The Mysterious Red Heifer--Thoughts for Parashat Hukah

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Parashat Hukat: The Mysterious Red Heifer

by Jake Nussbaum

The books of Bereishith and Shemot are almost exclusively stories about our ancestors. Vayikra is all laws. Bemidbar is interesting, because while it is mostly stories of the journey and challenges of the children of Israel through the desert, sections of this book are dedicated to teaching laws, sometimes seemingly without relevance to the stories being talked about before and after.

One such section appears in Parashat Hukat with the laws of the Para Aduma, the red heifer. These laws describing the process of purifying someone from the highest levels of ritual impurity are perplexing. Rashi (chapter 19 verse 2) explains that laws categorized by the Torah as “hukah” have the sole reason of being a decree of Hashem, and are beyond our reason. In other words, there are laws in the Torah that cannot be understood by humans.

The Sefer Hahinukh was written in hope of trying to understand the possible reasons behind each mitzvah in the Torah. However, in Mitzvah 397, (which is the red heifer) the Hinukh admits that he cannot state a reason for this mitzvah. Based on several midrashim, he writes that Moshe was the only person who was ever able to comprehend this Mitzvah.

Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky pointed out that this is the only Mitzvah that the Hinukh couldn't provide an explanation for; even including the other hukim. This makes the para aduma the epitome of the laws of Hashem that go beyond human intellect.

Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berditchev points out in Kedushat Levi that the mitzvah of parah adumah is the perfect example of us not being able to understand the reasons of the mitzvot, but it also comes to remind us that even if great sages come up with explanations for them, we will never know if we have unlocked the true meaning. There are many Mitzvot in the Torah that are easier to understand based on basic human morality and logic, and this can sometimes cause us to think that we observe them because they make sense or seem right. Therefore, every mitzvah in this category of “hok” reminds us that we perform the mitzvot purely because of the decree of Hashem.

Given the nature of this mitzvah, its placement in the Torah is very interesting. The previous parasha, parashat Korah, is about a rebellion against the authority of Moshe and Aharon by Korah and his followers. Rashi in chapter 16 verse 1 quoting the midrash says that Korah asked Moshe if a garment made entirely of teheilet requires tzitzit or not. When Moshe responded in the affirmative, Korah and followers laughed, remarking that an entire garment of teheilet should fulfill the obligation and tzitzit shouldn't be needed. Korah was challenging the logic and reasoning behind Mitzvot.

In his essay “The Common Sense Rebellion,” Rav Joseph B. Soleveitchik writes that Korah believed that human intellect is the chief deciding factor in matters of Jewish law, and therefore Moshe is no better than anyone else, as Korah said: “...For the entire nation- all of them are holy” (Bemidbar 16:3) The Rav compares this to people in his time who argued for reforms based on their own limited understanding.

This can be taken a step further. Korah couldn't wrap his head around the fact that there are things beyond human comprehension, and that common sense does not override Hashem’s law. The Midrash says that Korah began his rebellion after the laws of the red heifer were taught to the children of Israel. Given his nature and outlook on life, it makes sense that as soon as the Torah taught laws that were outside the scope of his understanding, he would reject it’s teachings. This flaw in Korah turned out to be fatal for him and his followers.

I believe there is another connection from the Parah Aduma to the surrounding stories in the Torah. After the laws are taught, we learn of the infamous incident of “The waters of strife,” when Moshe hit the rock. Assuming that Moshe’s sin was hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, (Rashi on Bemidbar 20:12) perhaps Moshe too made a mistake when it came to what he was able to understand and what he couldn't. Rashi on the previous verse, verse 11, says that when Hashem told Moshe to speak to the rock, he mistakenly spoke to the wrong rock which didn't produce water. Once this happened, he rationalized that since 40 years prior (Shemot 17:6) he was able to get water out of the rock by striking it, it would work again. His logic was correct and the water did come out, but not without repercussions for him, as he would be prohibited from entering the land of Israel. Moshe also made the mistake of letting his personal logic interfere with doing what Hashem commanded him to do.

I believe that the laws of the Para Aduma are mentioned in this section of Bemidbar to teach that regardless of how great you are, and whether the matter is large or small, the most important thing is to always follow the word of Hashem. While it is a massive value in Judaism to try and understand reasoning and to try to break down laws to figure them out, logical arguments can never supersede following the mitzvot according to how they were commanded to us. The Kedushat Levi and Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky said, the laws of the Para Aduma remind us that although we won't always understand everything in life, our true purpose is doing our best to fulfill the decrees of Hashem. May we all strive to follow all the mitzvot in their highest forms, and may we become closer to Hashem in their merit. Shabbat Shalom.