

"THE TASTE OF TORAH"

- The law of the Prah Adumah (P.A.) or Red Heifer, which forms the content of this morning's special reading, has always proved a source of difficulty and even embarrassment to sensitive, alert Jews. <sup>Quoted by Rashi,</sup> Rashi, quoting our Sages, <sup>in antiquity:</sup> already told us of the perplexity caused us by P.A. ~~when he writes~~ LEFI SHE-HA-SATAN V'UMOS HA-OLAM MONIN ES YISRAEL MAH HA-MITZVAH HAZOS UMAH TAAM YESH BAH, that Satan and the Gentiles would taunt the Jews and say, what does this commandment mean, and what sense does it make? What is the reason for this strange rule? For indeed it is strange: one who has been defiled, declared TAMEI because of contact with a cadaver, is to be purified by a ceremonious sprinkling with the ashes ~~and blood~~ of a red heifer; yet the priests who <sup>themselves</sup> participated in preparing the animal which would purify are declared impure as a result of their contact with it. P.A. purifies the impure, and defiles the pure! What an irrational paradox! And so the UMOS HAOLAM, the Higher Anti-Semites, and the Satan, or our inner skepticism, challenge us and taunt us and tell us that all this is simply absurd, irrational. And the Rabbis' <sup>seem to</sup> answer, quoted by Rashi, does not help us overmuch: CHUKAH HI, GEZERAH MILEFANAI - - it is a decree, one which you may not question.
- Indeed, in the history of Jewish HASHKAFAH or religious philosophy, whole schools have been built about this central idea of whether or not we can know the reasons for the observances required of us by the Torah. Some deny we can ever/<sup>know</sup> or should ever search for the TAAMEI HA'MITZVOS, the reasons for the commandments. In fact, the MITZVOS have no reasons! Maimonides, rationalist that he is, disagrees. Every command of G-d must have a reason. He is, after all, the Source of Intellect. How then explain P.A.? There is a reason for its strange paradox, but we do not know it. <sup>of</sup> But with other MITZVOS we can and often do know the reasons. <sup>But the reason for it must always remain a mystery to us, if G-d has chosen to conceal rather than reveal.</sup>
- What P.A. means therefore, is that man is to be reminded of the limits of his mind and the boundaries of his intelligence. We are presumptuous if we think we can fully know the mind of G-d. Only through submission to the greater intelligence of the Creator

can we achieve the TAHARAH, the purity which P.A. comes to bestow. P.A. tells us to call a halt to our intellectual arrogance and cultural haughtiness: you cannot understand this law, you cannot fathom this paradox, you may plumb the depths of the atom and extend your grasp into the Heavens -- but you cannot understand the mind of G-d "for My ways are higher than your ways, saith the Lord."

*we must remain puzzled and mystified. we must be overwhelmed by the reality of our ignorance.*

4. To the modern Jew this idea has special relevance. We are a generation that has had its intellect pampered into believing that everything can be known and understood.

*with just a bit of application & effort.*

\* Many a Jew rejects whole sections of Torah and Yiddishkeit only because he has not satisfied his rational curiosity as to why not ride on the Sabbath, why not non-Kosher, why repeat <sup>certain</sup> prayers. P.A. tells us that a central idea of Judaism is the limitation of man in the face of G-d. P.A. teaches us the virtue of intellectual <sup>modesty</sup> humility as well as humility of character. Hasidim relate that the origin of the custom of wearing the yarmulke is <sup>this kind of modesty</sup> humility. Just as ~~the wearing of~~ <sup>we</sup> clothes is not only because of warmth and protection, but also because of modesty in covering the body, so the yarmulke covers the cranium, testifying that he who wears it acknowledges the limits of his thoughts, that his mind cannot penetrate the inner thoughts of G-d.

5. But lest anyone here come to a wrong conclusion, let me say that this does not mean

that we are not to investigate the MITZVOS for their reasons. It does not mean that we are not to search for the motives and meanings of our observances. On the contrary, one of the greatest and most urgent tasks facing religious educators today is the rational and reasonable presentation of Jewish way of life to our youth. BUT... we must always remember that the reasons we ascribe are only tentative, only afterthoughts, that the observance itself MERELY BECAUSE G-D COMMANDED IT is the important thing. Our reasons that we ascribe -- they may change from one generation to the next as we gain new insights into the world; but the act of obedience and love and fear of G-d -- that remains forever. <sup>unsophisticated</sup> How interesting that the word TAAM -- reason, as in TAAMEI HAMITZVOS -- in early Hebrew meant not "reason" but "taste." When I observe G-d's commandment, then the observance itself the religious devotion and acceptance of divine discipline -- that is the substance,

*The current American Jewish generation is generally more open to investigation of reasons for observance or disregard thereof. We pointed out that even if we cannot understand or explain "reasons", it is as an acknowledgment of our limitation or ignorance without first attempting to understand or explain.*

the essence, the meat. The extraneous reasons I assign to my observance -- such as the healthfulness of kashruth, the psychological benefits of Taharat Hamishpachah, the social good inherent in Shabbat law -- these are TAAM, they add taste and flavor <sup>spice</sup> to the ~~meal~~. <sup>It is important that our meals be flavored and tasty, So it is important to learn and discover the TAAMEI HAMITZVOT. But ultimately, we must remember that it is possible to survive on a bland diet as long as we have our vitamins and proteins; but it is impossible to survive on a diet of flavoring alone, much as we may delight in it. The essential vitamin of our spritual Torah diet is: the command of G-d merely because He is Creator and I am creature. The taste & flavoring is the expendable reasoning I ascribe to the divine MITZVAH.</sup>

6. Many people ask why we recite a BRACHAH only over MITZVOS in the realm of man's duties to G-d, such as Tefillin, Kiddush, Candles, Shofar, not over our religious obligations to our fellow men such as love of neighbor, charity, paying one's employees on time. One great Sage gave this answer: the BRACHAH over a MITZVAH is worded as follows: BARUCH ATA..... ASHER KIDESHANU BEMITZVOSAV VETZIVANU, "Blessed.....commanded us to perform such-and-such MITZVAH". Now when I perform a social or ethical obligation, I may not always do so because of the commandment but also out of humanitarian reasons, for inherent motives of civilized conduct, which I might do even without Torah. Hence my act is not because VETZIVANU, not because G-d commanded. When I perform a ritual MITZVAH, however, there is no real reason other than G-d's command for my doing it. And only when a Jew acts because G-d commanded, out of love of G-d Himself, does he achieve KEDUSHAH -- ASHER KIDESHANU. And only when a Jew's submission to G-dly discipline leads him to holiness can he attain BERACHAH or blessing. That is what P.A. wants to teach us: to do because G-d commanded; <sup>to make Him, and not</sup> ~~not because~~ our mortal, fallible, inadequate intellect, <sup>the measure of our aspirations & the guide for our conduct</sup> convinced us. Only thus do we arrive at KEDUSHAH and BERACHAH and the THARAH of P.A.

7. This is a hard doctrine which we are enunciating. And we must be prepared to face the challenge of the American Jew reared on the <sup>we are</sup> liberal fare of our day: "Is not that a matter of a blind religion? Isn't that too much like the Catholics? Are we to do something we

do not understand?"

*that the Talmud is greatest monument to the questioning mind of man who are divinely inspired, let us not answer*  
Let us not answer that all of us do things we do not completely comprehend as long as it

benefits us. The skeptic who will not trust G-d's word usually fails to question the wisdom of his physician's prescription. Let us rather answer that not only in the spiritual realm but in the natural-physical realm there are things we do not and never shall understand. Modern science does not confirm the popular impression that there is little we do not or cannot know about nature. Modern science shows the futility of this ~~Dogma~~ *Popular prejudice* of ~~Total Omniscience~~, that we can know all and that what we do not know is nonsense.

Thus a Prof. Conant -- eminent educator and leading chemist -- declares, "I would subscribe to the answer [given in the Book of Job] that the universe is essentially inexplicable." Or listen to the words of one of the wisest of modern physicists, Prof. P.W. Bridgman, "the most revolutionary of the insights ~~were~~ to be derived from our recent experiences in physics [is that] we are now approaching a bound beyond which we are forever stopped from pushing our inquiries, not by the construction of the world, but by the construction of ourselves." Or the astounding words of the "father of the atom bomb," Prof. Robt. Oppenheimer: "we will have to accept the fact that no one of us will really know very much [for] we are of course an ignorant lot." Well then, if we cannot know all about the BERIAH, how much more so about the BOREY? If we are to remain ignorant of the created world, how can we dare to expect to know and understand all about its divine Creator? That is precisely what P.A. has come to tell us: CHUKAH HI, GEZERAH HI, there are laws in the spirit as there are laws in nature that are simply beyond man. The TAAMEI HAMITZVOS are the flavoring, the taste of Torah. The essence, however, is: CHUKAH -- the will of G-d, period.

8. Of course, our new generation of American Jews finds this a hard pill to swallow. And there is a reason for it -- their early childhood and youth. Until recently the psychology book replaced the father as master of the household, and no child was expected to obey unless an adequate reason was presented by the docile parents. Well-meaning parents therefore

inadvertantly led their children to reject discipline -- for discipline means obedience even when I can not see any valid reason for the command -- and believe that only what they can understand and agree to is worthwhile doing. Hence, the Dogma of Total Omniscience. No wonder then that for some people the mentality of the proverbial college sophomore who believes himself, the possessor of all wisdom holds sway over so many people for so long. No wonder so many young people cease to observe the precepts of Yiddishkeit when they have entertained their first doubt and ~~ways~~ discovered that not everything can be explained in simple terms. If he needn't obey his earthly father without being convinced of its reasonableness first, the same, then, with his Heavenly Father! There is a direct ~~the~~ connection between children's education at home and their religious orientation as adults. In both cases, P.A. comes to tell us that we must use our minds to the fullest extent -- but always remember that even at their best ~~our~~ minds are just fragmentary chips from ~~the Lord of all Creation.~~ <sup>the world of Nature & the world of Spirit,</sup> ~~the universe of humanity & of individuality~~ <sup>from the Lord of all Creation.</sup>

9. DR. Samuel Belkin, President of Yeshiva U., is right when he maintains that it is far more fruitful to look for the purpose than for the reason of the commandments. For the purpose underlying all commandments is ASHER KIDESHANU BEMITZVOSAV -- the holiness that is achieved by living the G-dly life. Only through this kind of KEDUSHAH, this selfless flight of the soul to G-d, can we attain BERACHAH or blessing in our lives. Purpose we indeed do have. For our Torah way of life is purposeful and meaningful. But reason -- that is another matter. We are humans therefore we search for reasons: whether the reason why millions of Jews are done to death, the reason why we were chosen to be saved, the reason why our religion limits our diets, the reason our Sabbath must be observed so differently from others. ~~But any~~ <sup>The</sup> reasons we may discover are, after all, only flavor in our spiritual diet -- TAAMEY HAMITZVOT are both the reasons for the commandments and the taste of the Torah. <sup>the make Jewish life delicious</sup> But the substance of the religious life, <sup>what makes it precious,</sup> the real, true, basic motivation for obeying G-d -- is VEZOS CHUKAS HATORAH, that this is the decree of Torah, the will of G-d: imponderable, inexplicable, impenetrable. It is here that man comes face-to-face with G-d. It is here that, stripped of his

\*the infinite wisdom of G-d, sawdust particles from the workbench of the creator of the universe.

*in the presence of*

false props and his ambitions and his pretense, man realizes that the inscrutable  
*his own mental powers are of a vastly absurd insignificance*  
Will of G-d ~~is infinitely greater than his own mind.~~ And here, too, man discovers, is  
the road not only to KEDUSHA and TAHARAH and BERACHAH, to holiness and purity and  
blessing, but to hope and happiness and ~~confidence in the future:~~  
*courage*

BEYADO AFKID RUCHI, B'EIS ISHAN V'A'IRA

V'IM RUCHI GEVIYASI, HA'SHEM LI VE'LO IRA

In His hand do I trustfully commend my spirit,

When I lie down to sleep and again when I awaken

And with my spirit -- my body,

For the Lord is with me, I shall not be afraid.