1. Introduction. Rav Mayer Twersky שליט"א told the story of a young ישיבה בחור who went to ask Rav Pinchas Hirschprung זצ"ל a question. Rav Hirschprung was a remarkable genius who had כל התורה כולה at his fingertips. The question was a good one and Rav Hirschprung answered “I don’t know”. Words cannot describe the smile on the boy’s face when he heard this response. His question was so good, that as far as this question goes, both he and Rav Hirschprung were the same. Neither one of them knew the answer! Rav Hirschprung, noticing the smug look on the boy’s face, commented to somebody “it’s cute, he thinks his ‘I don’t know’ is the same as my ‘I don’t know’”. There are often different levels of not knowing something. To take an example from Rav Twersky, when somebody experiences a terrible tragedy we often say that we don’t know the ways of God. This is obviously true, but also unsatisfying for the person suffering and trying to come to grips with the loss. On the other hand, if we were to tell a person that our parenting philosophy is going to be to not do anything to our children that they cannot fully comprehend, this would preclude bringing them to a dentist or doctor of any kind – certainly vaccinations would be out of the question. Is this good parenting? Obviously, we can all understand that this is terrible parenting and actually cruel to our children. If Hashem is our parent and enjoys a greater perspective than we do, isn’t it possible that as a good parent He must do things to us that are painful and difficult? Now, at the end of the day, we still don’t understand why Hashem did it, but it has now become a different kind of “I don’t know”.
2. There are certain topics, like פרה אדומה, where no matter how much analysis we engage in, the end of the road is going to be an “I don’t know”. However, our עבודה is to make sure that our “I don’t know” is a Rav Hirschprung “I don’t know” and not a totally ignorant “I don’t know”. Perhaps this is the message behind the other חוק in the תורה being חוקת הפסח which involves plenty of asking – even if a child doesn’t ask – את פתח לו. Yet, as a חוק, the real answer is still going to be “I don’t know”, but each סדר night we make sure that it is a Rav Hirschprung “I don’t know”. So let us take a look at a potential message to be gleaned from פרה אדומה.
3. Questions.
4. רש"י begins to give a reason for פרה אדומה in the name of ר' משה הדרשן, when he explains – תבא אמא ותקנח על בנה – in some way this is מכפר for the חטא העגל. What is the connection between the two?
5. The פסוק at the end of the פרשה says "אדם כי ימות באהל" and the גמרא ברכות דף סג: darshens "אין דברי תורה מתקיימים אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה" – a person only retains his תורה when he kills himself over it. This is a beautiful and easy to understand דרשה. What is a bit more difficult is how to understand the end of the פסוק in this light – "כל הבא אל האהל וכל אשר באהל יטמא שבעת ימים".
6. The גמרא חגיגה דף ג. Tells us that on the Shabbos that ר' אלעזר had his turn to darshen, he made the following דרשה: When it comes to the mitzvah of הקהל we can easily understand why the adults come, but why do the children come? R’ Elazar’s answer is כדי ליתן שכר למביאיהם. The מכילתא adds a comment: אשריך אברהם אבינו שר' אלעזר בן עזריה יצא מחלציך! What was so singularly impressive about this דרשה that Avraham would be so proud of?
7. Rabbi Rudinsky explains that the sin of the עגל didn’t happen out of the blue. The idea that there will be an ערב רב who will try to do terrible things is not limited to that generation. What made the דור דעה particularly susceptible to committing a חטא העגל? Rav Rudinsky explains that there was a basic breakdown in the אחדות of כלל ישראל. If Jews care about each other, they would try to stop each other from sinning. When each person is in his own little corner doing his own thing, he can be very tolerant of aberrant behavior. You do what you do and I do what I do. The call of the עגל was "אלה אלהיך ישראל", not "אלה אלהי" – you go and worship עבודה זרה and it doesn’t bother me.
8. The כפרה is the פרה אדומה which involves becoming טמא in order to make another person טהור. Not only do I concern myself with what the other person is facing, but I have to give up my own טהרה to help him.
9. Perhaps this is why, when חז"ל describe the notion of being מחנך children, they use the imagery of a cow and a calf – יותר ממה שרוצה העגל לינוק הפרה רוצה להיניק – a Jew has a burning desire to give and to help. It pains the mother to not feed the child even though child rearing is challenging, difficult and expensive.
10. Rav Twersky told the story of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik’s incredible חסד. When ר' חיים got married, his wife’s grandfather, the נצי"ב, bought them a cow for a wedding present. This way they will always have milk. But Rav Chaim would never keep anything for himself. He just gave everything away to others. (When one of my תלמידים asked what he should give Rav Schachter for being מסדר קידושין, Shay told me that he shouldn’t bother giving him money because “whatever you give him, he will just give to the next משולח that comes to his door”). Rav Chaim’s wife complained to her grandfather that her husband had given away the cow. The נצי"ב, in a move that perhaps was the only time that Rav Chaim was ever outsmarted in his entire life, bought a new cow and told Rav Chaim – “This cow is not for you. It is mine. You, however, have the right to milk it and enjoy all of it’s milk”.
11. Answering the questions.
12. This may be the explanation of the פסוק about אדם כי ימות באהל – when a person is ממית עצמו he will be able to achieve in תורה, but there is more – "כל הבא אל האהל וכל אשר באהל יטמא שבעת ימים" – it is not enough for him to be concerned with his own achievement. Instead, he must be aware of everybody else in his אהל. Their status has to be a concern for him.
13. The greatest ברכה for אברהם אבינו is to have ר' אלעזר emerge from him. אברהם, who dedicated his entire life to caring for the concerns of others is particularly proud of a דרשה about bringing children to an environment of רוחניות. With all the giving that אברהם did throughout his life, all he ever dreamed about was to give to a child. A parent who brings his child to הקהל can’t have the same experience at הקהל for himself. But he is willing to give up a bit of his own experience for the sake of the חינוך of his children.