

# Parsha Ponders

Shemini / Parah | March 24, 2022 | 21 Adar II 5782

## *The puzzling paradox of the crimson cow<sup>1</sup>*

זאת חקת התורה אשר-צוה יקוק לאמר דבר אל-בני ישראל ויקחו אליך פרה אדמה תמימה אשר אין-בה מום אשר לא-עלה עליה על

This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying: “Speak to the Children of Israel, and take for yourselves a completely red heifer, that has no blemish, one which has not had a yoke placed on it”<sup>2</sup>

The *shabbos* after Purim<sup>3</sup> is called *parshas Parah*, the *parsha* of the cow. It receives this title because on it we read about the *parah adumah*, the red heifer<sup>4</sup>. Before the holiday of Pesach, the Jewish people would need to become spiritually pure. Sometimes it would be necessary to use the ashes of a completely red heifer. The sprinkling of these ashes onto the impure person would enable them to bring their Pesach offering. We read this *parsha* to remind the Jewish people to become pure before the Festival<sup>5</sup>.

The *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*, the red heifer, is considered *the* quintessential decree, a *mitzvah* without an apparent reason. The reasoning behind this *mitzvah*, why specifically a red heifer, how it works, why we were commanded it, is beyond us<sup>6</sup>. Even the wisest of men, King Shlomo, says that אמרתי אחכמה ממני והיא רחוקה ממני, “I said I would become wise, but it is beyond me”<sup>7</sup>. Our Sages say<sup>8</sup> that this was referring to the reasoning behind the *parah adumah*. Shlomo had no idea. The problem is, we do know the reason behind the *mitzvah*. Our Sages tell us<sup>9</sup> that the red heifer was to atone for the sin of the

<sup>1</sup> Based on Chasam Sofer's Derashos I p. 209b s.v. בקהלת, and his teacher the Hafla'ah's Panim Yafos to Numbers 19:2

<sup>2</sup> Numbers *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Unless *Rosh Chodesh Adar* falls on a Friday. In that case the *shabbos* after Purim is the 16<sup>th</sup> of Adar, and we don't read anything special that week. Instead *parshas Parah* is delayed to the following week, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Adar, so that it is juxtaposed to the reading of the following week of *parshas HaChodesh* (see Rashi to Megillah 30b s.v. ואי זו and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 685:6)

<sup>4</sup> Megillah 3:4; Shulchan Aruch ad. loc. § 3

<sup>5</sup> Rashi to Megillah 29a s.v. פרה אדומה and Bartenura to Megillah 3:4. The Beis Yosef to Tur Orach Chaim 685:7 brings in the name of Tosafos at the beginning of the second chapter of Berachos that this reading is a biblical requirement. In his Shulchan Aruch ad. loc. he brings this as a יש אומרים without dispute. However, Tosafos to Berachos 13a s.v. בלשון הקודש, the way we have it, just mentions *parshas Zachor*, not *parshas Parah*. Indeed, the Biur HaGra ad. loc. writes that the Beis Yosef had a corrupted version of Tosafos. The Bach ad. loc. also quotes Tosafos as writing *parshas Parah*, and proceeds to ask how this could be so, and seems to argue. The Magen Avraham ad. loc. also brings many others who disagree, as it doesn't seem to make sense how it could be a biblical obligation to recite. However, in the Soncino (1484-89) and Venice/Bombardieri (1520-23) prints of the Talmud, Tosafos do mention *parshas Parah*. This is corroborated by the fact that Tosafos HaRosh, Tosafos Ri HaChossid, and Tosafos Rabbeinu Peretz ad. loc. all mention *parshas Parah*. It was the Maharshal in his Hagahos Chochmas Shlomo ad. loc. who took it out of our Tosafos, as he believed it to be a typo. How can we make sense of it being biblical? See Aruch HaShulchan ad. loc. § 7, who attempts to provide an explanation

<sup>6</sup> I always understood that the main חוק of the *parah adumah* is that it makes the impure pure and the pure impure, a seeming paradox. However, the Panim Yafos and Chasam Sofer understood Rashi to Numbers 19:2 to be focusing on the reason *behind* the *mitzvah*, as he says מה המצוה הזאת ומה טעם יש בה

<sup>7</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:23

<sup>8</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 19:3

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 19:8; Rashi to Numbers 19:22 in the name of Rav Moshe HaDarshan

Golden Calf. This is why the *mitzvah* was given. If so, what's so complicated? What was Shlomo so confused by? Why is this *the* decree of the Torah?

When King Shlomo declared his frustration at his inability to grasp something, not everyone agrees it had to do with the *parah adumah*. Others suggest<sup>10</sup> it's referring to a famous paradox in Jewish theology. We believe with complete faith that Hashem is Omnipotent. Meaning, He is simultaneously aware of everything that ever was, is, and will be. At the same time, it's a central tenet of Judaism that we have free will<sup>11</sup>. It's up to use whether we will be righteous or wicked. Nothing forces us one way or the other. At first glance, this would seem to be a complete contradiction. If Hashem knows what I'm going to do, doesn't that mean that I am guaranteed to act that way? How then can I choose to do anything, when Hashem knows already what I'm going to do<sup>12</sup>? It was this theological problem that bothered Shlomo.

Nevertheless, we can suggest that both explanations for Shlomo's dilemma are true, and complement each other. We brought that our Sages teach us the reason behind the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah* was to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. When were the Jews first commanded in the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*? At *Marah*, when they first left Egypt<sup>13</sup>. This was before they ever sinned with the Golden Calf<sup>14</sup>. How can the *parah adumah* be to atone for the Golden Calf, when they didn't sin yet? It must be that Hashem knew they would sin. Yet, that means that they didn't have free will, as no matter what,

---

<sup>10</sup> The Chasam Sofer says this is the understanding of the *pashtanim*, although he then cites a *sefer* called Kehillas Shlomo, and says this is from his *derashos*. I couldn't find such a *sefer* which says this. Interestingly, Rav Shlomo Kluger wrote a *sefer* called Kehillas Shlomo, and he asks the same question as the Chasam Sofer and Panim Yafos, namely we do know the reason for the *parah adumah*. He overlapped several decades with the Chasam Sofer, although he was born later. See there, where he brings many different answers

<sup>11</sup> Mishneh Torah Hilchos Teshuvah 5:1-4

<sup>12</sup> This paradox is commonly referred to as the Rambam's, as he indeed raises the question in his Mishneh Torah ad. loc. § 5 (see Ra'avad ad. loc.). However, this is essentially pointed out in the *Mishnah* itself in Avos 3:15 (see Tiferes Yisroel ad. loc.). The following is a selection of classical sources which attempt to address this paradox: Rav Saadiah Gaon in Emunos V'Deos 4:5, Rabbeinu Bachaye in Chovos HaLevavos Sha'ar Avodas HaElokim Chapter 8, and Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi in Kuzari 5:20

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 15:25 says that the Jews at *Marah* were taught חק ומצוה. Rashi ad. loc. says the חק refers to *parah adumah*. The question is where Rashi got *parah adumah*, as his sources, Sanhedrin 56b and Mechilta ad. loc., while bringing a dispute as to what they were taught, don't mention it. Torah Temimah ad. loc. § 36 wants to suggest that a typo fell into Rashi. The latter originally wrote כ"א, which stood for *kibud av v'eim*, honoring one's parents. What happened was the כ was mistakenly copied as א, and someone thought א"א stood for *parah Aduma*, and expanded the abbreviation in the text. However, the *sefer* Yosef Hallel ad. loc. strongly argues against this approach. We see Rashi to Exodus 24:3 lists both *parah adumah* and honoring one's parents as *mitzvos* which were commanded at *Marah*. So we can't say there's a typo. Emes L'Yaakov ad. loc. also brings this proof against this suggestion. Yosef Hallel adds we see other *Rishonim* mention *parah adumah* as well, like the Ramban and Ba'al HaTurim to Exodus 15:25. We even see Eliezer HaKalir, who was much earlier than Rashi, writes in his *piyut* for *parshas Parah*: ממרה חקה גור. He concludes that it must be they had some *Midrash* which we don't have. Torah Sheleimah ad. loc. § 269 brings from Seder Olam Zuta a *Midrash* that says like Rashi. However, see his Miluim § 11, where he decides this isn't the source for Rashi, as it probably was amended to fit with Rashi. He also asks on the Torah Temimah's suggestion like those above

<sup>14</sup> The Panim Yafos, instead of mentioning *Marah*, says that Moshe was given the entire Torah in the forty days on Mount Sinai, including the concept of the *parah adumah*. Again, before the sin of the Golden Calf

they were going to sin<sup>15</sup>. If they didn't have free will, why should they be held accountable? Why should they need atonement in the first place? It was these two conflicting points which bothered King Shlomo.

One attempt to address this paradox in theology is by the Alshich HaKadosh<sup>16</sup>. Although his comments contain mystical concepts, we can try our best to pull out ideas that speak to us on our level. He tries to differentiate between the faculties of thought, speech, and action. Hashem's knowledge of the future is related to His faculty of "thought", so-to-speak. The faculty of thought cannot affect our free will, which is related to the faculty of action. However, Hashem's faculty of speech has the power to override this. If Hashem were to declare how we should behave, we would be forced to do so. However, He leaves us with our free will to act as we please. This is why our Sages stress<sup>17</sup> that Hashem doesn't "say" if we will be righteous or wicked. It's up to us. His knowledge of the future, which is only the faculty of thought, doesn't affect our actions.

Perhaps we can use this to resolve the paradox of the red heifer. Just because Hashem knew that we would sin with the Golden Calf, that knowledge didn't force us to commit that sin. Therefore, the *parah adumah* shouldn't be problematic at all. However, this isn't sufficient. If Hashem's speech affects our free will, well, Hashem told us the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*. That speech should have forced us to worship the Golden Calf<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, teaching us the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah* isn't enough to affect our free will. Hashem didn't tell the Jews the reason behind it. Only after the fact were we privy that the *parah adumah* was to atone for the Golden Calf. When the Jews were first taught the *mitzvah*, it was without any reason. As such, their free will wasn't compromised. Hashem's knowledge was merely thought, and it wasn't verbally expressed. Once Moshe was later taught the reason, he realized that זאת חוקת התורה, *this* is the decree of the Torah. This is why the *parah adumah* was initially taught without any reasoning and presented as a decree<sup>19</sup>. Our free will remained uncompromised.

Good Shabbos

---

<sup>15</sup> The Chasam Sofer says this is what Aharon was referring to when he told Moshe the reason they worshipped the Golden Calf was כי ברע הוא, since they are wicked (Exodus 32:22). What he meant is that Moshe should have known they would sin, since he knew about the *mitzvah* of *parah adumah*. That's why he asked why should Moshe be angry with them

<sup>16</sup> In his Devarim Nichumim to Lamentations 3:37-39

<sup>17</sup> Niddah 16b

<sup>18</sup> This is the Chasam Sofer's question on applying the Alshich to our discussion. For some reason, he disagreed with this teacher's resolution, as we're about to see

<sup>19</sup> Panim Yafos *loc. cit.* He wasn't trying to address Shlomo's paradox, just the seeming contradiction that the *parah adumah* is without reasoning, when we know the reasoning. To this, he says the reasoning was initially hidden. It was only after the sin that they were told. It was the Chasam Sofer who expressed Shlomo's dilemma this way. It would seem according to the Panim Yafos that King Shlomo had nothing to be bothered by. Perhaps this impossibility motivated the Chasam Sofer to reject his teacher's explanation, although I am at a loss for what flaw he saw in it