not allowed to enter the land.

The Jewish people here begin the transition from life in the desert, where in certain ways everything was so clear, to the process of entering the land of Israel, where the great questions of life abound.

Traditionally, there were three major and constant miracles in the desert: the manna, which fell from heaven every day in the merit of Moshe, the water which flowed from the magical well of Miriam, and the clouds of glory which protected the Jews in the merit of Aaron.

It was all so simple, and so clear. You knew where tomorrow's bread was coming from, and you could not forget that G-d runs the world.

And then Miriam died, the well dried up, and the people panicked (20:1). And soon after, Aaron dies, and the Jewish people have to go to war against the Canaanites in Arad, where incredibly, they have to ask G-d to deliver the Canaanites into their hands, because Aaron is dead, the desert miracles are gone, and life is no longer so simple. Even Moshe has to be told by G-d not to fear in the battle for Ya'azer (21:34), because there are no assumptions anymore.

And this transition, from being totally in the hands of G-d in the desert, to the need to fight for ourselves, should come as no surprise. This may well be, (as the past Lubavitcher Rebbe, **Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson** zatz"l suggests in his *Likkutei Sichot*), what motivated the ten spies to resist entering the land of Israel forty years earlier: they knew the Jewish people would be leaving the cocoon of such close proximity to G-d, and they felt, perhaps, that we weren't yet ready for the challenges of conquering the land.

The desert, in the end, was the ultimate yeshiva, with no need to work for a living or worry about the future, one could simply sit and learn Torah all day long.

But life was never meant to be so simple, and the world is not black and white. The righteous don't always prosper, hard work does not always result in bread on the table, and you can't really assume anything in this world. One minute we are one big happy family ready to at long last come home to Israel, and the next minute, Moshe, Aaron and Miriam are being taken away, and we become an orphaned generation, with a world full of uncertainty lying ahead.

And yet, this is not all bad, because the safe, simple, and predictable world of manna from heaven every day only exists in the desert, where we wander in circles with no purpose. It is precisely when we have to conquer life's uncertainties that we also have the opportunity to give meaning to why we are really here.

All of this brings us back to our questions: what indeed are *Chukim*, and are we encouraged (allowed!) to attempt to understand them?

The truth is, we need to understand what exactly the Rambam means when he says we should explore these mitzvot and attempt to give them a "*Ta'am*", or reason.

There are three components to understanding anything in this world: there is the reason, the purpose, and the implications or lessons we draw for ourselves.

In the army, whenever you are at a firing range the first thing you do is to review the *horaot bitachon*, the security instructions that govern behavior on the firing range. Paramount amongst them is the rule that from the moment your ammunition cartridge is in the gun, you never point the barrel of the gun away from the targets on the range. Accidentally pointing the barrel of your gun at the fellow standing next to you, aside from the potential catastrophic results, will also often result in the loss of your weekend pass.

The reason for this rule is simply stated at the end of the security rules:

*"Zechor! Horaot elu' nichtevu' be'dam."*  
"Remember! These instructions are written in blood."

In other words, the **reason** you keep your barrel pointed at the target at all times is because people have been killed in careless accidents. The *reason* is what caused this particular rule to be created.

The **purpose**, however, is much broader. The *purpose* of this and all the instructions is to ensure the safety of all the men present. The purpose represents what the author of this list wanted to accomplish: to ensure a safe firing range, and to make sure all the men get home safely.

And then there are the **implications**, which in this case would include the value of human life and the importance of safety in general. It's interesting to note that even if the author of these security precautions was not considering or was even unaware of the valuable implications of these rules, I can still benefit from understanding what these implications are. They become valuable because I make them valuable; my decision to consider them and to glean their messages are what make them valuable, at least to me. And most important of all, my ability to consider these implications actually serve to make a better soldier and commander, such that the process is valuable whether I end up with the same implications of the author or



not. It is important to remember, however, that these implications are mine, and that is what makes them valuable, at least to me.

**Rav Mattes Weinberg**, in an article on this very topic, suggests that it would be absurd to imagine that we could ascertain the *reason* for *mitzvot*.

If the Torah comes from G-d, (such that it is the thought process of G-d, which must always have been; G-d does not have a thought today He did not have yesterday, because then G-d yesterday would be somehow less than He is today...) and the *Mitzvot* in it thus precede creation, they cannot have a cause; they are the cause. Hashem created us as the cause of the *mitzvot* and not the other way around. And for us, as limited beings, to attempt to understand the unlimited thoughts of G-d would be a futile pursuit at best.

Thus, we can only be considering the *purpose* and/or the *implications* of a given *Mitzvah*.

Sometimes, Hashem allows us to tap into the purpose of a *mitzvah* either by stating it clearly in the Torah, as in Shabbat, or by creating us with the faculty to hone in on what a particular *mitzvah* accomplishes in whole or in part; both as individuals and as a larger society. This may well be the nature of the *mitzvot* we call *Mishpatim*, when we have the opportunity to relate to what the *mitzvah* accomplishes in the world, as well as what it accomplishes for us. It is hard, for example, not to see this clearly when considering the nature of Shabbat. If Shabbat is all about taking time to be in the moment, and to consider what all the running around we do all week long is all about, it is quite clear what this process can accomplish in the world.

But sometimes, we do not get to be privy to the purpose of a *mitzvah*, or an experience, and this may well be what *Chukim* are really all about. The purpose of kashrut (the dietary laws) and how the world changes as a result may be beyond our grasp, but this does not mean we cannot consider the implications.

**Rabbeinu Bachya Ib'n Pekudei** bases his entire *Chovot Ha'Levavot* on the premise that we are given a mind by G-d, and as such we are obligated to employ our own reasoning to attempt to give meaning to the *mitzvot* that we fulfill.

By definition, the meaningful lessons I glean from a closer examination of kashrut, as an example, will inevitably make the *mitzvah* more meaningful, and as such will help to make me a better person.

If meat in the Torah represents death and cruelty, and milk represents life and mercy, the ethical messages we can discover by attempting to understand the implication of the Torah's prohibition against mixing the two (such as the fact that one man's cruelty is another's kindness...) will most certainly become a part of making me a better human being, not to mention changing the motivation with which I approach the *mitzvah* itself. And as long as I remember that these are the lessons I choose to learn, and that further study may cause me to reassess my understanding, the process can only be a valuable one.

Indeed, this would seem to be the Torah's approach to all of life's paradoxes and mysteries, death chief amongst them. To imagine that we as limited human beings could ever understand death and human suffering in this world would be arrogance in its most supreme form. And yet, the process of grappling with the challenge of death, and of attempting to learn from the process can only be a valuable one, within these parameters.

*Tumah* or impurity as it is often translated, represents contact with death. Every instance of *Tumah* in the Torah is the result of some level of contact with death, be it a dead lizard (a *sheretz*), or the loss of potential

life as in the woman who is a *Niddah* after the breaking down of the uterine wall. And *taharah* (purity) which always comes after immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) full of water, which represents life, is always the re-emergence of the individual into the mainstream of life. This then, is the paradox of the red heifer; the intertwining of life and death, and the impossibility of understanding why it so often seems that the pure become impure (i.e. the righteous suffer) and the impure become pure. Perhaps this was why King Shlomo viewed this as the ultimate mystery, because we are not meant to understand the purpose of experiences so beyond our comprehension as death. And yet it is clear from both the Talmud and the Midrash, that Shlomo does try, because we are, as the Rambam suggests meant to try and at least draw the implications from even these most difficult *mitzvot*. (This is why the Rambam, and Rashi, and even the Chinuch all do subsequently attempt to offer some level of implications to be drawn from even this most paradoxical of *mitzvot*.)

And maybe this allows us as well to understand the seeming contradiction in Maimonides. On the one hand to assume that Hashem prohibits us from slaughtering the calf and the mother on the same day because He is merciful, is to ascribe cause and reason to the *mitzvah*; this we cannot do. And the attempt to do so is a complete misunderstanding of our relationship with G-d.

But that does not mean we cannot learn lessons for ourselves, such as the fact that we must be merciful. Note that **Maimonides** does not suggest in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, that G-d is merciful, merely the need for us to be aware of the pain even an animal feels.

(Indeed, a careful look at the language of Maimonides, which is beyond the scope of this essay, will note the different words Maimonides uses, sometimes employing the word *Ilah* (reason) and sometimes *Taam* (purpose) as in Meilah 8:8, which would seem to support these ideas, as Rav Weinberg points out.)

We live in a world full of many mysteries, abounding with realities we find impossible to comprehend. But the decision, which is in each of our hands, to find meaning in every detail of every moment and every piece of every *mitzvah*, will most often be the determining factor, each and every day, between grabbing life and being reborn every minute, or losing life and dying day by day, one slow second at a time.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman