

THE MYSTERIOUS LAW

by Rabbi David Algaze

'This is the decree (hukkat) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded saying: Speak unto the children of Israel and they shall take to you a completely red cow, without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come.' (Bamidbar 19:2)

The Torah is one of the most rational and intelligent books of mankind. In it we find a cogent set of laws, governing man's relations with each other, the organization of society, the preservation of property and body and a judicial and ethical system that has stood the test of time and become the source of admiration and emulation for centuries. Yet, this same Law contains two types of regulations. The first, the mishpatim, are the laws that are perfectly rational and would have been established by reason even if there had been no Revelation. These laws include the prohibitions of murder, stealing, incest and the like. The second set of laws are the hukkim, the laws which appear to have no rational explanation and which the law of the Red Cow is a supreme example. Among them are the laws of kashrut, shaatnez, the laws of purity and so on which our mind naturally wishes to reject. This is the reason that the law of the Red Cow is introduced as "this is the decree of the Torah." Not just the decree of the Red Cow, but the decree of the entire Torah, for we are being presented with the set of laws that are beyond human understanding and which we are to observe simply because Hashem commanded them. The Red Cow is a symbol of these laws because it presents a paradox: its ashes purify the impure, yet those who gather the ashes become contaminated by the contact. It is about this paradox that King Solomon exclaimed, "I said I would be wise, but it is far from me." (Kohelet 7:23)

The Midrash narrates the story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai explaining the logic of this law to a heathen who questioned this law as an apparent act of magic. The Rabbi told the heathen that just as when a person has a certain ailment, he is treated by the burning of some plants and the smoke cures him, so it is the procedure of the Red Cow in removing the impurity from a person who came in contact with a corpse. After the questioner left, the students told the Rabbi, "You pushed him aside with a frail argument, but to us what do you say?" Rabbi Yochanan answered them, "The corpse does not contaminate and the water does not purify, but rather Hashem says, 'I have made a decree, you may not transgress it.'" (Bamidbar Rabba 19)

The Maharal (R. Yehuda Loew, 1562-1609) demonstrates from this story that, although the laws of the Torah appear to stem from a rational or natural source, in reality this is not so. Otherwise, the Torah would merely be a health manual. The foods we are forbidden to eat are not intrinsically worse than the foods we are allowed to consume. It is not the pork that dulls our minds; it is the fact that we disobey G-d that makes us weaker physically and mentally. The most repugnant creature does not necessarily contain noxious elements in itself; the reason they harm us when we eat them is because we have transgressed the will of Hashem. (Tif'eret Israel, 8) That is the reason why "one should not say, 'I cannot stand pork, I cannot commit adultery.'" On the contrary, a person should say, 'I could eat pork...but what can I do my Father in Heaven forbade it?' (Sifra 20)

It is common nowadays to attribute great reason and good sense to many of the laws of the Torah. Indeed, we have found that many of our practices such as circumcision, kashrut, niddah laws, have a salutary effect on our bodies and social hygiene. However, the real reason that the transgression of these laws is so harmful to our bodies and spirit is that when we do not observe these laws, we steer away from G-d and His master plan for the universe. There is no greater crime than this and no greater damage we cause to our selves. When we associate with the laws willingly, when we trust the Lawgiver, we come closer to Him. It is that proximity with the Creator that is the ultimate source of our blessing, our health and our serenity.

Maimonides writes that despite this, one should attempt to find rational explanations for all the laws in the Torah including the hukkim. However, "if one does not find a rational explanation for a certain law, the law should not be regarded as unimportant in his eyes and rebel against G-d...One should not step on the laws he does not comprehend." (Laws of Temurah) We observe the law because it comes from G-d; it is good because it stems from the Creator, not because we know them to be good for us. Although in most cases, the dilemma does not exist, there may be times when we find a law difficult to observe, its cause or rational need eluding us. On those moments we have to rise above our questions and our doubts and understand that the laws derive their value from the fact that G-d commanded them regardless of whether we understand them or not. It is beautiful to see our laws as so full of wisdom and intelligence, but a Jew has the greater merit when he observes the laws simply Hashem commanded it.

Someone once said that he would only believe in Judaism if it made sense to him. He wanted to accept only those beliefs or laws that could penetrate his mind. However, the universe is full of mysteries, of phenomena we may not comprehend, yet they exist whether we understand them or not. To demand that we observe the Torah only after we understand it is like asking the sun to rise only if we know its movements. The sun will rise without us, the flowers will bloom without us, and the truth will be true whether we understand it or not. Man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue. (R. Munk).

G-d gave us two types of laws: the rational-to remind us that the universe is created by an Intelligent Being, and the second, the hukkim, to raise us to a level that transcends our limited intelligence. By observing the hukkim with trust in Hashem, we demonstrate our trust in Him and our acceptance of the limits of our comprehension. A Torah without hukkim would be infinitely poorer. This is another gift of G-d to Man.

Why is it that the hukkim are associated with the law of the Red Cow? The answer may be that when we have the right approach to these laws, we will achieve purity and our lives will be lived in proximity to the Creator Himself. If you observe the decrees of the Torah in the manner we have explained, you are assured of leading a life of purity and peace. "This is the decree of the Torah." The whole Torah can be understood from the acceptance of this law.