

JUDAISM WITHOUT EXPLANATIONS

The rite of *Parah Adumah* (the Red Heifer) is the most puzzling of all the commandments of the Torah. The procedure entails a paradox which defies all logic. A man who had been ritually defiled by contact with the dead would appear before the *kohen* (priest) who was pure. The *kohen* would sprinkle on the man a mixture of the ashes of the Red Heifer and certain other substances in water, and thereupon the man would become pure -- whereas the *kohen* would be defiled. It is the symbol of the classic *חוקה*, a law for which no reason is offered and no explanation seems adequate. There are a number of such laws in the Torah, of which *Parah Adumah* is the most blatant.

In their own quaint way, the Rabbis saw *Parah Adumah* as a challenge to Judaism and as an embarrassment to Jews. *אומות העולם מונין את ישראל מה טעם יש בה*. "The nations of the world taunt Israel and say, what is the reason for this commandment?" What sense does it make?

Not only non-Jews, but Jews too are disturbed by this reason-defying law. I was recently consulted by a couple of young men who have done superb work in presenting Judaism to non-religious Jews and in interesting them in our sacred tradition. Their technique was to show how meaningful, relevant, and rational the commandments are. They offered what is classically known as *טעמי המצוות*, the "reasons" for the commandments, and they were most persuasive and often remarkably successful. However, they were troubled by the fact that some commandments defy explanations, and many in their audience were disturbed that there should be any observances for which there are no known reasons. Is it really necessary, they asked me, to insist that there are such things as *חוקים*, laws without explanations?

My answer was, yes. It is true that we must always search out the elements of relevance and subjective appeal in the commandments of the Torah, but honesty forces us to say that rationalizing can be overdone. Not everything in Judaism can be easily explained. God, in His obduracy, is not necessarily willing to submit to the judgment of our superior wisdom.

Of course, I do not mean to denigrate the role of reason in religion, certainly not in Judaism which maintains that *תלמוד תורה כנגד כלם*, that the intellectual effort in the study of Torah is the most important precept in all our faith. Yet even for a great rationalist like Maimonides, reason is limited. Religion must use reason, must respect it -- and then it must transcend it. The automatic rejoinder, "but that is blind faith," is banal, silly, and disingenuous. Such terms are used mindlessly. What is one man's blind faith, is another's fierce resolve and heroic confidence.

What does *Parah Adumah* have to teach us, in this last quarter of this twentieth century? Permit me to suggest three things.

First, especially in this age of science and technology, it reindulges in us a sense of wonder at the fundamental mystery of existence. *Parah Adumah* reminds us of the basic, magnificent inexplicability of life itself -- even after all we know about RNA and DNA and that the double helix and amino acids and molecular biology and biochemistry. Deep within life there lies imbedded a miracle, a source of wonder, something deliciously and tantalizingly mysterious.

In truth, the more we know, the more should we respect that fundamental mystery of existence, the ineffable grandeur of it all. But our problem, in this age of the proliferation of technical knowledge, is that our mind is so cluttered up with the

trees of knowledge -- and its branches and its weeds -- that we lose sight of the forest of wisdom. It seems that we know too much, and so have lost the sense of wonder and grandeur. There must be some limited area of deliberate ignorance that will force us to confront the mystery of life, or at least to acknowledge that it exists.

Hence *Parah Adumah*, by withholding from us an understanding and explanation of the commandment, forces us to an awareness of the grandeur that broods over our ignorance -- and over our ever so limited knowledge as well. It reminds us that life is more than biochemistry, that man is more than machine or computer, that religion is more than dogma, that Torah is even more than moral conduct. *Parah Adumah* is thus a goad to a deeper kind of wisdom, even if it is an annual scandal to those who feel that only what appeals to their reason is valid, and that what fails to do so must be condemned to the junkyard of antiquated ideas and obsolescent values -- to those, in other words, whose intellectual superficiality is matched only by their spiritual mediocrity.

As a procedure which deals with life and death -- the defilement that comes from death and the purification that is necessary for life -- *Parah Adumah* shows how Torah reflects life and death, their sense of awe and mystery and impenetrable secrets. By *not* having an apparent reason, *Parah Adumah* affirms that there is something in life beyond our ken, something in man that is unknowable and unpredictable and inviolable. It ensures that the accumulation of mere facts will not cloud our vision of grandeur and mystery.

But even more important is the challenge that *Parah Adumah* poses to a certain bias of the modern mind, especially of the American mind. There is a cultural streak that runs through the American character which makes us believe that there is no difficulty that cannot be overcome with enough time and money, no problem that is intractable, no question that is unanswerable, no puzzle that is undecipherable.

As a result, we have a penchant for superficial "explanations," which lead on to gimmicky techniques. This is especially true in the realm of psychology. Scan your book-review sections, visit your book-stores, and you will find them cluttered with all kinds of titles that reflect these trendy "explanations." Here is a partial list: Self-Actualization Techniques; Gestalt Therapy; Encounter Groups; Meditation; Bio-Energetic Analysis; Relaxation Techniques; Self-Analysis; Trans-Personal Psychology; Peak Experiences; Primal Therapies; Bio-Feedback Training; Transactional Analysis; Psycho-Synthesis; Altered States of Consciousness...

Of course, there may be a certain degree of effectiveness in each or some of these approaches, but what unites almost all of them is that they are simplistic explanations of profound situations, and that their greatest success is in enhancing the bank account of the authors...

We Americans, in our unimpeachable optimism, are disturbed that there should be something that cannot be explained, and we insist therefore that there is no human condition that cannot be adequately covered in a short, 600-word article in *Time* or *Newsweek* -- or 3,000 words in the Sunday Magazine Section of *The New York Times*. I grant that some of them may be serious, and a number may have beneficial results. But all too many of these "explanations" are glib; they explain away problems without really enlightening or solving them.

I discern two kinds of such pseudo-explanations which we can well do without. One is the function of explanation as excuse, and the other is the tendency of such explanations to trivialize. These constitute the second and third lessons of *Parah Adumah*.

Too often, so-called explanations are merely excuses for non-action. They reassure -- and thus reinforce passivity. They discourage any real effort to improve the situation.

For instance, I am at odds with my father and we have serious differences. Someone informs us that this is an "Oedipal situation" (maybe even an Oedipus Complex!), and so we are satisfied that the matter has been "explained." Now the father need make no effort to assert his greater maturity in coming to an accommodation, and the son need make no effort to be more pliable or less obnoxious. After all, it has all been "explained"...

I am battling with my brother. We cannot get along. Then someone tells us that this is a classic case of "sibling rivalry" -- and now I can proceed to maul him without guilt or conscience.

Perhaps the greatest favorite "explanation" in the therapeutic mode is, "identity crisis." (I remember a young man who came to me complaining that he had not yet suffered such an identity crisis, and way anything wrong with him?) Offer this as an explanation for an adolescent's obstreperousness, and you will relieve him of any obligation to straighten out and shape up.

Of course, I do not mean to say that these terms are empty, that they are nonsense terms. Certain reaction patterns **do** appear and reappear in human behavior and it is necessary to identify them for purposes of therapy. But I regret that they are bandied about much too easily, much too carelessly, and that even when they are significant, we are so inundated with this psychological verbiage that the layman often tends to be satisfied with the explanation alone, and abandons any effort to change accordingly -- much like the person who receives a prescription from his physician and fails to fill it, as if the mere identification of the disease or condition by the physician is in itself therapeutic.

A writer in a recent journal tells us that a friend of his remarked about the wretched behaviour of a colleague, saying that, "Of course, he had a troubled childhood." The writer answered, "Well, why doesn't he consider growing up?" I have had the same situation a number of times when I try to convince people to come into a synagogue or to improve their religious observance. They reply, "But I had a miserable Hebrew school teacher." No matter how often I hear that, I am dismayed. At the age of 35 or 40, should a mature man or woman still react to the hostilities of a 12-year old? Is the explanation really adequate -- or is it merely a convenient excuse for intellectual inertia and spiritual indolence?

This, I submit, is the deeper wisdom of the Tradition in its assertion of *Parah Adumah* is inexplicable, and its somewhat negative attitude to *תוספתין*, to offering reasons for the commandments. If I know the reason, I might well be tempted to use that knowledge as an excuse to violate the commandment. According to the Tradition, Solomon himself, in all his wisdom, failed in this very way. So *Parah Adumah* challenges us to do things that are right for their own sake, to respond to the divine summons and the sublime wisdom of Torah, even if we do not understand, even without explanations. It reminds us that in human relations, sometimes, if we are spared explanations for immaturity, we may well mature much faster.

Finally, in addition to orienting us to the grandeur and mystery of life, and to making us chary of explanations as excuses, *Parah Adumah*, in its insistence on leaving some things unsaid and unaccounted for, warns us against those explanations which are merely convenient labels and which diminish the scope of problems and trivialize both the problems and us. Such trivializing explanations effectively dampen our sense of compassion and human sympathy. When we affix labels to problems,

we erroneously think that we have solved them, when in fact these explanation-labels may be nothing more than a convenient cop-out from confronting the problems squarely.

A man is undergoing deep, black moods. His friends are concerned. Then they are told that a doctor has diagnosed his condition as "manic-depressive." So! It has a name! No longer need friends feel moved to commiserate with him in his terrifying sense of emptiness and uselessness and helplessness. What for the professional is a diagnosis leading to therapeutic treatment, becomes for the layman a way to disengage from the one so diagnosed.

A relative acts strangely, there are wild and irrational flashes of conduct. Someone tells us: he is a schizophrenic. What a relief! We know that his condition has a name, a label, an explanation -- and so we can dissociate from his anguish, and never mind that he is going through the torment of hell and that he is disintegrating within. His problems and his pains have been cut down to size -- to be accurate, the size of a label on which you can type the word, "schizophrenic."

A woman loses her husband. For a considerable time thereafter, she often breaks into tears, seemingly without reason. Her children are genuinely worried. But then they are told, "Oh, that's the Widow's Syndrome!" What a magical solution! She is no one special in her suffering, it is the lot of every widow. No longer need they offer her any special companionship and understanding and warmth for those empty days and dark nights, for the times when she gropes for a hand and cannot find it, when she listens for a reassuring voice and cannot hear it, when she yearns for the familiar presence of strength and finds nothing but the deep ache of absence.

Simple-minded explanations and labeling demean because they trivialize. Genuine suffering is mocked when it is wrapped up in a few choice psychological cliches. One deserves at minimum to have his private anguish respected, and not dismissed or explained away in cheap little phrases.

What is done to us in the human condition by these trivializing explanations, is done to religion as well. Consider how these facile explanations trivialize the majesty of Torah, the sublimity of religious experience. I am sure that these experiences are common. You speak to someone of *kashrut*, and he says, "Oh yes, that's a matter of health!" You mention the laws of "family purity," and he responds, "Certainly, that was once necessary because of sanitation reasons." You talk of the Sabbath and the all-knowing response is, "Surely, that was necessary for slaves in order to give them a day off from their labor."

What remarkable, staggering nonsense! How the arrogance of ignorance reduces *kashrut*, which speaks of the relations between man and the animal kingdom and our environment, to the mere avoidance of trichinosis! How it diminishes the laws of *niddah*, which pronounce the Torah's vision of the relations of the sexes and the concern for the "divine image" of humankind, to a mere issue of plumbing! What a "put-down" of *Shabbat*, which teaches us the interrelationships of God and man and nature, and the channeling of creativity, to a mere vacation!

Such explanations are an insult both to Torah and to one's intelligence.

Such trivializing explanations apply to the political realm as well. A few years ago, for instance, one journalist -- with very close connections to the State Department -- wrote an article in which he sought to explain why the Israelis do not always do the bidding of the American government. He referred to the

Israeli attitude as motivated by a "Massada Complex." Massada was the place where Jews made a last stand against the Romans, and determined that they would rather die than yield to the Roman Empire. The label, "Massada Complex," was thus a way of trivializing Israel's profound concern about its very existence. Israel was thus tarred with the brush of masochistic irrationality, with phony martyrdom! No doubt the term will be resurrected now that the State Department wants to pressure Israel even into further concessions, and that the CIA has now carefully "leaked" news about Israel's possession of atom bombs, at the very time that the Administration is pressuring Congress to agree to an American arming of Egypt. So, this label-explanation cuts Israel down to size and makes us forget the very real background of Israel's fears -- its experience of the Holocaust a mere three decades ago in which the entire Western world clammed up in ignoble silence; its awareness that the major differences between the Arab foes of Israel are on tactics and not on the ultimate strategy of destroying Israel; the lessons that Israel learned about how other minorities are treated in the Arab world, and the obvious conclusion that if the Christian West can allow Christians in Lebanon to be destroyed, how much more quickly will they be prepared to allow Jews to be killed. All this is trivialized by pinning on us the label of "Massada Complex!" In addition, slogan begets slogan, label begets label. From "Massada Complex" there is only one step to "Israeli Intransigence," and from there to, "Israel is not sufficiently forthcoming"... Those who read carefully will spot these terms and phrases, for they are all code-words designed as "explanations" which cut us down to size.

How words can demean, how labels can humiliate, how explanations can trivialize!

Our Tradition tells us that a Roman pagan approached the great R. Yohanan ben Zakkai, the Sage of Yavneh, and complained that the whole rite of *Parah Adumah* seemed like nothing more than **מַעֲשֵׂה כַּשְׁפִּים**, like black magic, some kind of voodoo: you mix the ashes of a red heifer and some other substances in a special kind of water and sprinkle the potion on a man and, lo and behold, he is "cured" from his impurity. R. Yohanan ben Zakkai answered him with some kind of explanation about the similarity of the *Parah Adumah* procedure to that of medicine. After the Roman left, satisfied, the students of the sage in the Academy said to him: **רַבִּי, לָמָּה דְחִית בְּקִנְיָ לָנוּ בִּיה אֶתְּהָ מִשִּׁיב** "Rabbi, that kind of answer may have been satisfactory to him, but what are you going to say to us?" Whereupon he answered, **חֲכָמֵינוּ, הֵיכָּן הַמֵּת מִשְׁמָחָ וְכֵן הַמַּיִם מְטַהְרִים**, "I take an oath that a corpse does not defile (in any objective, physical sense) and the waters do not purify", **אֲנִי אֶתְּהָ אֶתְּהָ הַקִּבְיָה, חִיקָה חֲקִיקָה, גְּזִירָה גְזִירָה, אִי אֶתְּהָ דְשִׁאִי לְעִבּוּר עַל גְּזִירָה**.

"Rather, says the Holy One, I have declared a **חֻקָּה** (unexplained law), I have decreed a decree, and you are not permitted to transgress My decree."

For the pagan mind there is no need to buttress the sense of mystery and wonder in the world; he has his nature gods which serve as his idolatrous explanation of everything, and so any explanation will suffice. For the heathen, we need not worry about an explanation serving as an excuse; as a heathen, his moral will is paralyzed anyway and can barely transform itself. For the Roman of that period, one whose horizon was limited, we need not worry that piddling explanations would trivialize and demean the greatness of the divine commandment.

But for serious people, the *Parah Adumah* is a symbol of that which defies explanations: the wonder that will not be unravelled; the maturity which beckons beyond excuses; the depth of suffering and joy and awe which are primal and sacred and must be revered.

The Rabbis tell us that Solomon too sought the explanation of *Parah Adumah*, and it was denied him. They find this in the verse in Ecclesiastes, אָמַרְתִּי רִחֵק אֵלַי חֵכֶם וְהָיָה רִחֵק מִמֶּנִּי, "I wanted to be wise, but it is far from me." He meant, the Rabbis imply, that he wanted the additional wisdom of understanding *Parah Adumah*, but he failed to do so, the explanation remained far away. Perhaps we can modify that interpretation: the verse indeed refers to *Parah Adumah*, but Solomon meant that he wanted to become wise -- and he did so by deliberately abjuring any explanation for *Parah Adumah*! "I wanted to be wise -- and that is why I kept all explanations of this commandment far from me"...

There comes a time when Judaism without explanations is the only valid explanation for the Judaism that is beyond explanations.