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What Lies Beyond Our Understanding?

When physicists first observed electrons behaving like waves and particles simultaneously, they faced an intellectual crisis. The experimental data was undeniable, but it shattered every assumption about reality. A century later, we've built entire industries around these "impossible" phenomena, yet the underlying mystery has never been solved. Modern science has taught us a humbling truth: some of the most powerful realities in our universe operate beyond the reach of human comprehension.

King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live,[1] discovered this same principle three thousand years earlier. In studying the Red Heifer, he declared in defeat: "I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me!"[2] Like quantum mechanics, this mitzvah has earned its reputation as completely inexplicable, but somehow essential.

Yet at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, Rashi makes a startling declaration about this inexplicable law: "The Red Heifer atones for the sin of the Golden Calf."[3]

If you're paying attention, you'll notice that this statement is a glaring contradiction: If the Red Heifer defies comprehension, how can Rashi definitively declare its purpose? Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik[4] asked this very question—and his brilliant answer doesn't just solve the paradox, it reveals a profound truth about how we're meant to relate to divine wisdom.

You Think You Know Better?

In order to understand this apparent contradiction, we must revisit the sin of the Golden Calf for which the Red Heifer apparently atones. How did this catastrophic sin come about? When Moses vanished into the divine cloud for 40 days, panic set in. The people couldn't bear losing their intermediary to God, so they engineered a solution. Take some gold, melt it down, shape it into a calf—problem solved!

But despite their good intentions, their methodology revealed the most fundamental of errors - thinking we know better than God. Instead of consulting Aaron, a known prophet with decades of experience, and instead of recognizing that their actions violated the second commandment they'd heard directly from God just 40 days earlier, they took matters into their own hands, plowing forward with their flawed plan.

This fundamental sin appears in the story of Adam and Eve. The Arizal[5] explains that Eve wasn't merely tempted by appetizing fruit and the wisdom it promised. She was a brilliant strategist. She realized that if God designed the world to reward proper use of our free will, then humanity needed the most challenging choices possible to earn maximum rewards. By eating from the Tree of Knowledge, she would amplify the difficulty of future decisions, maximizing humanity's potential.

Her logic was sound. Her intentions were noble. But despite her sophisticated reasoning, there was one inconvenient obstacle: God had commanded her not to eat. Yet eat she did, and through her eating, she plunged humanity into a reality of pain and suffering she had not even imagined possible. Her sin? Like the Golden Calf and like every sin since—believing we know better than God.

Action Before Understanding

After Adam and Eve's sin, humanity fell to a spiritual level they would never rise from again—with one exception.

At the moment before the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai, Moses asked whether they would accept Hashem's commandments. They responded, "*Naaseh v'Nishma*"—"We will do, THEN we will understand."[6] This declaration, according to the Talmud, elevated the Jewish people to the spiritual state of Adam and Eve before their sin.[7] What could possibly be so powerful about this simple phrase that it undid thousands of years of spiritual exile?

Because *Naaseh v'Nishma* represents the ultimate acceptance of God's will over human understanding. It means action comes before understanding—fulfilling God's will takes priority over our comprehension of it. Any understanding that follows serves only to deepen our intention, never to override His commands with our own reasoning.

Through this complete commitment to divine authority, the Jewish nation perfectly rectified Adam and Eve's original error, catapulting themselves to humanity's pre-sin spiritual level. Unfortunately, when Moses delayed his return, the people repeated that ancient mistake with the Golden Calf, crashing their spiritual level back down to earth.[8]

Humbled by the Unknown

Now we can unravel the paradox. We asked how Rashi could explain something that defies explanation—how he could give a reason for something that transcends reason. Here's the brilliant insight: Rashi isn't explaining the Red Heifer at all. He's revealing that precisely BECAUSE the Red Heifer is completely

inexplicable and beyond logic, THAT is why it atones for the Golden Calf!

The Red Heifer becomes the perfect antidote to humanity's fundamental error. Our humble acceptance of God's will beyond our comprehension atones for all the sins that resulted from our rejection of His will in favor of our own understanding. A Torah with the Red Heifer demands we acknowledge that God knows best. We don't have all the answers, and we never will. Therefore, our mission isn't to figure it all out—it's to follow His infinite intelligence instead of relying on our own limited understanding.

Accepting God's Morality

I'd like to suggest a way to integrate this perspective of trusting God's will over our own. Anyone who encounters the Torah today—whether through study or simply hearing about its controversial teachings—will face moral challenges. I faced these struggles when I first began reading the Torah as an adult—many issues challenged my 21st century liberal sensibilities. My good friend reminded me that while I was right to have a sensitive conscience, I must also recognize that God's morality operates from infinite wisdom while mine is necessarily shaped by my cultural moment.

And cultural morality is simply unreliable. Pre-Nazi Germany led the world in science, art, and technology, yet committed history's worst genocide. Hitler himself campaigned against animal cruelty while orchestrating humanity's greatest atrocity. Where society's morality proves fallible, God's morality remains consistent and objective. If our moral sensitivities grate against the Torah's teachings, our first response shouldn't be to reject them, but to approach them with humility. Sometimes the wisest thing we can do is admit, like Solomon, that some truths are beyond us, yet trust in God's wisdom despite our limitations.

May we find the courage to say "*Naaseh v'Nishma*" in our own lives, trusting in divine truth even as we continue to learn and grow.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. 1 Kings 4:29-31: "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men…"
2. Ecclesiastes 7:23
3. Rashi on Numbers 19:2
4. (1820-1892), known as the Beis HaLevi, grandfather of the Brisk Rabbinic Dynasty.
5. Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), known as the Arizal (meaning "the Lion"), was a 16th-century Kabbalist whose mystical teachings became foundational to modern Kabbalah.
6. Exodus 24:7
7. Tractate Shabbat 146A
8. Tractate Shabbat 88A - When the Jewish people said "Naaseh v'Nishma," 600,000 angels came and placed two crowns on each person's head. However, when they sinned with the Golden Calf, they lost these crowns, representing their fall from the elevated spiritual level they had achieved.

Peace Talks

In this week's Torah portion, Moses' brother Aaron dies. The Torah tells us that the Jewish people mourned more for Aaron than they did for Moses. That's quite an amazing statement. The Sages explain that Aaron was a man who devoted himself to making peace between individuals and, as such, was respected and loved by all.

Here is Aaron's modus operandi: Whenever two people got into an argument, Aaron would visit each of them separately. He would tell the first person (untruthfully) that he had just visited the other, "who is full of remorse and wished to apologize." He would then visit the other person and tell him (again untruthfully) the same thing.

Judaism is not prudish or puritanical. It is a very practical approach to life, and recognizes that there are times when it's right to lie - in this case, in order to bring peace between God's children.

What Aaron did was based on simple human nature. When we perceive someone is attacking us, we will fight our corner and find only wrong in him. When, however, that same person comes humbly to apologize and accepts responsibility, we will more often than not, be willing to accept the role that we have played also. When we don't feel judged, we are more able to own up to our shortcomings.

It's something that we would do well to remember in all of our relationships - specifically, perhaps, in marriage. If we make our spouse feel attacked and judged, their most likely response (assuming they are human) will be to defend themselves and find fault in us instead. This will happen more than nine times out of ten.

If, on the other hand, our spouse feels accepted and respected, and there is an issue that we want to deal with, they are much more likely to be honest and objective about the role they may have played in creating the problem.

Any time we make another person feel judged and put down, we can blame only ourselves if the results are less than satisfactory. It's much better to try the positive approach instead.

To Give or Not to Give?

One of the most difficult dilemmas human beings face is weighing our own needs against the needs of others. This issue takes many forms, for example: How much should we contribute to charity? Should we regularly go out to restaurants

if that will lessen our ability to help the less fortunate? When a homeless person asks us for money, should we give it to him? Should America, most of whose citizens have themselves been the beneficiaries of a relatively liberal immigration policy, now more tightly restrict immigration?

How do we draw the line between our own legitimate self-interests and our concern for others?

This week's Torah portion, Chukat, describes just such a dilemma. The Jewish People, after long wanderings in the desert, are finally on the brink of entering the Land of Israel. Since the travel route will take the Jews through Edomite territory, Moses sends emissaries to the Edomites asking if the Israelites may pass through. Edom is well aware of the difficulties and hardships the Israelites have suffered in the recent past - the attack by Amalek, the fiasco of the Spies, and the uprising of Korach. Nevertheless, the Edomites refuse Moses' entreaty - and even threaten military attack if the Jews try to enter their territory!

Moses is persistent and sends another message. He assures the Edomites that when the Jewish People travel through, they will remain (as Nachmanides explains) "on an isolated road far from any population centers." Moreover, the Israelites promise to pay for any food or water they consume. Despite this plea, however, the Edomites again refuse entry.

On one hand, the Edomites' obstinence was not totally unreasonable. It's risky to allow a mass of three million people pass through one's territory, even if they are staying out of the populated areas. Moreover, as the Abarbanel explains, had the Edomites in any way assisted the Israelites -who were on their way to attack the Canaanite nations - it would have certainly brought Cannanite disfavor upon Edom.

So why does Jewish tradition view the Edomite response as cruelty - to such an extent that the Torah forbids accepting an Edomite who wants to convert to Judaism?!

One possible explanation is based on a verse in Deuteronomy which refers to the Edomites as "brothers." The Edomites are not strangers to the Israelites; the two nations share a common ancestry going back to Isaac. As family, they should have known better.

Another explanation focuses more on the Edomites' lack of compassion. Instead of expressing regret and explaining to the Israelites that they weren't able to take geopolitical risks, the Edomites merely threatened the Israelites with death if they crossed the border! Couldn't they have come forward with some expression of kindness - offering food or drink instead?

What is the lesson for us today? When legitimate concerns do not allow us to aid others the way we'd like, we should at least look for some alternative way to express our concern. To not offer any kindness at all, is to echo the harsh and selfish actions of Edom.

Self-Monitoring

One of the key techniques used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is self-monitoring. Keeping track of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors is a powerful intervention that affects change. For example, research by Dr. Aaron Beck demonstrates that when people who are depressed are asked to record thoughts that are self-critical, the number of such thoughts tends to decrease over time. The act of tracking itself causes the change. In addition, tracking also provides valuable information that can be analyzed to reveal a deeper understanding of what contributes to the thoughts, emotions, or behaviors and their exact consequences.

As the Children of Israel approached the land of Canaan, they requested from Sichon, the King of the Emori, to pass through his land. Not only did Sichon decline the request, but he waged war against the Jews. This turned costly for Sichon, as he was defeated and the Children of Israel took over the land of the Emori.

In what seems like an odd tangent, the Torah dedicates several verses explaining the history of Cheshbon, one of the cities taken over by the Children of Israel. Cheshbon, we are told, used to belong to Moav, but was conquered by Sichon from Moav before losing it to the Hebrews. "About this" conquest of Sichon over Moav, the verse relates, "the poets would say: 'Come to Cheshbon; let it be built and established – the town of Sichon'" (Bemidbar 21:27). Who are these poets and why do we care about what they used to say about the war between Sichon and Moav?

Rashi explains that the poets here are Bilaam and his father Beor, and the Torah is hinting at a backstory to set the stage for the next chapter in the Torah. Originally, Sichon was unable to defeat Moav. It was only after Sichon hired Bilaam to curse Moav that he was able to conquer the land. When Balak the King of Moav later tells Bilaam that he knows that whomever he blesses will be blessed and whomever he curses shall be cursed, he is speaking from personal experience. Balak knows that he lost to Sichon because Bilaam cursed Moav, so he tries to hire Bilaam to curse the Children of Israel.

While Rashi—a self-identified commentator on the basic understanding —attempts to expound the verses within the context, Rabbi Yochanan, quoted in the Gemara (Bava Batra 78b), seems to make no such attempt. The message of the versee is a religious and moral one. The verse needs to be read homiletically. The word for poets is "*ha-moshlim*," which can also be understood as meaning a ruler or master. Cheshbon, the name of the city, literally means an accounting. Rabbi Yochanan reads the verse as telling us that those who are rulers over themselves, meaning those that exhibit self-control, are skilled at monitoring and analyzing their religious decisions. They

calculate the loss incurred by fulfilling a mitzvah against the reward of accomplishing it and the pleasure derived from committing a transgression against the loss suffered in the end. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his classic mussar work, Mesillat Yesharim, The Path of the Just, uses this statement of Rabbi Yochanan as a springboard to discuss how essential self-monitoring is to religious self-improvement.

Yet, even though Rabbi Yochanan's reading seems to be completely removed from the context of the verses, Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz argues that this message of self-monitoring is enhanced when understood within the context of Sichon and Moav. Rabbi Eybeschutz suggests that Cheshbon was a border town with a small population that the king of Moav paid little attention to because of its seeming insignificance. Sichon took over Cheshbon with ease and it then served as a strategic location for him to conquer other cities of Moav. The message for self-monitoring, Rabbi Eybeschutz writes, is that we too often ignore the "Cheshbons" of our behavior: those crumbs that don't count as calories or the one small sin that nobody really cares about anyway. These "unimportant" oversights often lead to worse outcomes over time.

To gain a better mastery of ourselves, we need to improve our self-monitoring skills. Whether improving our mental health by tracking of our thoughts, emotions and behaviors in a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy framework or enhancing our religious commitment through tracking mitzvot and sins, we can become *moshlim*, rulers, if we take an honest *cheshbon*, accounting.