CHUKAT: The Red Cow and How We Raise Our Children

Kill a red cow, burn it, and use its ashes to purify ourselves from contact with a corpse? It makes no sense at all!

Our Chachamim identify two kinds of Mitzvot. On one hand, the Mishpatim: the commandments that align with human reason, whose benefit to our personal lives and to society we can grasp, like the Mitzva of helping the poor or the prohibition against murder. On the other hand, the Chukim: commandments whose reason is beyond our logic. The Mitzva of the Para Aduma, mentioned at the opening of our Parasha, Chukat, is the Chok par excellence. It's hard to understand, too, how the cow's ashes purify the impure person while those who carry out the purification themselves become impure.

It's far easier to obey God and keep His commandments when we understand them, when they strike us as reasonable. But serving HaShem at the highest level, unconditionally, means accepting that sometimes we simply cannot grasp the "Divine logic," the reason behind some of His commandments. What matters is to remember that in obeying the Chukim, we show that we accept Him as the supreme authority, and that we are willing to obey Him beyond our ability to understand what He asks of us. But how does that acceptance of HaShem as the ultimate authority take root in us?

With our children, it's important to be reasonable. Most of the time, when we ask them to do something or to refrain from it, we explain why our advice is good for them. That naturally makes it easier for them to obey willingly and with a good heart. And it helps us keep a good relationship with them, because they learn to appreciate that we care.

But every so often they'll have to obey us even when they

can’t see the logic of what we’re asking or the good it holds for them. “I don’t understand why I can’t have ice cream for breakfast every morning.” “I don’t understand—if you love me, why do you let this nurse give me a shot that hurts?” “I don’t understand why I can’t go to my friend’s house,” or “to this party.”

Children learn early that there are rules whose “logic” we all share, but that there are also rules and limits they have to accept “because Mom or Dad said so.” The parents —not the logic— are the final authority. These are our children’s Chukim! And parents shouldn’t be afraid to exercise that authority, even when it doesn’t seem reasonable to the child.

It’s true that we parents sometimes get it wrong. We don’t possess the Absolute wisdom of our Creator. But for our children’s own good, we have to teach them to accept a higher authority. And when we win their trust in our authority —when they come to understand that our “decrees” are meant for what we believe is best for them— we are also preparing them to accept the authority of the Creator, even when they can’t understand the Divine logic behind it.

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