

## A Daily Bread

**Date:** 5 Tammuz 5785 (July 1, 2025)

**Torah Portion:** Chukat

**Topic:** Golden Calf, Red Cow: A Sin and Its Antidote, Part 2

With this, we can understand why Scripture, when describing how the Yisraelites subsequently built the Tabernacle, mentions over and over how the builders were acting in accordance with Elohim's command (Exod. Ch. 39). Thus, the Torah indicates how they set about rectifying their error: Instead of drawing on their own wisdom in blazing a path toward perfecting the world, they resolved to set aside their own intellect – and even that of their leader Bezalel, who knew “how to combine the letters by which the heaven and earth were created.” Despite having such an expert on the mysteries of Creation in their midst, the Yisraelites chose to channel all of their energy, and all of their meditations, into the unembellished enterprise of fulfilling Elohim's will.

From this approach it emerges that the sin of the Golden Calf originated in the attempt to give the human intellect and human initiative, as opposed to Divine revelation and instruction, too prominent a role in shaping man's efforts to lead a spiritually productive life. It therefore is clear that the perfect antidote for this misguided notion behind the Golden Calf – the ideal remedy for the mistake of crowing human reason as an arbiter of human virtue – is the mitzvah of the Red Cow.

Here is a mitzvah in which human reason, having no insight into the seemingly contradictory laws of the mitzvah, is given almost no role to play. By performing this mitzvah, or by contemplating it, the thoughtful Yisrael will infer that he fails to understand not only this mitzvah, but all the others as well, for all the mitzvos belong to one integrated system of thought. Just as the 248 limbs and 365 sinews are all connected and all part of one bodily whole, so are the 248 positive commandments and the 365 prohibitions all parts of a conceptual whole. A deficient understanding of one mitzvah inevitably results in a deficient understanding of all the others.

That is why Scripture introduces this parashah with the words, “This is the decree of the Torah.” For one might ask: True, there is good reason to describe the Red Cow precept as a “decree,” implying a mitzvah whose rationale is not evident and whose importance must be accepted on faith. But what makes it “the decree of the Torah,” as if this were the defining mitzvah of the Torah? The answer, according to what we have seen, is that this mitzvah is in fact the defining mitzvah of the Torah, for it teaches us that all other mitzvos are also “decrees” – in the sense that their true significance, their inner meanings, the full extent of their influence on our physical, spiritual, and eternal lives, are largely hidden from even the most learned among us.

In this way, the Red Cow “atones” for the sin of the Golden Calf, particularly the mistake that give rise to that sin. By putting man's intellectual powers in their place, the Red Cow protects us from the impulse to compensate for what the Torah “lacks” – to invent new moral imperatives, new standards of human virtue, that are not imposed on us from on High and have not been handed down to us by the Sages.

Shalom.