

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

Mazal tov to Deborah & Josh Wilbur on the marriage of their daughter Ashley to Josh Kokhavim, son of Romina & Iraj Kokhavim. Mazal-Tov also to Ashley's grandparents, Merryl & Nat Shaffir.

Chukat represents a transition in the Torah in many ways. B'Nai Yisrael arrive at the base of Har Sinai approximately a month and a half after departing from Egypt – Rosh Hodesh Sivan 2448. They depart from the base of Har Sinai on 20 Iyar 2449 (the second year) (Bemidbar 10:11). Once the people leave the base of Har Sinai, they start looking for reasons to complain, and Moshe and God both immediately call the complaints evil. Behaalotecha, Shelach Lecha, and Korach record massive, continuous complaints. The three serious sins of the second year after the Exodus all take place in a single week (See *Torah Anthology* 13.333-34). Miriam speaks lashon hara about Moshe's wife Tziporah on 22 Sivan, and God strikes her with tzaraat. While the people wait seven days for Miriam to recover from tzaraat and become tahor again (29 Sivan), Korach and his followers rise up against Moshe and Aharon. The Meraglim depart on 29 Sivan to explore Canaan, the quality of the land, the strength of the people, and prospects for defeating them in battle). (They return on 8 Av, give their reports, and the people cry in fear all night). Hashem has enough and decrees that all the adults twenty years old or older at the time of the Exodus will die in the Midbar, and only their children will survive to enter the land.

Chukat opens with chapter 19, the decree of the Red Heifer, which gives the procedure of becoming tahor again after exposure to a dead body. While God presents the decree to Moshe a year earlier at the base of Har Sinai, the Torah presents it here, after the death of many who sin during the last week of Sivan. Also, almost all of the adults still alive at that time will die during the following 38 years. The Torah concludes the story of the generation of the Exodus at this point, and there is no discussion of the rest of the wanderings until the Torah continues during the 40th year (chapter 21).

After Miriam dies and her well dries up, the people complain of thirst. God tells Moshe to take his staff and ask Miriam's rock to give the people water. Moshe becomes angry, calls the people rebels, and strikes the rock. Although the rock does give water for the people, Hashem is angry because Moshe does not use the opportunity to make a Kiddush Hashem. God wants Moshe to show that if an inanimate rock obeys a request of God, then how much more should we Jews, for whom Hashem has performed so many miracles and given so many gifts, also obey God's mitzvot. An

important lesson of Chukat is that careless speech is the final shortcoming for which God denies Moshe and Aharon permission to enter the land.

What does Chukat mean to us today? For me, Kohelet gives one answer: there is a time and place for everything. During a long period of slavery, the Jews reach a low point in merit and must regain the status of Yosef and his immediate family. Through teshuvah and help from Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem, B'Nai Yisrael raise themselves high enough to merit God's direct intervention to lift our ancestors out of slavery and to bring them to the base of Har Sinai to learn Hashem's mitzvot. This generation, however, looks to Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem for all its needs. As long as God leads the people directly, with Moshe's immediate assistance, they can survive. However, living in Israel, with Hashem's hidden face (operating only in the background, out of direct observation of humans), is beyond this generation. When the Meraglim return and the people fall apart, God sees that only a new generation, which has not been slaves, will be able to survive on its own (when God operates out of sight of humans).

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander teaches us that speech is vitally important, for good or for evil. Miriam lifts her voice in song several times to inspire the people to learn that with pure faith in Hashem, He will take care of the Jews. However, when Miriam speaks lashon hara about Tzipporah (Moshe's wife), God punishes her with tzaraat. Ten of the Meraglim speak lashon hara about the land of Israel, and they die for the sin. Korach exaggerates about several of the mitzvot, and he and his followers end up being buried alive for their sins.

The Chofetz Chaim may be best known for his focus on eliminating lashon hara. A lack of care with speech leads to several sins of the generation of the Exodus. Rabbi Brander recounts the story of Yiftach, subject of the Haftarah – a great military hero who saves the Jews from Ammon (in present day Jordan). Yiftach makes a vow to God that if He enables the Jews to defeat Ammon, he will offer as an olah (burnt offering) whoever is first to emerge from his house when he returns home. The first to emerge happens to be his daughter, an only child. Yiftach's reward for his great military victory is having to sacrifice his only child, his beloved daughter, because of his careless and evil speech.

Later in history, chazal blame lashon hara for the destruction of the second Temple. (We often read this horrible story at some time during Tisha B'Av.)

Rabbi Brander summarizes his lesson as follows:

The underlying message of our parsha and Haftarah is timelessly relevant: Speech is the currency of connection, and has the power to work in ways both good and bad. With it, we build relationships, teach values, and shape community. Misused, it becomes a weapon that divides and destroys.

Chukat reminds us that every interaction — with God, with family, with society — begins with how we speak and how we listen. In an age inundated by constant communication, may we never forget the sacred weight of our words, and may we use them wisely, as tools for healing, holiness, and harmony.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, helped generations of Jews appreciate Jewish mitzvot and history. He started me on my journey to greater knowledge, and he was thrilled watching his congregants learn and become leaders of their generation over half a century of leading congregations. His lessons certainly qualify as lashon tov!

I return to Kohelet with one more lesson for our times. The generation that founded the modern state of Israel has survived numerous wars and semi wars with enemies who want to eliminate Jews from the Middle East and the rest of the world. Those of us who were alive in 1948, and those born shortly after, have done what we could. A few countries in the Middle East have accepted Israel, and some have even entered into the Abraham Accords. Perhaps it is time for a younger generation to move forward and try to bring Israel and our fellow Jews into peace with our enemies.

A time for everything. In the past week, we have observed yahrzeits for two grandfathers and for the Rebbe. On one of the yahrzeits, our friends Deborah & Josh Wilbur, and Merryl & Nat Shaffir, celebrated the wedding of their daughter/granddaughter Ashley (Wilbur) to Josh Kokhavim. Terrific young Jews like Ashley and Josh represent the future of our people, and may their mitzvot help start a golden period, with peace and safety for all our people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Parshat Chukat: The Power of Words to Break or Build

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * 5785 / 2025
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the return of our hostages still in Gaza, for the refuah shlayma of our wounded in body or spirit, and for the safety of our brave IDF soldiers. ***

This week's OTS for You is dedicated in memory of Joseph)Joe(Blumenthal, a courageous man who was a dedicated husband, father, grandfather and community leader

Parshat Chukat marks a turning point in the journey of the Jewish people through the wilderness. After nearly forty years of wandering, a new generation begins to emerge, and with that transition comes a series of dramatic events — the deaths of Miriam and Aharon, Moshe's sin of striking the rock at Mei Merivah, the battles against surrounding nations, and moments of both song and strife.

At first glance, the connection between the parsha and its haftarah from Sefer Shoftim appears to be only historical — both reference Israel's encounters with Amon. Yet beneath the surface lies a deeper and unifying theme: the power of speech, and how it can either build relationships or break them beyond repair.

One of the parsha's central scenes is Moshe's mistake at Mei Merivah. Commanded by God to speak to the rock, Moshe instead strikes it)Bamidbar 20:8–11(. The consequence is severe: Moshe is denied entry into the Land of Israel. God's rebuke is telling — *"Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel"*)Bamidbar

20:12(This was meant to be a moment of public education — not just a miracle, but a model of engagement through dibbur, speech. God wanted Moshe to demonstrate that spiritual growth and divine connection emerge not from force, but from relationships — and that relationships begin with communication)see Sforno on Bamidbar 20:8(.

This theme is also expressed in our parsha through the deaths of both Miriam and Aharon – figures whose legacies, upon closer reading, are deeply tied to speech. Although Miriam is often associated with water—our Sages note that Miriam’s merit brought forth water from the well)see Ta’anit 9a(, and indeed her passing is followed immediately by the loss of water)Bamidbar 20:1-2(— it was her voice that shaped her story. In song her voice moves the people in achieving a spiritual rendezvous with God and tragically, in her critique of Moshe questions the veracity of Moshe’s unique position with God and the people. The Torah reminds us that words can carry profound consequences.

Aharon, the Ohev Shalom v’Rodef Shalom, the peacemaker who used words to reconcile and mend rifts between people)Avot d’Rabbi Natan 12:3(, is ultimately remembered for his quiet strength. When tragedy struck his own family, he responded not with protest, but with silence — “Vayidom Aharon”)Vayikra 10:3(. Sometimes, restraint in speech is itself a form of holiness.

In a more uplifting moment, our parsha also tells of the “*Song of the Well*” — a brief, poetic expression of gratitude, where the nation comes together to voice unity and thanks)Bamidbar 21:16–18(. And when Moshe reaches out to neighboring nations with messages of peace — speech before confrontation— the Torah reinforces the value of dialogue)Bamidbar 21:21–22; Devarim 2:26–29(.

The haftarah, from Sefer Shoftim, contrasts this ideal, and warns of the dangers of irresponsible speech. Yiftach, a judge and military leader, is a man whose life is marked by rejection, broken relationships and destructive speech, rises to save Israel. But he makes a reckless, tragic vow that results in the death)or cloistering(of his only child)Shoftim 11:30–40(. His words, spoken in haste, leave devastation in their wake, and serve as a reminder of speech’s potential to destroy. It is for this reason that this narrative is included in the haftarah according to Minhag Teiman – so that future generations will learn to be careful with speech.

The underlying message of our parsha and haftarah is timelessly relevant: Speech is the currency of connection, and has the power to work in ways both good and bad. With it, we build relationships, teach values, and shape community. Misused, it becomes a weapon that divides and destroys.

Chukat reminds us that every interaction — with God, with family, with society — begins with how we speak and how we listen. In an age inundated by constant communication, may we never forget the sacred weight of our words, and may we use them wisely, as tools for healing, holiness, and harmony.

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. **Ohr Torah Stone is in the midst of its fund-raising drive. Please support this effort with Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

Dvar Torah: Chukas: Everything!)2007(by Rabbi Label Lam

HASHEM spoke to Moshe saying:

“Take the staff and gather the assembly, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters. You shall bring forth for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and to their animals.” Moshe took the staff from before HASHEM,

as He had commanded him. Moshe and Aaron gathered the congregation before the rock and he said to them, *"Listen now O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?"* Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice. Abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank. HASHEM said to Moshe, *"Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation into the Land that I will give them."* Bamidbar 20:7-12(

Moshe finds himself between a rock and a hard place, literally. What is he to do? He has a thirsty crowd to contend with, and as a result of the action he takes or the words he spoke or did not speak, he and his brother Aaron are denied entry into the Land of Israel. It is hard to figure exactly what went so wrong. Why was Moshe told to take a stick and then talk to the rock? What was he to say to the rock? Why was he to speak to the rock *"to the eyes"* of the congregation? In the end the water came gushing out and the masses were mollified but Moshe was still blocked from the Holy Land. Could it really be that as he is apparently accused, Moshe did not believe in HASHEM? What does that mean?

The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni reveals what it was that Moshe was to say to the rock. *"Moshe was told to teach it a chapter Ja perek(and it would give forth water. The Lekach Tov says that Moshe was told to say, "So says HASHEM: 'Bring out your water!'"* In any case Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it and he even hit it twice. What was lost?

HASHEM criticizes Moshe that he lacked belief in HASHEM. It certainly cannot mean that Moshe who achieved the highest degree of prophecy did not believe in HASHEM. In this incident, Moshe failed to make HASHEM more believable in *"the eyes of the congregation."*

What is the point, what is the value of being stuck without water in the desert? It is a test? This becomes a teachable moment for the entire nation. Sure there is a practicality of expediently delivering water, but with that drink of water there is a great chance to install an all time lesson. Where had Moshe failed? He hit the rock, and miraculously the water was restored. The people broke out spontaneously into song, and Moshe is heralded as cosmic plumber. Yes, they made a Kiddush – but it was not as much of a Kiddush HASHEM as it might have been.

By deviating from the lesson plan outlined to him by HASHEM, the intended lesson was lessened. Had Moshe spoken to the rock, Rashi explains, the people would have figured that if a rock, which doesn't speak or hear and doesn't need a livelihood, is obedient to the word of HASHEM, then how much more so should we be! What an impact that would have made on the hearts of the entire nation. By using the stick instead, that crucial message was lost.

By simply learning with a rock, a small portion of Torah, it can be made to drip with the milk of human kindness and quench the thirst of millions of starving souls. How much more so, with regard to a human who can hear and can speak and who is vulnerable to the gyrations of the marketplace, should he be sensitive to the word of HASHEM. Moshe Rabbeinu should not have to hit or shout to get his point across. A great teacher should rather speak softly and carry a big stick.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter ztl. was served a glass of water at a fancy French hotel. Afterwards he was given a bill for 50 francs. He queried about the extra high price to the waiter who explained, *"Rabbiner, you are not paying only for the water! See the piano player over there tickling the ivories, and the artful tapestries are upon the walls. You're paying for the ambiance!"* Reb Yisrael paid the bill, and when he returned to his room, he wrote a letter to his students in Russia explaining that now he knows why when we make a Brocho on water we say, *"SheHaKol Neheyiah B'Devaro"* – *"that everything comes about through His speech."* We are not making a blessing on the water alone but rather on **everything!**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5770-chukas/>

Chukat: Leadership for Self-Reliance

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015, 2018

Transitions are hard. As the period of wandering in the desert begins to draw to a close, Bnei Yisrael encounter many changes and they anticipate many more. Their leaders begin to die: Miriam and Aharon both die in this week's parasha, and Moshe will pass away a few months hence. The people are also facing a shift in the very nature of their lives. For forty years they have been living an otherworldly existence, wandering in the wilderness, existing in a vacuum with all their needs being provided for directly by God in miraculous ways. Soon they will be living in the Land of Israel, fighting wars, planting and harvesting crops, living in a real society, and building a country. Will the people be ready for this change? What is necessary for a transition that is as smooth as possible, and what is required?

Perhaps the first thing that is needed is new leadership. Moshe and Aharon were the perfect leaders to bring the people out of Egypt, but they may not be the perfect leaders to bring them into the Land of Israel. They have led with the aid of ongoing and direct communication with God and with God's direct intervention through miraculous acts. Now, however, the people need leaders who don't need this option available to them, who can function without turning to God and expecting an answer. The people need leaders who can be effective when forced to work out real-world solutions for themselves, leaders who will be self-reliant and who can teach the people to be self-reliant as well.

Just as Moshe and Aharon have developed a reliance on God, the people have grown habituated to a reliance on Moshe and Aharon. This is not a healthy relationship, not for Moshe and Aharon and certainly not for the people. Consider the situation: The people have now spent forty years in the wilderness, and yet Parashat Chukat reads like a replay of their complaints as they left Egypt at the beginning of Parashat Beshalach. They lament the lack of water and food, they utter words against Moshe and God, and they ask to go back to Egypt.

Shouldn't they know better? They presumably know by now that God is able to provide for them. They also have presumably learned that complaining only leads to bad results. And yet what do they do? They whine; they repeat the old line, *"Why did you take us out of Egypt?"* Their request for water at least reflects legitimate need, even if they ask for it inappropriately, but the grumblings about the man is nothing but ingratitude and small-mindedness. And the divine response is predictably deadly. Really, don't they ever learn?

The truth is that it is one thing to learn intellectually and quite another to change the dynamics of a relationship. We so often revert to old patterns and old roles, even when we know better. A person could be a mature, accomplished professional, but when she goes back to her family for Thanksgiving or Pesach, all of a sudden she is playing her old role of middle sister and interacting with her parents and her siblings just like she did when she was a teenager. A couple could have worked through a difficult relationship, learning the behaviors that set one another off and that need to be avoided, but without a lot of effort, when those old triggers are encountered, they will again act in their old, counterproductive ways.

Moshe and Bnei Yisrael have been working on their relationship now for forty years, and it seems like those old patterns are not going to break. Bnei Yisrael somehow fall back into their teenage child mode when facing challenges and turn to Moshe. And Moshe falls back into his familiar mode and turns to God for an answer: *"And Moshe and Aharon went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them"* (Bamidbar, 20:6).

Moshe may not be aware of how little his own behavior has changed, but he certainly sees the people as failing in this regard: *"Hear ye rebels, must we fetch water for you out of this rock?"* (20:11). The word for rebels, *morim*, is echoed in his valedictory address to the people in a way that makes explicit the sense that the people's wayward behavior is hopeless and unchanging: *"Rebels, mamrim, you have been against God, from the day that I have known you"* (Devarim 9:24).

This, then, might be what the sin of Moshe and Aharon is really about, but it is all so mysterious. What was their sin? Was it hitting the rock rather than speaking to it? Was it calling the people rebels? Was it getting angry? Even if their sin is a combination of all these, do they really justify the punishment of dying in the wilderness without entering the land?

The answer might be that their sin is all of those and none, that it lays not in the acts themselves but in what they demonstrate. For each one of these things shows that Moshe is still the leader of old, and that he is unable to adapt to the changes ahead. Think of what he could have done differently: He could have engaged the people rather than running to the Tent of Meeting and calling on God to help. God even told him to break the old patterns and commanded him to speak to the rock, not to hit it, but he couldn't do it. Instead, he fell back into what was familiar, hitting the rock rather than speaking to it

There is a lot of symbolism in the choice of whether to speak or to hit. Does one speak, trying to engage, thinking that there can be a meaningful connection with the other side, believing that both are receptive to the change that can emerge when two sides meet in open and reflective conversation? Or does one hit, believing that no true conversation can take place and that behavior can only be modified by brute force from above? If after all this time Moshe still sees the people as incorrigible rebels who can only be beaten into submission, then it is time that Moshe step back and allow a new leader to take over.

And, lo and behold, even though Yehoshua is not selected yet, as soon as Moshe and Aharon are told that they will not take the people into the land, the people start acting in a more mature and self-reliant fashion. After Aharon's death, Israel suffers an attack by the king of Arad. Their response? Not to turn to Moshe, but to take matters into their own hands: *"And Israel vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities"* (21:2).

They prayed to God, they went to battle, and they were victorious. This was no replay of the war with Amalek, another parallel to Parashat Beshalach. Here, the people were not dependent on Moshe or a miracle wrought by his hands raised to heaven. This war was won by the people themselves, by their skills in battle, their prayers, and their relationship with God.

Perhaps the event with the poisonous serpents represents a relapse, with their complaining about the man and turning to Moshe to pray to God to save them. But in the end, even with the miraculous intervention, there was something more empowering this time. Moshe didn't save the people with his prayers, and Aharon didn't save them with the incense. Moshe made a physical object, a serpent on a flag, which the people then used to save themselves. Each person's healing was in his or her own hands. This healing may have been a little too miraculous for the real world they would soon be encountering, and in the end the brass serpent was destroyed by King Hizkiyahu (II Kings, 18:3). But in the wilderness, where the supernatural was taken for granted, this was how healing took place. And they did it themselves.

And so it continues. The song that they sing, *"Az Yashir,"* echoes the song sung by Moshe and Miriam back in Beshalach. But now it is not *"az yashir Moshe,"* but rather, *"az yashir Yisrael"* (21:17). And by the time they are encountering Sichon, it is no longer Moshe who is sending the messengers, as was the case with Edom (20:14), but rather, the people themselves: *"Then Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites..."* (21:21).

The people are learning what it means to be responsible for themselves; they are growing up. And sometimes to grow up and escape all those old behaviors and dynamics, you have to leave the parental home. Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam are left behind in the people's childhood home, in the desert where the people were raised. The people are now ready to leave home, to become adults as they learn independence and self-reliance, and as they prepare for the challenges that lie ahead in the Land of Canaan.

Shabbat shalom!

From my archives.

Leadership and "Gloomitis": Thoughts for Parashat Hukat

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

"And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people strove with Moses and spoke saying: would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord! And why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness to die there, we and our cattle? And why have you made us come out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place...And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and they fell on their faces..."
(Bemidbar 20: 3-6).

A great crisis arose: the people were thirsty; they needed water. In desperation, they complained bitterly to Moses and Aaron. The leaders did not know how to respond; they retreated to the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. God then commanded Moses and Aaron to speak to a rock, and water would come forth. Moses and Aaron gathered the people: *"Hear now, you rebels! Are we to bring you water out of this rock?"* Moses struck the rock twice and water came forth abundantly.

God then informed Moses and Aaron that they failed to sanctify God during this episode, and that they would therefore not lead the people into the promised land. Moses and Aaron would die before reaching their goal.

Biblical commentators have tried to understand what Moses and Aaron did incorrectly so as to incur God's displeasure. Some suggest that they sinned by speaking disdainfully to the Israelites, referring to them as *"rebels."* Others suggest that Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it, thereby not following God's specific instructions.

Perhaps, though, there is another way of understanding this story.

The people were thirsty and were growing increasingly distressed and angry. Why hadn't Moses and Aaron themselves noticed the shortage of water? Why did they need the people to come to complain to them? Shouldn't leaders be looking out for the welfare of their people, and shouldn't they realize when the people's basic needs are not being met? Why didn't Moses and Aaron pray to God for water well in advance of the people's complaints? They could have entirely avoided the crisis if they had been more in touch with the people.

Perhaps their error was not being sufficiently aware of the needs and the moods of the people. When leaders lose touch, they open the door to dissatisfaction, complaints, disaffection.

In his book, *Other People's Trades*, (Summit Books, New York, 1989) Primo Levi writes about an assignment given to a sixth grade class. Students were asked to describe an invented animal. One of the students wrote of a huge animal of incredible strength that had bones harder than steel. This animal *"has twelve hearts and sixty ribs and could be feared as invincible and immortal; however he is afraid of only one disease, gloomitis, which for him is fatal"* (p. 41).

"Gloomitis" is fatal because it saps the animal of self-confidence and the ability to act. Even though this monster is so powerful and seemingly invincible, it is undermined when it succumbs to gloom. It sinks into a helpless stupor.

It would seem that the people of Israel fell victim to *"gloomitis."* They forgot about all the miracles that had brought them this far and that continued to sustain them. They forgot about the many wonderful things that Moses and Aaron did for them. Instead, they lost heart; everything seemed bleak; they thought that death was preferable to their current situation.

Moses and Aaron had been unable to foresee or fend off the *"gloomitis."* This, it may be suggested, was the *"sin"* that disqualified them from entering the promised land. They had fallen out of touch with the needs and feelings of the people, and thus they were no longer able to lead them properly.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/criticism-or-contempt-thoughts-parashat-korah>

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American Jews and the American Dream

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

[On September 12, 2004, a special service was held at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York (founded in 1654) to mark the Congregation's 350th anniversary. Since Shearith Israel is the first Jewish Congregation in North America, this occasion also marked the 350th anniversary of American Jewry. Rabbi Marc D. Angel delivered a sermon at the 350th anniversary service, reflecting on American Jewish history through the prism of the experience of Congregation Shearith Israel. This is an abridged version of that sermon.]

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." These words from the American Declaration of Independence reflect the deepest ideals and aspirations of the American people. America is not merely a country, vast and powerful; America is an idea, a vision of life as it could be.

When these words were first proclaimed on July 4, 1776, Congregation Shearith Israel was almost 122 years old. It was a venerable community, with an impressive history - a bastion of Jewish faith and tradition, and an integral part of the American experience.

When the British invaded New York in 1776, a large group of congregants, including our Hazan Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas, left the city rather than live under British rule. Many joined the Revolutionary army and fought for American independence. Our story in America is not built on historical abstractions, but on generations of Jews who have played their roles in the unfolding of this nation. It is a very personal history, ingrained in our collective memory.

On this 350th anniversary of the American Jewish community, we reflect on the courage and heroic efforts of our forebears who have maintained Judaism as a vibrant and living force in our lives. We express gratitude to America for having given us — and all citizens — the freedom to practice our faith. This very freedom has energized and strengthened America.

Within Congregation Shearith Israel, we have been blessed with men and women who have helped articulate Jewish ideals and American ideals. Their voices have blended in with the voices of fellow Americans of various religions and races, to help shape the dream and reality of America.

The American Declaration of Independence pronounced that all men are created equal. In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport, in August 1790, President George Washington hailed the United States for allowing its citizens freedom — not as a favor bestowed by one group on another — but in recognition of the inherent natural rights of all human beings. This country, wrote President Washington, *"gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."*

And yet, if equality and human dignity are at the core of American ideals, the fulfillment of these ideals have required — and still require — sacrifice and devotion. Reality has not always kept up with the ideals. In 1855, Shearith Israel member

Uriah Phillips Levy — who rose to the rank of Commodore in the U.S. Navy — was dropped from the Navy's active duty list. He was convinced that anti-Semitism was at the root of this demotion. He appealed the ruling and demanded justice. He asked: are people *"now to learn to their sorrow and dismay that we too have sunk into the mire of religious intolerance and bigotry?... What is my case today, if you yield to this injustice, may tomorrow be that of the Roman Catholic or the Unitarian, the Presbyterian or the Methodist, the Episcopalian or the Baptist. There is but one safeguard: that is to be found in an honest, whole-hearted, inflexible support of the wise, the just, the impartial guarantee of the Constitution."* Levy won his case. He helped the United States remain true to its principles.

Shearith Israel member Moses Judah (1735-1822) believed that all men were created equal — including black men. In 1799, he was elected to the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. During his tenure on the standing committee between 1806 and 1809, about fifty slaves were freed. Through his efforts, many other slaves achieved freedom. He exerted himself to fight injustice, to expand the American ideals of freedom and equality regardless of race or religion.

Another of our members, Maud Nathan, believed that all men were created equal — but so were all women created equal. She was a fiery, internationally renowned suffragette, who worked tirelessly to advance a vision of America that indeed recognized the equality of all its citizens — men and women. As President of the Consumers' League of New York from 1897-1917, Maud Nathan was a pioneer in social activism, working for the improvement of working conditions of employees in New York's department stores. Equality and human dignity were the rights of all Americans, rich and poor, men and women.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that human beings have unalienable rights, among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These words express the hope and optimism of America. They are a repudiation of the tyranny and oppression that prevailed — and still prevail — in so many lands. America is a land of opportunity, where people can live in freedom. The pursuit of happiness really signifies the pursuit of self-fulfillment, of a meaningful way of life. America's challenge was — and still is — to create a harmonious society that allows us to fulfill our potentials.

President George Washington declared a day of national Thanksgiving for November 26, 1789. Shearith Israel held a service, at which Hazan Gershom Mendes Seixas called on this congregation *"to unite, with cheerfulness and uprightness...to promote that which has a tendency to the public good."* Hazan Seixas believed that Jews, in being faithful to Jewish tradition, would be constructive and active participants in American society.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were not reserved only for those born in America; they are the rights of all human beings everywhere. This notion underlies the idealism of the American dream, calling for a sense of responsibility for all suffering people, whether at home or abroad. American Jews have been particularly sensitive and responsive to this ideal.

On March 8, 1847, Hazan Jacques Judah Lyons addressed a gathering at Shearith Israel for the purpose of raising funds for Irish famine relief. The potato crop in Ireland had failed in 1846, resulting in widespread famine. Hazan Lyons well realized that the Jewish community needed charitable dollars for its own internal needs; and yet he insisted that Jews reach out and help the people of Ireland. He said that there was one indestructible and all-powerful link between us and the Irish sufferers: *"That link, my brethren, is HUMANITY! Its appeal to the heart surmounts every obstacle. Clime, color, sect are barriers which impede not its progress thither."* In assisting with Irish famine relief, the Jewish community reflected its commitment to the well-being of all suffering human beings. American Jewry grew into — and has continued to be — a great philanthropic community perhaps unmatched in history. Never have so few given so much to so many. In this, we have been true to our Jewish tradition, and true to the spirit of America.

Who articulated the hope and promise of America more eloquently than Emma Lazarus? *"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."* How appropriate it is that her poem is affixed to the great symbol of American freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

Alice Menken, (for many years President of our Sisterhood) did remarkable work to help immigrants, to assist young women who ran into trouble with the law, to promote reform of the American prison system. She wrote: *"We must seek a balanced philosophy of life. We must live to make the world worth living in, with new ideals, less suffering, and more joy."*

Americans see ourselves as one nation, indivisible, under God, with liberty and justice for all. Yet, liberty and justice are not automatically attained. They have required — and still require — wisdom, vigilance, and active participation. America prides itself on being a nation of laws, with no one above the law. The American legal tradition has been enriched by the insights and the work of many American Jews.

In one of his essays, Justice Benjamin Nathan Cardozo — a devoted member of Shearith Israel — referred to a Talmudic passage which has been incorporated into our prayer book. It asks that the Almighty let His mercy prevail over strict justice. Justice Cardozo reminded us that the American system relies not only on justice — but on mercy. Mercy entails not merely an understanding of laws, but an understanding of the human predicament, of human nature, of the circumstances prevailing in human society. Another of our members, Federal Judge William Herlands, echoed this sentiment when he stated that Justice without Mercy — is just ice!

Our late rabbis Henry Pereira Mendes, David de Sola Pool and Louis C. Gerstein, were singularly devoted to social welfare, to religious education, to the land of Israel. They distinguished themselves for their devotion to Zionism, and played their parts in the remarkable unfolding of the State of Israel. They, along with so many American Jews, have keenly understood how much unites Israel and the United States — two beacons of democracy and idealism in a very troubled world.

During the past 350 years, the American Jewish community has accomplished much and contributed valiantly to all aspects of American life. We have cherished our participation in American life. We have been free to practice our faith and teach our Torah. We have worked with Americans of other faiths and traditions to mold a better, stronger, more idealistic nation.

America today is not just a powerful and vast country. It is also an idea, a compelling idea that has a message for all people in all lands. As American Jews, we are committed to the ideals of freedom and equality, human dignity and security, to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of harmony among ourselves and throughout the world. We have come far as a nation, but very much remains to be done. May God give us the strength and resolve to carry on, to work proudly as Jews to bring the American dream to many more generations of humanity.

* Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. During his tenure as Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, Rabbi Angel delivered a sermon (September 12, 2004) on the occasion of Shearith Israel's 350th anniversary. This is an abridged version of that sermon.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/golden-age-spain-how-golden-was-it>

Gilda Angel: In Memoriam

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

[Thoughts by Rabbi Marc D. Angel for the "sheloshim" for his beloved wife of nearly 58 years.]

Everyone knows intellectually that we are mortal, that death is inevitable.

But when death claims a loved one, our intellectual awareness of death gives way to grief. Death is shocking.

Scientists can explain the process of death. Doctors can identify the symptoms leading to death. Theologians and philosophers can offer discourses on the meaning of death.

But death remains a profound mystery. All the explanations in the world still leave us at a loss. Someone we knew and loved is gone. The new silence is deafening. We strain to hear a beloved voice, to feel a tender touch, to share a living moment.

But no, death has taken this all away.

We mourn. No matter how wise or experienced we are, we find ourselves crying and mourning over an irreplaceable loss. The one who died is at peace; but the survivors are bereft.

Jewish tradition provides a framework for coping with death and mourning. It understands that mourning is a process; it takes time; it develops stage by stage — seven days, a month, eleven months, a year...a lifetime.

The Talmud (Berakhot 46B) records the opinions of Rabbi Akiva and the Sages on the appropriate blessing to recite when a loved one dies. Rabbi Akiva suggests: Barukh Dayan HaEmet, blessed be the True Judge. This is a blessing of resignation. We don't understand the mystery of death, we aren't sure how we are going to get through our grief: but we affirm that God is the True Judge and ultimate Master of life and death. We bow our heads humbly.

The Sages suggest a different blessing: Barukh Hatov VeHameitiv, blessed be the One who is good and bestows good. This seems like an odd blessing to recite when we are grieving. We don't necessarily feel that God is good or does good when we stand before the dead body of a loved one. But the Sages may be suggesting a profound way of coping with death. Yes, of course we are sad and forlorn; but we also need to inject positive emotions into our mourning. We need to remember all the blessings and happiness the deceased person had enjoyed. We need to call to mind all the good that was accomplished and experienced. We need to remember the happy times, the achievements, the special moments. We affirm that God is the source of goodness.

Gilda Angel (April 24, 1946-June 3, 2025) lived a beautiful life. She was a wonderful daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, aunt, teacher, friend. She was bright, loving, wise. She lived with a keen sense of God's presence. She taught science for over 40 years; she wrote a food column for ten years and also authored an amazing cookbook "Sephardic Holiday Cooking." She was an active "rebbitzin" in a wonderful congregation; she was hospitable and gracious, always with a welcoming smile on her face. She loved music, nature, art, travel. She loved Israel; we spent many summers in Jerusalem. She was kind, charitable, sociable...the list of her virtues goes on and on.

Gilda and I went on our first date May 8, 1966. We were married August 23, 1967. I am grateful beyond words for the privilege and joy of having spent these many years with her. The Almighty blessed us with wonderful children, grandchildren and extended family.

Barukh Dayan HaEmet: As a rabbi for over 50 years, I've been at many death beds, officiated at many funerals, made many shiva visits. But one never entirely comes to grips with death; it remains a mystery beyond our ken. With the passing of my beloved Gilda, I have lost my life partner, my light and my blessing. In resignation, I acknowledge God as the True Judge. God will shine glory and peace on Gilda's soul. God will provide our family with as much consolation as is possible.

Batukh Hatov VeHameitiv: Even in mourning — or perhaps especially in mourning — we need to recall the many blessings the Almighty bestowed on us. Gilda lived a beautiful life, full of love, happiness, fulfillment. When I reminisce

about our life together, my primary emotion is gratitude. I thank God who is good, who bestows good, and who blessed our lives with so much good and goodness.

Our tradition teaches that the memory of the righteous is a blessing. Gilda's life-force will continue to impact positively on me, our children and grandchildren, on Gilda's sisters, on our extended family, friends and her many students. Her faith, love and wisdom live on within all who were blessed to experience the radiance of her life.

Blessed be the True Judge. Blessed be God who is good and who bestows goodness.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3362>

Chukas: My Partner Knows by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2021 Teach 613

As humans we try to understand. We try to understand how gravity works, how plants grow, and how the digestive system works. Similarly, in life we try to see patterns, and we try to make sense of life events. But sometimes we just do not understand.

Even in Mitzvos, which are given by Hashem, we try to understand. In fact, the commentaries encourage us to try to understand the rationale and message of each Mitzva to the extent that we can. But, sometimes, we just do not know. A Mitzva that we just do not understand is called a "*Chok*."

The concept of a "*Chok*" is an important one. It means that there are limitations to our understanding, and that we are okay with that. Some maintain that this is why Jewish men cover their heads so diligently with a covering we call a Yarmulka. The covering symbolizes that there is a cap on our intelligence. "Yarmulka" is a slurred form of the two words "*Yarey Me'elokay*," meaning fear or reverence of Hashem. The covering symbolizes that we proceed in life even though we do not always understand everything.

This year, as I contemplated the name of the Parsha, "Chukas," I wondered if there was an example of this principle in the writings of the prophets. After all, the role of the prophets is to be conduits of Torah principles to the daily experience of life. The prophets were great mentors and teachers, connected closely to Hashem and to the people. I realized that there is indeed such an example of the "Chok" quality in the story of Elisha, the famous student of Eliyahu HaNavi.

In the book of Melachim (Kings) we find the description of how Elisha was hosted by an elderly couple, and how he blessed them to have a child. The child was born and then as a young boy, died suddenly. The woman went quickly to Elisha, and as she approached the prophet, Elisha sensed the urgency in her gait but declared, "*Hashem has withheld from me, He has not told me*," what her concern was. In other words, Elisha was accustomed to Hashem making him aware of what people's needs were, but in this case, it was withheld from him. Elisha knew for certain that Hashem knew her motive in coming; and realized that Hashem had not shared that with him.

In trying to understand the story, we are struck by how odd it is that at one of Elisha's greatest moments, he was seemingly so unconnected, and unable to know what troubled the woman. It is at this time in his "career" as a prophet that he was about to do *Techiyas Hameisim*, resurrecting the dead child, an act that is considered to be a "Key" held by Hashem, Himself. Every estimation of this time would indicate that Elisha was totally connected. So, it seems surprising that at this moment, he would be so unconnected as to declare, "*Hashem has withheld from me, He has not told me*."

I suggest that the dynamic that we see here is like that of partners in a business venture who trust each other implicitly. If one of the partners oversees sales, for example, and the other partner oversees the real estate bills such as taxes, electric, and water, then it is probable that if you asked the partner in charge of sales about the water bill, he would not know the answer. Remarkably though, this would not bother him, because he knows that that bill is in good hands. In fact, sometimes one partner will say “no” to a suggestion based on his knowledge base of his division of the partnership and his awareness of its ramifications, and the other partner will be okay with that and trust him.

The fact that Elisha is so candid and aware that he does not know why the woman has come does not indicate distance between him and Hashem. On the contrary, Elisha is at one of the highest moments of closeness with Hashem. He is aware that he does not know, and that Hashem does. He is intensely aware that it is up to Hashem to decide if He chooses to share the information with him. It is from this place that Elisha will be able to proceed to perform the miracle of *Techiyas Hameisim*, because he has ascended to a wonderful level of partnership with Hashem.

As human beings we strive to understand all kinds of things, including the rationale behind the Mitzvos that we do. But the concept of “*Chok*” is powerful. It is the concept that I do not need to know. The confidence that the reasons for some Mitzvos are known only to Hashem, and the explanation for certain life events is known only to Hashem, is something we are good with. We view Hashem as our loving partner. Since He is aware, we are good, because we know things are in good hands.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos!

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Rabbi Rhine is on summer vacation for a few weeks. He has given me permission to use some of his archived Devrei Torah during his absence.

From my archives.

Chukas – Forever Faith

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

We read this week of the fateful incident known as Mei Merivah – the Waters of Strife -- when Moshe hits the Well of Miriam to provide water for the nation. Throughout the forty years in the desert, the Well of Miriam had provided endless water. When Miriam passed away, the well stopped. The nation came to Moshe and Aharon crying out in thirst and demanding water. Hashem instructed Moshe to speak to the rock and tell it to give forth water. When Moshe and Aharon err, hitting the rock instead, G-d takes them to task saying that they did not believe in G-d to sanctify Him and therefore they will not lead the nation into the land of Israel.

At face value, Hashem’s challenge to Moshe and Aharon is difficult to understand. Where did they display a lack of faith in G-d by mistakenly hitting the rock instead of speaking to it? The Yalkut Shimoni (Remez 764) brings a puzzling Medrash regarding this lack of faith. The Medrash says that Hashem was telling them that they should have learned to have faith from the story of Hagar. When Hagar was sent away from Avrohom’s house with her young son Yishmael, she ran out of water and feared for his life. Hashem then miraculously provided her with a well in the desert. If Hashem provided a well for an individual in the merit of his father Avrohom, then how much more so would Hashem provide a well

for the Jewish people who have the merits of all of the forefathers, the merit of their own acceptance of Torah and the merit of their mitzvos!

This Medrash seems to indicate that the lack of faith was a lack of trust in Hashem's kindness. They were concerned that Hashem would no longer provide water for the nation. This statement in and of itself is an important lesson for us. As human beings, we can always fall prey to being affected by the reality we see with our eyes, no matter what we know in our hearts. Moshe and Aharon have now been living with G-d's miraculous protection and love for His people for forty years, beginning with the plagues in Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea. G-d now tells them directly that He is going to continue to provide water. Yet, somewhere within them there was a concern that Hashem's kindness had run out.

Yet, this Medrash is still puzzling. How does this explain why they hit the rock instead of speaking to it? If they were concerned that the miracle of the well would not continue, hitting the rock would not work either.

Perhaps this Medrash is teaching us the importance of equilibrium. As they came to provide water for the nation, they harbored within their psyches a slight concern for the nation's survival. This concern left them unsettled and inhibited their ability to properly handle the pressures of the moment and determine the proper course of action. It was because of this lack of equilibrium that they erred in judgement and hit the rock.

Faith and trust in G-d's kindness is a valuable tool in life. Beyond the obvious benefit of faith in enabling one to have the strength to do what one knows is right, faith enables one to maintain calm and stay focused knowing that Hashem will provide. This enables one to better judge and handle their challenges.

This Medrash also provides us with an insight into how we can develop this faith in G-d's kindness. Even though Moshe and Aharon had lived through forty years of miraculous sustenance, they are being told that they should have studied the story of Hagar. Every story of G-d's Providence carries its own message and can add a new depth to our appreciation of the depth of G-d's love and kindness.

No matter how much we have personally experienced, or how deeply we have developed our faith and trust in G-d's kindness, we can gain from remembering and studying the stories in the Torah, and the many stories that abound throughout history. The more different examples we hear, the deeper and more complete will be our understanding of G-d's endless love and kindness. The more complete our understanding, the greater will be our ability to maintain our equilibrium and to think clearly even in difficult situations.

[Ed. note: Rabbi David Fohrman makes a similar point but notes that Moshe and Aharon should have learned from the pure faith of their sister Miriam.]

* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and associated with the Savannah Kollel.

Heifer-Therapy

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia * (5782)

No matter how well-prepared we are, mentally and emotionally, for the inevitable loss of a close relative or a dear friend, when death strikes, we experience shock, grief, disbelief, and anger. We don't understand how can the world move on, functioning efficiently as if nothing happened, as if our lives have not been changed irreversibly. Death tears pages and pieces from our mental photo album, and each memory of a wonderful moment with a loved one floods us with pain as we realize that we will never have such a moment again. Some people are afraid to love, lest they suffer the loss of loved ones, and some reject being loved, not wanting to hurt others when they are gone. Most dangerously, long-lasting grief

leads to depression and indifference, causing a person to either withdraw from the world or to act carelessly and even violently towards others, as he feels that there is no meaning to one's life and actions.

In biblical times, this problem was addressed by the strange ritual of the red heifer, which was meant to bring back the mourner from depression to hope and from indifference to excitement about new possibilities. The Torah, of course, does not use these terms, but rather speaks of a transition from impurity to purity. Rabbis today attend to mourners, visit and comfort them, and impart words of wisdom to soothe their pain. They try to answer their questions, and reestablish a channel of communication between them and God. In the past, the priest was the person who led the mourner back into normal, communal life, and he lent this emotional and moral support through a deeply symbolic ritual.

The priest takes a young, wholesome red heifer which has never carried a burden. He slaughters it and burns it to ashes, together with cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool. When purifying the impure person, the priest puts some ash in a vessel, pours on it fresh water, and sprinkles the water on the person on the third and seventh day of the purification cycle. At the end of the process that person is declared pure, while the priest is rendered impure for one day.

The ritual of the red heifer was meant to help the mourner cope with the loss, by first vindicating his pain and grief, and then leading him on a path of acceptance and recovery, culminating in a resolution to take on life with renewed positive energy. The priest would not treat patients as numbers nor groups, but would rather take the time to talk to each candidate for purification and assist him with this biblical therapy.

An abstract concept represented by a physical object is brought closer to our senses and is made easier to internalize and retain. For that reason, the elements of the red heifer ritual are deeply symbolic:

"...a red heifer, without blemish, on which no yoke has been laid"

The Hebrew word for heifer, פרה, represents vitality, strength, and fertility. The red color represents blood, the liquid of life, as well as beauty, strong emotions and desire. The heifer is young, healthy and wholesome, and it has never carried a yoke. All these elements conjure a picture of a person who died at his prime, without a chance to fulfill his dreams and realize his potential. The priest vindicates the feeling of the mourner that a great injustice has been done, by slaughtering the heifer and burning it to ashes, as a reenactment of the tragedy that befell the one whom the mourner is grieving for.

"...take cedar wood, hyssop and crimson dyed wool, and throw them into the fire consuming the heifer"

The mighty cedar and the lowly hyssop represent the two extremes of society and the notion that death is the great equalizer. Dyed wool symbolizes our efforts to convey importance by wrapping ourselves with precious garments.

*"...take from the **dust**... and place it in a vessel, and shall then pour on it live water"*

The dust is placed in a bowl and water is poured on it. This symbolizes the need to allow water, the power of life, to overcome the feeling of despair and hopelessness, and to restart a cycle of growth and development. The physical act of sprinkling water on the person serves as a refreshing wakeup call: don't let the sorrow pull you down! For the sake of your loved ones, cling on to life, climb back from the abyss and march on, honoring the memory of the departed by bringing goodness to the world. This transformation is gradual and subtle, and it is insinuated by a miniscule change in the name of the therapeutic tonic from עפר to אפר.

Ashes to Ashes or to Dust?

In the beginning of the ritual the Torah refers to ashes, but when the purifying tonic is prepared, it speaks of dust. The message to the newly purified person is that the long process of healing and recovery starts with one small step, as small as the difference in Hebrew between Aleph and Ayin. This minute difference is life-changing, because while nothing can

grow in ashes, dust, with the aid of live water, can sprout new life. The phrase which the Torah and the priest would want the mourner to remember is not “ashes to ashes” which speaks of the finality of the physical world, but “from dust you are and to dust you shall return”. There is a cycle, people are born and people die, and while there is nothing we can do to stop death, there is a lot we can do to enhance the quality of life, enjoy it and bring joy to others.

At the end of this process, the mourner is pure and ready to go back to life, while the priest is rendered impure for one day as a result of his encounter with death's aftermath, an encounter which depleted his reserves of spiritual energy. There is great comfort in knowing that the Torah cared about those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and that it has provided them with a staff to lean on. I find solace in the realization that the green pastures, the still waters and the overflowing cup are ours to draw strength from in this world.

We read the description of the red heifer's ritual – Parashat Parah, before the month of Nissan, with which arrive Passover and the story of the Exodus, to remind us that we want to be redeemed, that the world is imperfect and we can make it better. However, whereas the Exodus was brought about miraculously, this time it is up to us. We should cure ourselves from our spiritual impurity of despair and apathy, and start our journey, our pilgrimage to redemption, by embarking on a path of positive actions, loving ourselves and extending love to others.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan)Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Chukat: I Don't Understand It by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

Like everyone living on Earth, I don't understand it. Take anti-Semitism. How is it possible that we can do all the right things to help humanity, follow the law, understand all viewpoints, create the only democracy in the Middle East with equal rights for Jews and Arabs alike, and yet masses of people still chant for and wish for death upon the Jews.

The public media spaces keep giving platforms to anti-Semites who equate Israel with the Iran regime and Hamas terrorism. They hammer home a narrative of hate and lies from Israel to Glastonbury.

Apparently even Sigmund Freud admitted defeat when trying to understand the world's oldest hatred. It's just there. It's strong, it mutates, and it requires constant vigilance to defeat it in every generation.

Our parsha, Chukat, details the procedure of the Red Heifer, the purification process by which people become pure to ascend to the Temple. Part of the Red Heifer's brand is its mysterious nature. Why a Red Heifer? If it's such a symbol of purity, why does the person preparing it become impure? The Talmud describes the Red Heifer as a "*Chok*" -- a commandment that we can never understand but still have to do.

In the same vein, our job is to defeat Jew-hatred even if we don't understand how it operates. It's a *Chok* aspect of our world, but something we must take on if we ever wish to live in a world, a pure world of peace and happiness that we envision. May it happen speedily in our days.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah

Chukat: The Book of God's Wars

The Torah reading concludes with an obscure reference to the *Book of God's Wars*, describing the Arnon canyon near the border between the Land of Israel and Moab. The verses are cryptic, and the Talmud)Berachot 54a-b(fills in the details with the following story:

Just before the Israelites were to enter the Land of Israel, the Amorites)one of the Canaanite nations(laid a trap for them. They chipped away at the rock, creating hiding places along a narrow pass in the Arnon canyon. There the Amorite soldiers hid, waiting for the Israelites to pass through, when they could attack them with great advantage.

What the Amorites didn't know was that the Holy Ark would smooth the way for the Jewish people in their travels through the desert. When the Ark arrived at the Arnon Pass, the mountains on each side crushed together, killing the Amorite soldiers. The Israelites traveled through the pass, blissfully unaware of their deliverance. But at the end of the Jewish camp were two lepers, named Et and Vehav. The last ones to cross through, it was they who noticed the riverbed turned crimson from the crushed enemy soldiers. They realized that a miracle had taken place, and reported it to the rest of the Israelites. The entire nation sang a song of thanks, namely, the poetic verses that the Torah quotes from the *Book of God's Wars*.

Challenges to the Torah

The Talmud clearly understands that this was a historical event, and even prescribes a blessing to be recited upon seeing the Arnon Pass. Rav Kook, however, interpreted the story in an allegorical fashion. What are *God's Wars*? These are the ideological battles of the Torah against paganism and other nefarious views. Sometimes the battle is out in the open, a clear conflict between opposing cultures and lifestyles. And sometimes the danger lurks in crevices, waiting for the opportune moment to emerge and attack the foundations of the Torah.

Often it is precisely those who are on the fringes, like the lepers at the edge of the camp, who are most aware of the philosophical and ideological battles that the Torah wages. These two lepers represent two types of conflict between the Torah and foreign cultures. And the Holy Ark, containing the two stone tablets from Sinai, is a metaphor for the Torah itself.

The names of the two lepers were Et and Vahav. What do these peculiar names mean?

The word Et in Hebrew is an auxiliary word, with no meaning of its own. However, it contains the first and last letters of the word emet, 'truth.' Et represents those challenges that stem from new ideas in science and knowledge. Et is related to absolute truth; but without the middle letter, it is only auxiliary to the truth, lacking its substance.

The word Vahav comes from the work ahava, meaning 'love')its Hebrew letters have the same numerical value(. The mixing up of the letters indicates that this an uncontrolled form of love and passion. Vahav represents the struggle between the Torah and wild, unbridled living, the contest between instant gratification and eternal values.

When these two adversaries — new scientific viewpoints)Et(and unrestrained hedonism)Vahav(— come together, we find ourselves trapped with no escape, like the Israelites in the Arnon Pass. Only the light of the Torah)as represented by the Ark(can illuminate the way, crushing the mountains together and defeating the hidden foes. These enemies may be

unnoticed by those immersed in the inner sanctum of Torah. But those at the edge, whose connection to Torah and the Jewish people is tenuous and superficial, are acutely aware of these struggles, and more likely to witness the victory of the Torah.

The crushing of the hidden adversaries by the Ark, as the Israelites entered into the Land of Israel in the time of Moses, is a sign for the future victory of the Torah over its ideological and cultural adversaries in the time of the return to Zion in our days.

)*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 266-267; adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. II, p. 246.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/CHUKAT60.htm>

Chukat: Anger Management (5775, 5782)

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

There are some, say the Talmud, who acquire their world in an hour and others who lose it in an hour. No example of the latter is more arresting and bewildering than the famous episode in this week's parsha. The people have asked for water. God tells Moses to take a staff and speak to the rock and water will appear. This then follows:

He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, '*Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?*' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "*Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.*" Num. 20:10-12

"*Is this the Torah and this its reward?*" we are tempted to say. What was Moses' sin that it merited such punishment? In previous years I have expressed my view that Moses did not sin, nor was he punished. It was simply that each generation needs its own leaders. Moses was the right, indeed the only, leader capable of taking the Israelites out of Egypt. They needed another kind of leader, and a different style of leadership, to take the next generation into the Promised Land.

Within the framework of this year's series, though, as we discuss the ethics of the Bible, it seems more appropriate to look at a different explanation, the one given by Maimonides in *Shemoneh Perakim*, the "Eight Chapters" that form the preface to his commentary to the Mishnah, Tractate Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers.

In the course of these chapters Maimonides sets out a surprisingly contemporary account of Judaism as a training in emotional intelligence.]1[Healthy emotions are essential to a good and happy life, but temperament is not something we choose. Some people just happen to be more patient or calm or generous-spirited or optimistic than others. Emotions were at one stage called the "*passions*," a word that comes from the same root as "*passive*," implying that they are feelings that happen to us rather than reactions we choose. Despite this, Maimonides believed that with sufficient training it is possible for us to overcome our destructive emotions and reconfigure our affective life.

In general, Maimonides, like Aristotle, believed that emotional intelligence exists in striking a balance between excess and deficiency, too much and too little. Too much fear makes me a coward; too little makes me rash and foolhardy, taking unnecessary risks. The middle way is courage. There are, however, two exceptions, says Maimonides: pride and anger. Even a little pride)some Sages suggested "an eighth of an eighth"(is too much. Likewise even a little anger is wrong.

That, says Maimonides, is why Moses was punished: because he lost his temper with the people when he said, "*Listen, you rebels.*" To be sure, there were other occasions on which he lost his temper – or at least appeared to lose it. His reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf, which included smashing the Two Tablets, was hardly eirenic or relaxed. But that

case was different. The Israelites had committed a sin. God Himself was threatening to destroy the people. Moses had to act decisively and with sufficient force to restore order to a people wildly out of control.

Here, though, the people had not sinned. They were thirsty. They needed water. God was not angry with them. Moses' intemperate reaction was therefore wrong, says Maimonides. To be sure, anger is something to which we are all prone. But Moses was a leader, and a leader must be a role model. That is why Moses was punished so heavily for a failure that might have been more lightly punished in someone less exalted.

In addition, says Maimonides, by losing his temper Moses failed to respect the people and might have demoralised them. Knowing that Moses was God's emissary, the people might have concluded that if Moses was angry with them, so too was

God. Yet they had done no more than ask for water. Giving the people the impression that God was angry with them was a failure to sanctify God's Name. Thus one moment's anger was sufficient to deprive Moses of the reward surely most precious to him, of seeing the culmination of his work by leading the people across the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

The Sages were outspoken in their critique of anger. They would have thoroughly approved of the modern concept of anger management. They did not like anger at all, and reserved some of their sharpest language to describe it.

"The life of those who can't control their anger is not a life," they said.)Pesachim 113b(

Reish Lakish said, *"When a person becomes angry, if he is a sage his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him."*)Pesachim 66b(

Maimonides said that when someone becomes angry it is as if he has become an idolater.)Hilchot Deot 2:3(

What is dangerous about anger is that it causes us to lose control. It activates the most primitive part of the human brain that bypasses the neural circuitry we use when we reflect and choose on rational grounds. While in the grip of a hot temper, we lose the ability to step back and judge the possible consequences of our actions. The result is that in a moment of irascibility we can do or say things we may regret for the rest of our lives.

For that reason, rules Maimonides, there is no "middle way" when it comes to anger)Hilchot Deot 2:3(. Instead we must avoid it under any circumstance. We must go to the opposite extreme. Even when anger is justified, we must avoid it. There may be times when it is necessary to look as if we are angry. That is what Moses did when he saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, and broke the Tablets of stone. Yet **even when we outwardly display anger, says Maimonides, inwardly we should be calm.**]emphasis added[

The Orchot Tzaddikim)a 15th century commentator(notes that anger destroys personal relationships.]2[Short-tempered people scare others, who therefore avoid coming close to them. Anger drives out the positive emotions – forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and sensitivity. The result is that irascible people end up lonely, shunned, and disappointed. Bad tempered people achieve nothing but their bad temper)Kiddushin 40b(. They lose all else.

The classic role model of patience in the face of provocation was Hillel. The Talmud says that two people once made a wager with each other, saying, *"He who makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz."* One said, *"I will go and provoke him."* It was Erev Shabbat and Hillel was washing his hair. The man stood by the door of his house and called, *"Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?"* Hillel robed himself and came out, saying, *"My son, what do you seek?"*

"I have a question to ask," he said.

"Ask, my son," replied Hillel.

He said, "Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?"

"My son, you ask a good question," said Hillel. "The reason is that they have no skilled midwives."

The man left, paused, then returned, crying out, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?"

Again, Hillel abandoned his bathing, robed, and came out, saying, "My son, what do you seek?"

"I have another question."

"Ask, my son."

"Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans bleared?"

Hillel replied, "My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in sandy places."

He left, waited, then came back a third time, calling, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?"

Again, Hillel dressed and came out, saying, "My son, what do you seek?"

"I have another question."

"Ask, my son."

"Why are the feet of Africans wide?"

"My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in watery marshes."

"I have many questions to ask," said the man, "but I am worried that you might become angry."

Hillel then sat and said, "Ask all the questions you have to ask."

"Are you the Hillel who is called the nasi]leader, prince[of Israel?"

"Yes," said Hillel.

"In that case, said the man, "may there not be many like you in Israel."

"Why so, my son?" he asked.

"Because I have just lost four hundred zuz because of you!"

"Be careful of your moods," said Hillel. "You may lose four hundred zuz, and yet another four hundred zuz through Hillel, yet Hillel will not lose his temper." Shabbat 30b-31a.

It was this quality of patience under provocation that was one of the factors, according to the Talmud)Eruvin 13b(, that led the Sages to rule almost entirely according to the School of Hillel rather than of Shammai.

The best way of defeating anger is to pause, stop, reflect, refrain, count to ten, and breathe deeply. If necessary, leave the room, go for a walk, meditate, or vent your toxic feelings alone. It is said that about one of the Rebbes of Lubavitch that whenever he felt angry, he would take down the Shulchan Aruch to see whether anger was permitted under the circumstances. By the time he had finished studying, his anger had disappeared.

The moral life is one in which we grapple with anger but never let it win. The verdict of Judaism is simple: either we defeat anger or anger will defeat us.

FOOTNOTES:

]1[The term was introduced by Peter Salovey and John Mayer. See Peter Salovey, Marc A. Brackett, and John D. Mayer, *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovey Model* (Port Chester, NY: Dude Pub., 2004), subsequently popularised by Daniel Goleman in, for instance, his book *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

]2[Orchot Tzaddikim, Shaar Kaas, *The Gate of Anger*.

Around the Shabbat Table:

]1[Why do you think anger is permitted as an outward display but not as an internal emotion?

]2[What about when God Himself became angry with the people?

]3[What methods do you find helpful when you become angry?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/anger-management/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

What Is the “Book of the Wars of G-d”?

By Mordechai Rubin *

Toward the end of Parshat Chukat, the Torah quotes a mysterious source. In Numbers, chapter 21, the narrative describes the Israelites' travels: after leaving the Zered valley, they camp “*on the other side of the Arnon*” – a river marking the border between Moab and the Amorites.¹ The text then states:

Concerning this, it is told in the Books of the Wars of the L-rd, “*from Vahev in Sufah, and the valleys of Arnon. And the spilling of the streams that turned to settle at Ar and leaned toward the border of Moab.*”²

Leaving aside the obscure nature of these verses, the most obvious question that jumps off the pages is: What is the *Book of the Wars of the L-rd*? Is it perhaps an ancient book that we’ve since lost? Below, we will examine the approaches of several commentators.

1. Not An Actual Book

Rashi and his grandson, Rashbam, explain that the word we typically translate as “*book*,” ספר, here means “*story*” or “*account*.” In his view, the verse isn’t citing an actual lost volume, but saying that when people retell the stories of G-d’s miraculous battles on Israel’s behalf, this event at Arnon will be included among them, just like the Splitting of the Sea.

2. A Lost Historical Book of Wars

Conversely, Ibn Ezra writes that there was indeed an actual book by this title, now long lost, in which “*the wars of the L-rd*” were written down for posterity. He even speculates that its origins might date back to the time of Abraham. He notes that many writings from biblical times have been lost (citing examples like Divrei Natan and others mentioned in Tanakh³), and *The Book of the Wars of G-d* was likely one of those lost sources.⁴

Nachmanides further elaborates on how such a book came to be. He explains that in each generation, there were wise men or bards – whom Nachmanides calls “*moshlím*” poets(– who recorded the great battles and victories of their times, often in poetic form. The Torah, he says, is quoting a snippet from one such book. 5

3. A Record of Borders and Forbidden Lands

Chizkuni writes that the Israelites kept a book in which they recorded the borders of lands they passed. This log included entries such as this cryptic line, which is essentially a list of locations. According to this, the book served as a geographic and halachic record of their journey, particularly noting where they were forbidden to wage war, referencing the warnings against waging war against Edom, Moab, and Ammon found in Deuteronomy Chapter 2.6

4. Exodus or Deuteronomy

The Targum Yerushalmi renders the *Book of the Wars of the L-rd* as “*the Book of G d’s Torah.*”7

Which book?

The Midrash Aggadah singles out the Book of Exodus, which recounts G d’s war against Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea. It connects this to the verse in Exodus, “*Until Your people cross, O L-rd...*”8, and explains that this refers both to the crossing of the Arnon Valley and later the crossing of the Jordan. According to this view, the places mentioned in the verses above are all reflections of allusions found in the Song at the Sea, pointing to past and future miracles.9

Rokeach writes that the Book of the Wars of G d is a reference to the Book of Deuteronomy, which records how G d gave mighty nations into the hands of the weak — for example, the Emim, who were defeated by the Moabites; the Refa’im, defeated by the Ammonites; and the battles against Sichon and Og. All of these victories were miraculous and thus worthy of being called “*wars of the L-rd.*”10

5. A Book Open Before G d

Ohr Hachaim interprets the *Book of the Wars of the L-rd* as the heavenly record before G d. The verse is understood as follows:

In the book that is before G d, which concerns the wars and territorial inheritances of the nations. That divine book determines which nation will receive which land. And in that book, it is stated that in the future — at the end)besofah(— this very border will be given to Israel.”11

6. What Will Be Said in the Book

Onkelos translates the verse to mean: “*Therefore it will be said in the book – [about] the wars of Hashem...*” In his reading, the *Book of the Wars of G d* is not the name of the book, but the subject of what will be said in the book. It will contain accounts of G d’s wars — but the title of the book itself is not given.12

This is similar to the explanation of some later scholars who explain that the book was not yet written in the days of Moses. Rather, the Torah is stating that these events will be recorded in the future by the sages and chroniclers who would later write a history of G d’s wars.13

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers, 21:10–15.

2. Numbers, 21:14-15.

3. 2 Chronicles 9:29
4. Ibn Ezra, Numbers, 21:14.
5. Nachmanides, Numbers, 21:14.
6. Chizkuni, Numbers, 21:14.
7. Targum Yerushalmi, Numbers, 21:14.
8. Exodus 15:16.
9. Midrash Aggadah, Numbers, 21:14.
10. Rokeach, Numbers, 21:14.
11. Ohr Hachaim, Numbers, 21:14.
12. Onkelos, Numbers, 21:14.
13. See Oznyim Latorah, Numbers, 21:14.

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https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6940810/jewish/What-Is-the-Book-of-the-Wars-of-G-d.htm

Chukat: True Forgiveness by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky

As they progressed toward the Promised Land, some of the people accused Moses of being an irresponsible leader. G-d punished these people by sending venomous snakes in their midst. They then repented, asking Moses' forgiveness. Moses not only forgave the people, but prayed to G-d to heal them.

The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against G-d and against you. Pray to G-d that He remove the snakes from us." Moses prayed on behalf of the people.)Num. 21:7(

Moses' wholehearted forgiveness of the people who slandered him is intended to serve as an example for us. When we forgive someone only "officially," we indeed cause him to be spared any Divine punishment for his acts against us. But when, like Moses, we forgive him wholeheartedly, cleansing ourselves of any residual grudge against him, we are moved to pray for his overall well-being and spiritual betterment as well.

Furthermore, in the merit of our sincere forgiveness, G-d acts generously toward us, forgiving our transgressions and granting us material and spiritual bounty.

– From *Daily Wisdom* #3

* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parshat Beha'alotcha from our *Daily Wisdom* #3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

May G-d grant continued wisdom, strength and peace in the Holy Land.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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5785 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Descartes' Error

In his 2011 bestseller, *The Social Animal*, New York Times columnist David Brooks writes: We are living in the middle of the revolution in consciousness. Over the past few years, geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and others have made great strides in understanding the building blocks of human flourishing. And a core finding of their work is that we are not primarily products of our conscious thinking. We are primarily the products of thinking that happens below the level of awareness.[1]

Too much takes place in the mind for us to be fully aware of it. Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia estimates that the human mind can absorb 11 million pieces of information at any given moment. We can be conscious of only a tiny fraction of this. Most of what is going on mentally lies below the threshold of awareness.

One result of the new neuroscience is that we are becoming aware of the hugely significant part played by emotion in decision-making. The French Enlightenment emphasised the role of reason and regarded emotion as a distraction and distortion. We now know scientifically how wrong this is.

Antonio Damasio, in his *Descartes' Error*, tells the story of a man who, as the result of a tumour, suffered damage to the frontal lobes of his brain. He had been known to have a high IQ, was well-informed, and had an excellent memory. But after surgery to remove the tumour, his life went into free-fall. He was unable to organise his time. He made bad investments that cost him his savings. He divorced his wife, married a second time, and rapidly divorced again. He could still reason perfectly but had lost the ability to feel emotion. As a result, he was unable to make sensible choices.

Another man with a similar injury found it impossible to make decisions at all. At the end of one session, Damasio suggested two possible dates for their next meeting. The man then took out a notebook, began listing the

pros and cons of each, talked about possible weather conditions, potential conflicts with other engagements and so on, for half an hour, until Damasio finally interrupted him, and made the decision for him. The man immediately said, "That's fine," and went away.

It is less reason than emotion that lies behind our choices, and it takes emotional intelligence to make good choices. The problem is that much of our emotional life lies beneath the surface of the conscious mind.

That, as we can now see, is the logic of the *chukim*, the "statutes" of Judaism, the laws that seem to make no sense in terms of rationality. These are laws like the prohibition of sowing mixed seeds together (*kelayim*); of wearing cloth of mixed wool and linen (*shaatnez*); and of eating milk and meat together. The law of the Red Heifer with which our parsha begins, is described as the *chok par excellence*. As it is written: "This is the statute of the Torah." Num. 19:2

There have been many interpretations of the *chukim* throughout the ages. But in the light of recent neuroscience, we can suggest that they are laws designed to bypass the prefrontal cortex, the rational brain, and create instinctive patterns of behaviour to counteract some of the darker emotional drives at work in the human mind.

We know for example – Jared Diamond has chronicled this in his book *Collapse* – that wherever humans have settled throughout history they have left behind them a trail of environmental disaster, wiping out whole species of animals and birds, destroying forests, damaging the soil by over-farming and so on.

The prohibitions against sowing mixed seeds, mixing meat and milk, combining wool and linen, and so on, create an instinctual respect for the integrity of nature. They establish boundaries. They set limits. They inculcate the feeling that we may not treat our animal and plant environment however we wish. Some things are forbidden – like the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The whole Eden story, set at the dawn of human history, is a parable whose message we can understand today better than any previous generation: Without a sense of limits, we will

destroy our ecology and discover that we have lost paradise.

As for the ritual of the Red Heifer, this is directed at the most destructive pre-rational instinct of all: what Sigmund Freud called *thanatos*, the death instinct. He described it as something "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides".[2] In his essay *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, he wrote that "a portion of the [death] instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness", which he saw as "the greatest impediment to civilisation."

The Red Heifer ritual is a powerful statement that the holy is to be found in life, not death. Anyone who had been in contact with a dead body needed purification before entering the sanctuary or Temple. Priests had to obey stricter rules, and the High Priest even more so.

This made biblical Judaism highly distinctive. It contains no cult of worship of dead ancestors, or seeking to make contact with their spirits. It was probably to avoid the tomb of Moses becoming a holy site that the Torah says, "to this day no one knows where his grave is" (Deut. 34:6). God and the holy are to be found in life. Death defiles.

The point is – and that is what recent neuroscience has made eminently clear – this cannot be achieved by reason alone. Freud was right to suggest that the death instinct is powerful, irrational, and largely unconscious, yet under certain conditions it can be utterly devastating in what it leads people to do.

The Hebrew term *chok* comes from the verb meaning, "to engrave". Just as a statute is carved into stone, so a behavioural habit is carved in depth into our unconscious mind and alters our instinctual responses. The result is a personality trained to see death and holiness as

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two utterly opposed states – just as meat (death) and milk (life) are.

Chukim are Judaism's way of training us in emotional intelligence, above all a conditioning in associating holiness with life, and defilement with death. It is fascinating to see how this has been vindicated by modern neuroscience.

Rationality, vitally important in its own right, is only half the story of why we are as we are. We will need to shape and control the other half if we are successfully to conquer the instinct to aggression, violence, and death that lurks not far beneath the surface of the conscious mind.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

From Jerusalem to Ashes to Life Eternal

"This is the statute of the law which God commanded, saying, 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer.'" (Numbers 19:1–2)

One of the most profound mysteries of the Bible is the rite of the red heifer, called a *chok* (statute) because it belongs to the group of divine decrees which human logic cannot penetrate.

Detailed in the first twenty-two verses of our Torah reading, the ceremony certainly sounds strange to the modern ear: a heifer, which is completely red, without blemish, and upon which no yoke has been brought, shall be slaughtered outside of the encampment of Israel; cedar wood, hyssop, and a scarlet thread shall be cast into the burning pyre of ashes, and a "personage of purity" (*ish tahor*) shall gather the ashes in a sacred place, mix them with spring water (*mayim chayim*, waters of life) and use the mixture to purify those who have been contaminated by contact with a corpse. What can we possibly make of such a primitive sounding ritual?

We must be mindful of the fact that all other impurities other than a death impurity find their purification by the defiled individual's immersing himself or herself in a mikveh, a gathering of freshly running spring water or specially collected life-giving rainwater; in effect, in all these instances, the defiled individual actually purifies him- or herself! Only in this rite of the red heifer does the kohen, representing God Himself, effectuate the purification. It is as though the Bible is teaching us that we can save ourselves from many of our weaknesses, we can rise above many of our temptations, but only God can ultimately redeem us from death.

And from this perspective, the symbolism of the red heifer ritual begins to make sense. A heifer is the consummate symbol of life, the

cow's mother-milk serving as the universal expression of maternal nurturing of her young; red is likewise the color of blood, and blood is the life-force, the very nefesh of the living organism. However, although human beings come in various shapes, sizes, personalities, and powers – they can be as tall and proud as the cedar tree and as mean and humble as the hyssop plant – the angel of death ultimately conquers them all, because the scarlet thread of human sin condemns each of us to the common destiny of mortality.

Following the sacrifice, the personage of purity gathers the ashes of the remains, mixes them with the life-giving waters of the divine and, born-again, purified life emerges even from the surrealistic specter of death itself. Inherent in this symbolism is that historic Israel – mother nurturer of the continuity of humanity by means of the Abrahamic "compassionate rightness and moral justice" which Israel taught and must continue to teach – is destined to be slaughtered, but will always rise again to life and to the fulfillment of her mission and destiny.

This symbolism of the red heifer assumed new significance for me after a trip to Frankfurt and Berlin I took just a few years ago. Ohr Torah Stone's Joseph Straus Rabbinical Seminary has sent close to three hundred rabbis and their families to communities throughout the world, from Caesarea to Curacao to Guatemala City to Johannesburg to Lincoln Center – with eight of our graduates presently in Germany. While in Berlin, I made it my concern to visit their newly completed Holocaust Memorial at the very center of the city, not far from the last bunker from which the "mad Führer" (may his name be blotted out) committed suicide.

The open-air memorial consists of 2,711 stones, monuments of various shapes and sizes. Walking amongst the narrow, massive slabs of stone, one becomes lost within a giant cemetery, feeling helplessly and hopelessly minute and insignificant within a maze of monuments whose eerie, death-imbedded caskets seem to have overtaken world and life; I even felt a panic attack, was almost ready to scream out loud in fear and anxiety, when I saw the sight of blessed steps of exit from this mass and massive tomb. One then descends into a netherworld of hell, where pictures and stories of Holocaust victims evoke their life experiences and all of their future potential that was snuffed out, inexplicably and cruelly torn asunder from the tree of life by monstrous and subhuman hands. How many medical and scientific advances were simply burned to ashes in the death factory called Auschwitz! How many Nobel Prize winners, how many giants of humanity!

I stumbled away from the experience feeling as though I had just awakened from a horrific

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nightmare. The symbolism of the monuments continued to haunt me months after I returned to Efrat; after all, those who lost loved ones in the Holocaust don't even have graveside monuments to weep over. Each empty stone screams out with any name, with every name, with my name, and with my children's names, because a part of each human being was killed in those death camps whose perpetrators attempted to destroy every last vestige of humaneness.

But I also came away from the experience feeling cheated by the memorial. Something was missing, the essence was missing, the victorious ending was missing. Because, you see, the Jewish people won the war which Hitler tried to wage against us. Yes, he succeeded in destroying six million of us, but as he records in *Mein Kampf*, he wasn't waging a war against six million Jews. He was waging a war against the last Jew, against Judaism, against what he called a slave morality of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, of sensitive concern for the weaker vessels, of a God of ultimate power who insists upon human protection of the powerless. And in that war, Hitler failed!

Yes, we won that war. Alas, the brilliantly alive "red heifer," a metaphor for the Jewish people, a people who nurture the world with the milk of morality of the Ten Commandments and the milk of human kindness of "You shall love the stranger" and "You shall love your neighbor like yourself" was, to a large extent, tragically and inexplicably slaughtered beyond the "human encampment" in Auschwitz and Treblinka. But the Almighty God, the "Personage of Purity" Himself, gathered the ashes, Himself mixed them with living waters of rebirth, and Himself transformed those ashes into the fertile soil of the recreated sovereign State of Israel. And the "Personage of Purity" Himself mixed the ashes with the life-giving wellsprings of Torah, our tree of eternal life, and in addition to our national physical being, likewise revived our spiritual being, Torah centers, and Daf Yomi Talmud study groups to an unprecedented and unparalleled degree all over the world. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, who could have predicted the rise of the State of Israel; who could have foreseen hundreds of thousands of Jews studying Daf Yomi every day?

Indeed, it boggles the mind to think that Judaism is reawakening even in the failed Führer's own capital city of Berlin, where three new yeshivot have been dedicated over the past several years. Imagine the historical irony of the fact that the only two growing Jewish communities in the world today are in Israel and in Germany!

And take note: there are 2,711 monument stones in the memorial, and when the artist Peter Eisenman was asked as to the significance of that number, he said there was no significance, it was purely arbitrary. However, if you check Google, you will find that there are 2,711 folio pages in the Babylonian Talmud studied in Daf Yomi! And this is more than coincidence. Adolf Hitler is now mercifully long dead. Curiously enough, one of his personal effects within his self-inflicted suicide bunker was the tractate Pesachim, a Gemara of the Vilna Shas (six orders of the Talmud) which tells of the Pesach festival of Jewish freedom and redemption. The American State Department decided to give this sacred text to Rabbi Herzog, then chief rabbi of Israel, whose wife showed it to me in the early 1970s. Apparently the devil incarnate, who was obsessed with Judaism, had hoped to bury the last Talmud tome in existence. Instead the Talmud tome buried him! Indeed, 2,711 pages of the Talmud have literally walked out of the 2,711 monument stones, and have granted to the Jewish victims the eternal life of Jewish victors, who will yet teach the world the message of universal freedom and redemption which is the vision of the Pesach Seder.

A Biblical and Historical Postscript
We learn from the rite of the red heifer that only God, the Personage of Purity, can redeem from death; and in our post-Holocaust generation, He has certainly done so. There ought to be a final glorious exhibit in the Berlin Holocaust Memorial which features pulsating present-day religious Jewish life in Germany, as well as a magnificent tribute to the reborn State of Israel.

“Thus says the Lord your God ‘...I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves and bring you into the Land of Israel.... And I shall put My spirit in you and you shall live and I shall place you in your land.’” (Ezekiel 37:13-14)

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Why Aharon HaKohen Was Mourned by the Entire House of Israel

The pasuk in Parshas Chukas says, “Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom: Aharon shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the Children of Israel...” (Bamidbar 20:23-24). The Torah describes the ceremony of how Aharon HaKohen died on the first of Av, and how his son Elazar took over after him as the Kohen Gadol. The pasuk then says: “When the entire assembly saw that Aharon had perished, they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Israel.” (Bamidbar 20:29).

Rashi famously points out here that when Aharon died, the pasuk says that he was mourned by “kol Beis Yisrael” – the entire house of Israel. However, when Moshe died, the Torah only mentions that he was mourned by “Beis Yisrael” – the house of Israel, but not by “kol Beis Yisrael.” Rashi explains that Aharon was mourned by both the men and the women because he was a peacemaker who brought shalom between arguing parties and between quarreling husbands and wives.

This is not to say that the women did not mourn the death of Moshe Rabbeinu, but they were particularly saddened by the death of Aharon HaKohen, who was known as an ohev shalom v’rodef shalom, who patched up many troubled marriages. In short, there was a greater outpouring of grief for the loss of Aharon than there was for the loss of Moshe.

Avos D’Rav Nosson (12:3) describes Aharon HaKohen. The Mishna says (both in Avos and in Avos D’Rav Nosson) that Aharon was a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace. Avos D’Rav Nosson says that the pasuk “The teaching of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and with fairness and turned many away from iniquity” (Malachi 2:6) is referring to Aharon. Avos D’Rav Nosson then describes Aharon’s peace-making technique: When Aharon would be walking along the road and meet a wicked person, he would give that person a very friendly greeting. The next day, when that person was tempted to do an aveira, the person would stop in his path and say “Woe is me! How can I do such a thing and ever be able to look at Aharon HaKohen straight in the eyes again? I am too embarrassed to disappoint him like that because he treated me as such a friend!” So the person ceased and desisted from doing any further aveiros.

I saw an observation brought down in the name of Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch (Rosh Yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Europe at the time of its destruction in 1944). As we all know, there are people who, whenever they meet you, they greet you with a big smile and say, “How are you? It is so great to see you. How are things going?” But when the person walks away from you, you feel that the greeting was really just lip service. He didn’t really mean it.

Why didn’t people have that attitude with Aharon HaKohen? Why didn’t people say “He was just putting on an act. He doesn’t really care about me!”? In fact, how was it that Aharon, who was a tzadik, was able to mean it when he greeted all those reshaim with such a warm and friendly disposition?

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The answer is that if we reexamine that pasuk in Malachi which describes Aharon HaKohen, we notice that Aharon was not only a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace. The pasuk also notes that “The Torah of truth was in his mouth and iniquity did not pass his lips.” These two phrases: 1) Toras emes hayesa b’feehu (i.e. – he never uttered a falsehood) and 2) avla lo nimitza b’sfasav (i.e. – when he had to give a person mussar, he apparently gave him mussar, but it was never in an angry or annoyed way). Aharon did not give mussar (chastise) with venom or a put-down or scorn. This is a very difficult needle to thread. On the one hand, Toras emes hayesa b’feehu – when Aharon saw you doing something wrong, he was not going to pull his punches. He spoke words of truth. But yet, avla lo nimitza b’sfasav – he never said a cross word!

So, when he gave someone this warm “Shalom aleichem! How are you? It is so good to see you!” people believed his sincerity. He had the reputation of being impeccably honest. His warm greeting and his Shalom aleichem were not fake emotions. As much as he was known for being an ohev shalom v’rodef shalom, he was equally known for speaking only truth and Toras emes. He never faked it or put on an act.

Therefore, someone who met Aharon and was greeted so warmly by him would not turn around and do an aveira tomorrow – simply because he would be too embarrassed to meet Aharon again. That was a very hard tightrope to walk, but Aharon HaKohen was successful in doing it.

Saraf Sensitive Suppresses Sinful Serpent Associations

The middle of Parshas Chukas contains the story of the serpents. The pasuk says that the people complained that there was no bread or water, and that they were sick and tired of eating just mann. As a punishment, Hashem made nechashim (poisonous snakes) attack and bite them, causing many of Bnei Yisrael to die. Of course, at that point the people repented. Hashem told Moshe to construct a saraf (serpent) and post it on a flagpole. In Hebrew, there is a difference between nachash, saraf, and akrov – all of which refer to snakes. Here the mitzvah was to specifically make a saraf, hang it on a high flagpole so that anyone bitten by the snakes could stare at it and be healed.

However, when describing what Moshe actually does, the Torah says that he made a nachash hanechoshes (copper snake) and placed it on a pole. Notice carefully what transpired: The plague involved nechashim. Hashem told Moshe to construct a saraf but Moshe actually constructed a nachash nechoshes! Moshe apparently did not follow the words of Hashem here! What happened? Why did Hashem specify a saraf? And if

Hashem told Moshe to make a saraf, why did Moshe make a nachash?

The Rishonim (the Riva, the Rosh, etc.) ask this question. Listen to how Rabbeinu Efraim (one of the Baalei haTosfos and a disciple of Rabbeinu Tam) answers this question, and ponder the lesson we may derive from it:

Moshe Rabbeinu thinks to himself, “We are being attacked by nechashim; Hashem told me to make a saraf. Consider for a minute... When Hashem first appeared to me at the burning bush and He was displeased that I first hesitated to accept His mission, He told me to throw down my staff and turned it into a nachash. Again, when I was supposed to circumcise my child and I didn’t, He sent a nachash to swallow me up! Also, now when the people complained, He sent nechashim.” Moshe reasoned that every time he or the people slipped up, Hashem sends nechashim as a warning/punishment. Therefore, Hashem is now telling me to make a saraf, because had he said make a nachash, I would be frightened that He is coming to remind me of my past aveiros. In other words, Moshe felt that Hashem really wanted him to make a nachash, but He used the word saraf as a type of euphemism for the word nachash, inasmuch as the latter word evoked painful memories for Moshe. He knows that I am sensitive to that word and He doesn’t want to make me feel bad.

On the basis of this assumption, Moshe Rabbeinu changed what Hashem told him and made a nachash rather than a saraf. Why? Because Hashem acts with sensitivity. Hashem would even avoid saying a word which might make someone feel badly. The practical lesson of all this is simple: There is a mitzvas asheh (positive Biblical command) of “Hevi domeh lo” – to emulate the ways of Hashem. If the Ribono shel Olam acts with such sensitivity to human beings, how much more so do we need to act that way to each other.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Naama Frankel: The Bronze Serpent

Parshat Chukat transitions us from the second year of our sojourn in the desert to the fortieth year, as we stand on the brink of entering the Promised Land.

Here, we encounter a new generation. The leaders who guided the people out of Egypt are no longer alive. This generation, after years of roaming in the wilderness, is expected to have greater faith, having learned from the sins of its ancestors. As such, we await to see a different spirit among them.

And yet, after the people mourn the death of Miriam and Aharon, they voice a complaint: “They journeyed from Hor HarHar by way of

the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom, and the people became disheartened because of the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moshe. Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread and no water, and we detest this miserable food” (Bemidbar 21:4-5).

Seemingly, the complaint is a legitimate one. There is no water, no bread, and they are forced to take another detour. As Rashi explains, they said “—So close are we to entering the land, and now we are turning back again, just as our forefathers did.” Flashbacks from history remind them of similar situations—real fears that this wilderness ordeal will never end.

We might sympathize with their complaint, but our memories, short as they might be, still recall the recent events described in the portions of Beha’alotcha and Shelach Lecha—only a few chapters before: consuming fire; a burning lust for meat; the episode with the spies, and Korach. The phrase “we detest this miserable food” immediately echoes Bemidbar 11: “Now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, except this manna.” The words “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness?” are reminiscent of God’s reproach when they craved meat: “Because you have wept in the ears of the Lord, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.’”

Reading this, one cannot help but be alarmed by the behavior of the Israelites. Anger wells up, along with the question: Has nothing changed?! Have we not progressed in the deeper sense? Can the people of Israel ever enter the Land of Israel that requires a wholly different perspective?

Unlike previous incidents, this time, God’s response is immediate: “The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died.” (ibid. 21:6). There are no attempts by Moshe to explain or placate, no discussions. It is as if God is saying, “I expect more from you.” It is natural for a generation that emerged from Egyptian slavery to be bitter and despondent, but not you—the generation of the wilderness. You, who have witnessed My care for you in the desert, who have seen the consequences of not having enough faith in the Lord, cannot continue on this path.

And at this point, the people’s progress does become evident. They repent instantaneously: “The people came to Moshe and said: ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’” (ibid. 21:7). The Israelites are in a different place now—they quickly take responsibility for their actions.

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This is significant progress. A nation that both takes responsibility for its deeds, as well as relies on the Lord, is, indeed, a nation prepared to enter the Land of Israel – a land which demands these very qualities in every generation.

Now the question arises: what is the significance of the serpent in this process the people are undergoing?

The last time the Israelites complained about food, the punishment was also related to food – God provided them with meat “until it comes out of your nostrils,” and killed them while “the meat was still between their teeth.” Hence, the fact that the Israelites are punished with serpents in our portion, must be of significance.

According to one of Rashi’s interpretations, there seems to be a connection between the nature of the complaint and the consequent punishment: “Let the serpent come, for all foods taste the same to it (the taste of dust), and let it punish the ingrates for whom one thing changes into a multitude of tastes...” The serpent, condemned to eat dust all its life, demonstrates to the Israelites their ingratitude for the manna with its diverse and miraculous flavors.

Rashi’s second interpretation shifts the focus to the fact that they dare complain at all, rather than the nature of the complaint: “Let the serpent, which was punished for speaking ill, come and punish those who dare speak ill.” The serpent, symbolizing the quintessential vilifier since time immemorial, punishes those who dare speak ill of the Land of Israel, of God, and His messengers.

The serpent bites, and miraculously, it also heals the bite when it is positioned on a banner above the people. Abarbanel tries to understand the significance of the bronze serpent that was put up to save the people from the biting serpents. The serpents did not stop biting the people, but, says the Torah, “whoever looks at it [the bronze serpent] shall live”. How could such an act of looking upwards heal the bite of a serpent? Moreover, if a serpent bites an individual and the latter looks up and sees another serpent above him, surely this would only increase his anxiety?

The well-known Mishnah in the Tractate of Rosh Hashanah suggests that the very act of looking upwards brings home the point that it is not the serpent that kills and heals, but rather – God Himself. In a situation where the people are in doubt about their faith – Will they truly reach the land? Is there someone guiding this journey? – it is the bronze serpent that provides the answers, as it were. How? By forcing the Israelites to look upwards towards their Father in Heaven and understand that

healing and salvation come from Him alone: [As the Midrash on Bemidbar 21, 8 says:] "Does the serpent kill, or does it give life? Rather, when the Israelites looked upward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed..."

I would like to offer another perspective that connects the serpent to the red heifer mentioned at the beginning of our portion. The serpent has two faces: when looked upon on the ground, it brings death, but when one raises one's gaze and looks upwards towards it, it has the power to bring life. We would expect that anyone touching the ashes of the red heifer would become pure since it has in its power to purify one of the greatest of all impurities – contact with death. However, the Torah tells us that those who handle the purification ritual of the impure individual, even if they, too, touch the purifying waters mixed with the ashes of the red heifer, must undergo a brief purification process themselves. This is because anyone who encounters death, or comes face-to-face with the sorrow and the pain of those made impure by death, is inevitably impacted negatively, and, like the impure persons themselves, requires a journey of faith to return to life in its state of purity.

We find ourselves in times when we very frequently touch deep pain: "Released for publication" headlines; shiva visits; funerals. We've had a challenging year. Yet, we have witnessed how marvelous and holy our people are – myriads of saintly individuals were willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation and the land. This encounter with pain weakens and raises doubts and questions. It seems that the Torah portion asks us to lift our gaze upwards, to know that there is someone supervising our journey, even when our spirits are weary from the road, and to remember in the deepest sense "–By your blood – you shall live."

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

Peace in Heaven and on Earth

The death of Aharon Hakohen in Parshas Chukas had a significant impact on Klal Yisroel. Chazal note that the mourning for Aharon was even greater than the response of the Jewish People following the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu. In his role as one who interceded to promote peace between spouses and within the greater community, Aharon was sorely missed by all. Even the day of his death is noted by the Torah in Parshas Masei.

Rosh Chodesh Av is not only the day to mourn the individual Aharon Hakohen; it became a day associated with mourning for future generations. Chazal teach us that the halachic period of mourning preceding Tisha Ba'v begins on Rosh Chodesh Av. Although there

are several customs that are observed during the period of the Three Weeks, actual prohibitions begin on Rosh Chodesh which begins the period known as The Nine Days.

Is it just coincidental that the day that begins the formal observance of commemorating the churban is the yohrtzeit of the first kohen gadol, or is the death of Aharon linked to the subsequent churban?

In Parshas Yisro we are commanded not to use metal when preparing the stones of the mizbeach. Chazal comment that the role of the mizbeach is to bring peace between Hashem and the Jewish People, and it is therefore inappropriate for metal, which is associated with weapons, to be used in the construction of the mizbeach. When there is a distance between Hashem and His people it is analogous to a lack of peace. Korbanos, which reconnect us to Hashem, are a vehicle of shalom. Hashem blessing us with closeness and a peaceful relationship with His people is contingent upon our seeking peace with one another. The same kohen gadol who performs the avodah on Yom Kippur, thereby repairing the rift between Hashem and us, is the same kohen gadol who is instructed to be the lover and pursuer of peace which was the hallmark of the first kohen gadol, Aharon Hakohen.

There are numerous prophecies relating the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash to a breakdown in the realm of bein adam lachaveiro. When there is strife within the Jewish People, Hashem distances Himself from us.

Chazal point to an unwillingness to compromise in monetary matters as a cause of the churban. When peace and harmony are replaced by every individual's demand for his own rights, Hashem declares there is no need for the Beis Hamikdash which is a source of peace between Himself and His nation.

As we are approaching the period of aveilus for the churban, it is appropriate to look to Aharon Hakohen as a role model. The day of his death, which marked the loss of a great force of peace, became the beginning of churban. We must emulate the traits of, "ohev shalom v'rodef shalom" and by doing so bring about the gift of peace from Above. May we soon witness, "haporeis sukkas shalom aleinu v'al kol amo Yisroel, v'al Yerushalayim."

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Sicha of Harav Yaakov Medan

Chok or Mishpat – The Red Heifer and the Service of God

The commandment regarding the red heifer (para aduma) opens as follows: And the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Aharon saying: This is the statute (chukka) of the law that the Lord has commanded, saying... (Bemidbar 19:1-2)

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What is the meaning of the word chukka? Rashi (ad loc.) explains: "This is the statute of the law" – Because satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying: What is this command and what reason is there for it? On this account Scripture writes the term chukka about it, implying: It is an enactment from before Me; you have no right to criticize it.

Chazal explain the uniqueness of the red heifer – namely, that it purifies the impure, but also renders the pure impure. According to them, this phenomenon is so unique and incomprehensible that it turns the mitzva of the red heifer into a chukka. The red heifer symbolizes a mitzva that the intellect cannot grasp, and thus following God blindly, without reservations or criticism.

First, we must ask ourselves: Why did Chazal choose this commandment to symbolize mitzvot that do not lend themselves to rational understanding? Is the difference between white hair that precedes a white spot and a white spot that precedes white hair more intelligible? And what about the number of offerings brought on the various festivals?

However, the difficulty in the words of Chazal is not just that there are other mitzvot that are just as difficult to understand. The very difficulty with the mitzva of the red heifer encounters several landmines. Given that the red heifer purifies the impure, the question indeed arises – how is it that it also defiles the pure? But this question is automatically answered when we examine the Torah section dealing with the sacrificial service on Yom Kippur:

And Aharon shall come into the tent of meeting and shall put off the linen garments, which he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. And he shall bathe his flesh in water in a holy place and put on his other vestments, and come forth, and offer his burnt-offering and the burnt-offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people. (Vayikra 16:23-24)

The High Priest, in the course of his service on Yom Kippur, must immerse himself in a mikveh. This is a clear model for service involving a particular offering that defiles a priest and requires him to undergo a process of purification before he is permitted once again to enter the Holy.

Another assumption in the words of Rashi is that the word chukka relates to a mitzva that cannot be understood by way of the rational mind. According to Chazal, then, apart from Moshe, no one ever understood or will ever understand this mitzva. But if we consider other mitzvot in the context of which the word chukka is mentioned, we find that the word is used also for mitzvot whose reasons are perfectly clear and understandable.

Let us begin with the omer offering and the bikkurim offering. In both of these cases, the Torah uses the word chukka:

And you shall eat neither bread, nor parched corn, nor fresh ears, until this selfsame day, until you have brought the offering of your God; it is a statute (chukka) forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. (Vayikra 23:14)

The reason for these two mitzvot is clear, and even important and central: The first fruits of the

harvest, which are especially dear to a person, must be brought to the Temple and waved before God.

From here we move on to the rest of the holidays, regarding which this unique term, *chukka*, is also mentioned: Regarding Yom Kippur, it is stated in Parashat Acharei Mot (Vayikra 16):

And it shall be a statute (*chukka*) forever to you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and shall do no manner of work, the home-born, or the stranger that sojourns among you. (Vayikra 16:22)

Is it not absolutely clear that we are in great need of Yom Kippur, that atonement and purity be granted to all of Israel? The word *chukka* is used here regarding a mitzva that is totally logical and reasonable.

The word *chukka* is used also in connection with the festivals of Shavuot and Sukkot:

And you shall make proclamation on the very day; there shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall do no manner of servile work; it is a statute (*chukka*) forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (Vayikra 21:31)

And you shall keep it a feast to the Lord seven days in the year; it is a statute (*chukka*) forever in your generations; you shall keep it in the seventh month. (Vayikra 23:41)

The word *chukka* is also found in connection with the mitzvot of inheritance and forbidden sexual relationships. It is difficult to argue that these mitzvot lack clear and understandable reasons.

If we look for a reason for the very mitzva of the red heifer, beyond the mechanism of purification on the technical level, we will find important and essential things.

The cult of death was accepted and central in various religions over many periods and across various different regions. We are familiar with the cult of death in Egyptian mythology, in the pyramids and in the treasures buried in them. This cult was also found in various Canaanite religions, and it even began to penetrate Judaism during the Second Temple period. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel came out firmly against this phenomenon:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel taught: Monuments are not erected for the righteous; their words are their memorials. (Yerushalmi Shekalim 2:8)

What is the cause of the cult of death? Christianity also gives much attention to death. This stems from the notion that the source of death lies in primeval sin. We are all immersed in a reality of sin, and death is its conclusion. From the very beginning, life leads to death. We must do what we can do during our lifetimes, before we are overtaken by the predetermined sentence – death. This is an irreversible, final, and negative situation.

Judaism never saw things in this negative light. For us, death is not the end. We learn in our parasha about Elazar, who wears the garments of Aharon his father and continues his role and actions. Aharon's death is not absolute; his son

will continue his actions, and after him, his grandson.

Moreover, an important and central component of our faith is belief in the resurrection of the dead. This is not merely some future event, which does not affect our lives in the here and now. This is a reality that affects our view of death already now, and thus also the manner in which we live our lives. Life does not lead to a final stop called death. Death is but a stopover on the way to the World-to-Come, to the world of resurrection.

R. Kook writes that the worst thing about death is the falsehood connected to it – the perceived finality – while in essence it is merely a stopover.

Resurrection is not just a return to the life of all the dead from ancient times. Resurrection is actually a means for general, comprehensive repair. As opposed to Christianity, which sees in death a revelation of primeval sin, we focus on the resurrection and see it as an opportunity for repair.

The red heifer reflects the same repair. The red heifer is exceedingly difficult to prepare properly – so difficult that it was precisely Moshe who had to prepare the heifer, as Rashi writes:

"And they shall take to you" – It will always be called by your name; the heifer that Moshe made in the wilderness. (Rashi, Bemidbar 19:2)

That heifer must be red and unblemished, with no yoke ever having been placed on it. There are well known midrashim that describe the difficulties involved in finding such a heifer, as well as its cost. This symbolizes the difficulty in the repair of sin, which is likened to the impurity of death. The repair is difficult and costly; it exacts a price and requires offerings. But it is within one's grasp. It is possible.

There are also streams in Judaism that attach great weight to death. I refer to the cult that is gaining momentum in our very day – the cult of visiting the graves of the righteous. This cemetery industry was never the norm among the Jewish People, and it has faulty roots. This approach is based on the assumption that this world is a negative and problematic world. From this it follows that one can either fight the horrors and trials of this world or try to escape from it through death.

This is not true! The world is not only a source of sin and hardships! The world is full of challenges and opportunities, from which we grow as individuals and as a people. Thus, the red heifer reflects the same danger and negativity of the world around us regarding death, its finality, and the sin that it expresses.

We have thus explained the matter of the red heifer in a manner that finds a great deal of logic in it – both on the essential level of the impurity that is contracted through contact with the dead and the way that one purifies oneself from it and regarding the specific question regarding the purification of the impure and the defilement of the pure. Rashi, as noted, did not choose this path. Rashi's approach is further reinforced in the books of Chassidut, such as the Sefat Emet. Here, following God in a natural manner, without any search for logic, receives a boost, meaning, and strength.

Here we stand between these two approaches. To one approach belongs words such as

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responsibility, criticism, and rationality. Here the servant of God tries to find a reason for every mitzva, a logical explanation for every law. Though he feels himself uncompromisingly obligated to the Torah's mitzvot, he is not willing to follow a commandment blindly if it is possible to find a logical reason for it, using the human tools at his disposal.

In contrast to this approach, there is also a completely different approach. To this approach belong the words innocence, wholeness, and faithfulness. Here the servant of God follows the Torah, without any compromises. No attempt is made here to understand God's supreme judgment, but only to walk in His path in absolute manner.

Many of us tend to view the world as a circle and to see our goal as reaching the center. Thus, by taking one step and then another step, we approach the ideal, the desired end. This stems from the school of Aristotle, who saw the world in this manner. The truth, however, is that in Judaism, the world is much closer to an ellipse, which has two centers – one center of serving God by way of innocence, and a second center that involves trying to understand and delve into the heart of the matter.

Both centers are good. Both approaches have great benefits. They cannot be bridged; they are two parallel lines, which do not and will not ever meet. Here, each and every person must choose between approaches. When choosing one approach, one must be aware of what he loses by not choosing the other approach. Of course, one must choose with a whole heart and soul, but one must not make light of the approach that was not chosen.

I could have attempted to express what is, in my opinion, the preferred approach and where, according to my worldview, the advantages are more significant. However, stating what the better way is will immediately lead to thinking about the less-desired way, and from there the road is very short to scorn for and negation of the second approach.

We must be aware of the existence of both approaches, and we must consciously choose between them. However, we must never make light of the second approach – neither the innocent and natural approach, which Rashi represents in our parasha, nor the approach that tries to understand the essential elements of the Torah by way of the intellect that God has given us. [Adapted by Elisha Oron; Translated by David Strauss]

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez: See the World the Way We Are

According to the Sefer Yetzirah the tikkun we need to focus on during the month of Tammuz is on "ayin tova", to make sure we see the world through a positive eye.

Why specifically during the month of Tammuz? From Rosh Chodesh Tammuz until the 9th of Av, the 10 spies were in the land that G-d had promised to the Jews. Meaning that entire month of Tammuz, they were wandering

the land and everything that could have been interpreted in a good way was interpreted in a negative way. When they saw the height and strength of the giants and how healthy they were, instead of saying this is a land that produces strong people and can sustain a people, the spies saw how strong the enemies were compared to the Jewish people.

When we see a scenario, we have a choice in how we interpret it. We can choose to see everything in a negative light, or in a positive light.

This is the lesson of the month of Tammuz with the parshiot this month. We see and experience many things as we go through our lives. May we choose to see it positively, because we see the world not the way it is, but the way we choose to view it. May we see the world through G-d's eyes because if we see things in a positive light, that's the world we live in.



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io
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Thu, Jul 3, 3:41 PM (8 hours ago)

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Chukas

How Does the "Mother Cow" Make Up for the Mess Made by Her "Child"?
These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion:
#1343 – Making a Mi'she'bairach for a Choleh on Shabbos – Is It Permitted?
Good Shabbos!

How Does the "Mother Cow" Make Up for the Mess Made by Her "Child"?
The Medrash Tanchuma in Parshas Chukas (quoted by Rashi) discusses the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer). The only way a person can regain tahara (purity) after becoming tamei through contact with the dead is via the ritual of the Parah Adumah. Therefore, nowadays when we no longer have access to the ashes of the Parah Adumah, we all remain contaminated with tumas meis (death impurity).

The Medrash gives an analogy for the Parah Adumah: It can be compared to the child of the king's handmaiden, who soiled the palace. The king will command, "Let the mother come and clean up the mess made by her child." The Medrash means to say that the purpose of the Parah Adumah is for the "mother cow" to come and atone for the aveira (sin) of the Eigel Hazahav (Golden Calf).

The obvious question is that other than the fact that the parah is a cow and the eigel is a calf, which is the offspring of a cow, what is the connection between Parah Adumah, which is related to tumas meis and the purification therefrom, and the aveira of the Eigel Hazahav? The cheit ha'eigel (Sin of the Calf) was a form of Avodah Zarah, or at least an aveira bordering on Avodah Zarah. How is that related to tumas meis and the Parah Adumah? I would like to give two interpretations of this Medrash:

The first is a beautiful Kli Yakar on the parsha. When Klal Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, the Gemara says they went through a spiritual purification process. Had we not sinned with the eigel, there would have been no such thing as tumas meis. That doesn't mean that there would not be death in the world. No. People would still die, but they would die a different type of death. They would not die at the hands of the Malach Hamaves. They would

die with what is called a misas neshika (death by a 'kiss'). Somehow, the Ribono shel Olam would 'kiss them' and their souls would leave them. It is for this reason that some people say that the death of the righteous does not engender tumah, but rather the death of the righteous comes via a 'kiss'. Death via a 'kiss' does not cause tumas meis.

This, says the Kil Yakar, is what Chazal mean when they say that the Parah Adumah atones for the aveira of the Eigel Hazahav. The caused a descent of the whole concept of death, such that from that point forward, death engendered tumas meis. Now we need a Parah Adumah to regain a state of tahara. Therefore, the Parah Adumah is an appropriate kapara for the aveira of the Eigel Hazahav.

I saw another understanding of why the Parah Adumah is a kapara for the cheit ha'eigel in the sefer Meorei Ohr. Rashi notes on the fact that the Parah Adumah must be temima (without blemish) that the symbolism represents Klal Yisrael, who were without blemish (prior to the aveira of the Eigel Hazahav) and then became ba'alei mumim (blemished). They were given the Parah Adumah to allow them to return to their blemish-free status.

What does this mean? The author notes that Rashi says in Chumash on the pasuk, "Tamim you shall be with Hashem your G-d" (Devorim 18:13) that a person should just accept what the Ribono shel Olam gives and not try to figure out what is happening or what will happen in the future. The Meorei Ohr states that when they did the cheit ha'eigel, they were guilty of this very thing that they were warned against in the pasuk "Tamim you shall be with Hashem your G-d." They tried to "outsmart" the Ribono shel Olam or to be more pro-active than the Ribono shel Olam himself.

All the Rishonim say that when they made the Eigel Hazahav it was not literally an idol. They were desperate: "Here we are in the wilderness. Until now, Moshe Rabbeinu was taking care of everything. Now what are we going to do?" They decided they needed to take matters into their own hands. They made an Eigel Hazahav in the hope that this calf would be the medium through which Hashem would speak to them. What were they actually supposed to do? They were supposed to follow the dictum of "Tamim you shall be with Hashem your G-d." They should have said, "If the Ribono shel Olam took us out of Mitzrayim and the Ribono shel Olam gave us the mann and the be'er (well), etc., then the Ribono shel Olam will figure this out Himself. It is not for us to try to figure out new ways to interact with the Ribono shel Olam." That is the temimus that was required under those circumstances.

Parah Adumah is all about nullifying our sechel (intellect) to a Higher Authority. As we all know, Parah Adumah is the quintessential chok (unfathomable mitzvah). It is a paradox that makes no sense. While purifying the impure, it makes those who are pure impure. So then why do we do it? Because the Ribono shel Olam said so! We accept that. We have no questions. And we go further. Parah Adumah represents the antidote of what they did by the cheit ha'eigel. The unblemished (tamim) Parah Adumah represents this concept of temimus / innocence that they lacked when they made the Eigel Hazahav. That is why it is the "mother cow who comes and cleans up the mess made by her offspring (the calf)."

Mission Accomplished!

The pasuk in Parshas Chukas says, "And Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon on Hor Hahor, on the boundary of the Land of Edom, saying: Let Aharon be gathered to his nation for he will not come into the land that I have given to the Children of Israel..." (Bamidbar 20:23-24) The time for the death of Aharon has arrived. The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 11a) says "Hashem sits and completes the lives of the righteous from day to day." This means that a tzadik only dies when his time is up. He is allotted X number of years to his life, and when that time is up he leaves this world. However, because he is a tzadik, the Ribono shel Olam doesn't take him away early. He lives his life to the full extent of the time he was granted at birth.

The Sefas Emes asks that the previously quoted pasuk seems to contradict the principle of a Gemara in Rosh Hashana. The pasuk implies that Aharon is not dying here because "his days are full and his time is up" but rather because he does not have permission to enter Eretz Yisrael with Bnei Yisrael (because of his involvement in the incident at Mei Merivah).

To answer this question, the Sefas Emes makes a beautiful observation: When it says that tzadikim live their full lives," it does not mean in terms of days and years. It means in terms of purpose. Every person is put here on this world to fulfill a mission. When that mission is fulfilled, then the person leaves this world. With a tzadik, until he fulfills the mission that the Ribono shel Olam had in mind for him when He put his neshama on this earth, the tzadik won't die.

The Sefas Emes elaborates: Had Aharon been allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael, there would have been more mission for him to accomplish. He would have done the avodah; he would serve as the Kohen Gadol; he would have been in charge of the avodah in the Mishkan. He would have what to do. But because of the aveira of Mei Merivah, he couldn't go into the land and consequently, his mission had ended, so he had to die.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com
Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org.

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THE STORE CAN WAIT

Brisk on Chumash compiled by Rabbi Asher Bergman

Zos Hatorah Adam Ki Yamus BiOhel

Rav Chaim Brisker

This is the law of a man who dies in the tent (Bamidbar 19:14)

The Talmud (Berachos 66b) interprets this verse homiletically: "This is the law (or Torah) of a man who dies in the tent" - Torah knowledge cannot be sustained in a person unless he 'kills himself' (i.e., endures self-deprivation) in the 'tents' of Torah." Rav Chaim once explained the significance of this particular figure of speech- "unless he kills himself (or makes himself dead)" - by means of a parable:

Once there was a man who worked very hard to make a living, spending almost all his waking hours buying merchandise or minding his store. He had no time to even go to shul for communal prayer, let alone study the Torah. One day the man took a good look at himself and began to think about his spiritual lot in life. He was getting older and less energetic. In a few more years he would be called to the heavenevaluated and to be rewarded or punished accordingly. Was he ready for this judgment day?

He decided that he would begin to cut down on his business pursuits and spend some time in the beis midrash every morning. The first day he came late to the store, his wife asked him where he had been. The man managed to concoct some excuse for his lateness that day and the next, but eventually his wife, suspecting something foul, went for herself to search and find out what her husband was up to. When she finally found him slouched over a pile of books in the beis midrash, she was furious.

"Don't you know that the store is full of customers at this hour?" she demanded. "I can forgive you for the loss of revenue that you cause us by not showing up at the store - but you are losing customers, and thus undermining our whole source of livelihood!"

The man turned to his wife and said, "What would you have done if the Angel of Death had come to claim my soul this morning? Would you shout and complain to him as you do now? 'You can't do this! My husband needs to attend to his business affairs! There are customers in the store who need to be served!' These pleas would certainly fall on deaf ears. So simply make believe that I have died. And then, two hours from now, when I get back to the store, you can be all the more relieved that I have returned to life!"

This, Rav Chaim explained, is what the Sages meant when they said that Torah study requires one to "make himself dead." Just as when death strikes there can be no arguments or excuses whatsoever, so too, if one expects to accomplish anything in the study of Torah he must be firm in his resolve to

keep up his learning in the face of all adversity and hardship, without any excuses or justifications for laxity. -Toras Chaim

From **Chaim Ozer Shulman** cshulman@gmail.com

Chukas

In the Parsha of Mei Merivah Hashem says to Moshe and Aharon, "Yaan Ki Lo Heemantem Bi Lehakdisheini Leeinei B'nai Yisroel Lachen Lo Saviu Es Hakahal Hazeh El Haaretz Asher Nasati Lahem". (Perek 20 Pasuk 12). Because you didn't trust me and failed to make a Kiddush Hashem in front of B'nai Yisroel therefore you may not bring the nation into Eretz Yisroel. What is difficult to understand is how this particular punishment of not bringing the people into Eretz Yisroel relates to the Chet of Mei Merivah? What is also troublesome is how Moshe and Aharon could make the mistake of hitting the rock, when Hashem told them explicitly: "Videebartem El Haselah", to speak to the rock?

Rashi on Pasuk Yud-Alef states that at first they spoke to the rock but it was the wrong rock and therefore no water came out. So they thought, maybe we ought to hit the rock, and the proper rock appeared and they hit it. But this doesn't entirely explain their actions, because if Hashem told them specifically to speak to the rock then even if at first water didn't come out, why did they think that it was proper to hit the rock, and why did they think that hitting it would help?

I would like to suggest the following: As we know, there are two types of miracles. There is a Neis Nistar, a hidden miracle, and Neis Nigleh, an open miracle. The Seforno, however, in explaining the Chet of Moshe & Aharon states that even Neis Nigleh itself has two categories.

First, there is a Neis Nigleh that cannot be accomplished by natural means in those particular circumstances but in other circumstances could be accomplished naturally. An example would be hitting the rock, where in other circumstances hitting a rock could naturally cause water that is blocked by the rock to flow. Second, there is a Neis Nigleh that cannot be done naturally in any form, and which can be accomplished only by Hashem's words. An example would be speaking to the rock. This second level is obviously a higher form of miracle.

Hashem intended to perform the highest form of miracle to show B'nai Yisroel his dedication to them so that they should repent and do Teshuvah. So Moshe & Aharon sinned by performing a lesser miracle.

Now Rashi seems to learn a little differently from the Seforno. He states that the Chet of Moshe & Aharon was, that if they had spoken to the rock B'nai Yisroel would have learned a lesson that if a rock, which doesn't hear or speak and doesn't need Hashem's sustenance, keeps the words of Hashem, we B'nai Yisroel Al Achas Kama Vikamah should listen to Hashem's words.

But I believe that Rashi can still agree with the Seforno that to bring forth water by speaking to the rock would have been a higher level of miracle. With this explanation one can understand how Moshe & Aharon could make the mistake of hitting the rock. They understood that Hashem said to speak to the rock in the first instance, so that if B'nai Yisroel were worthy at that moment of the highest level of miracle then water would flow at Moshe's words. But once they saw that speaking to the rock did not help they understood that B'nai Yisroel were not worthy of the highest level of miracle, and therefore a lesser miracle, one of hitting the rock would have to be performed.

The fact that Hashem said to Moshe (in Pasuk 8) "Kach Es Hamatch", take the rod, perhaps led them to this mistaken conclusion. They understood that the rod was necessary so that if B'nai Yisroel would not turn out to be worthy of the highest level of miracle they would be prepared to hit the rock with the rod. In reality, however, the rod was to be taken, as the Mizrahi states, not to do anything with it but because of the miraculous powers that Hashem placed in the rod, even by just being in Moshe or Aharon's hand.

So Moshe and Aharon's Chet was in believing that even when Hashem promises that he will do something for B'nai Yisroel he only does it if they are worthy of it. And that was for Moshe & Aharon a grave error, since much of what Hashem does for B'nai Yisroel they are not worthy of, but Hashem does so by his good will.

So now we can understand what the Midah Kineged Midah - measure for measure - was in Moshe & Aharon's punishment. Since Moshe & Aharon believed that B'nai Yisroel would have to earn all that is promised to them, they could not take the people into Eretz Yisroel, because the actual gift of Eretz Yisroel is not something that the people necessarily earned. It's something that Hashem promised and will fulfill whether or not B'nai Yisroel merit [deserve] it.

One last thought. In the beginning of Vaeschanan on the Pasuk of "Vaeschanan El Hashem BaEis Hahi Leimar ... Eebra Na Viereh" And I beseeched Hashem at that time saying ... Let me cross and see the Land, Rashi says Ein Chinun Bichol Makom Elah Matnas Chinam, that Vaeschanan means Moshe asked for it as a gift. This fits in nicely with my explanation. Moshe Rabeinu understood now that Bnei Yisroel can receive Eretz Yisroel even without meriting it, and he sinned by not realizing it. But now he's asking that he too should receive a gift without meriting it, and should see Eretz Yisroel as a Matnas Chinam. But H'K'B'H' Midakdek Im Chasidav Kichut Hasaara.

from: **Ohr Somayach** <ohr@ohr.edu> date: Jul 3, 2025, 9:21 AM subject: Torah Weekly - Parshat Chukat

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Parsha Insights

Big, Brash, and Blonde?

"This is the (unexplainable) decree of the Torah" (19:02)

I couldn't help thinking as I watched pictures of President Donald Trump sitting in the operations room, watching the attack on the Iranian nuclear plant at Fordo, that he epitomized the United States of America.

There he was, flanked by two flags: to his right, the Star-Spangled Banner, and to his left, the seal of the President of the United States.

On his head was America's gift to the headwear of the world: a red baseball cap, with the slogan, "Make America Great Again." Trump is the perfect American icon: big, brash and blonde.

And then, in his formal announcement about the bombing at the White House, President Trump said, "We love you G-d. We love our great military – protect them! G-d bless the Middle East! G-d bless Israel! And G-d bless America!"

In Genesis 12:3, Hashem said to Avraham, "I will bless those who bless you (i.e., the Jewish People) and whoever curses you, I will curse."

The Book of Daniel opens with Daniel's interpretation of Nevuchadnetzar's dream in which Nevuchadnetzar sees a great statue. The parts of this statue represent the empires that would exile the Jewish People. The head represents Babilon, the two arms represent Media and Persia, the torso represents Greece. The two feet represent Edom (Esav) and Yishmael - Christianity and Islam.

There is a basic difference between the arms and the legs. A person can function with one arm, but with one leg, he is essentially powerless.

The two final exiles work as a team and they cannot oppress the Jewish People without the co-operation and assistance of the other. So, which is it? Are Edom's spiritual heirs, the West, the partners of Islam and its dogmatic concept of a world subjugated to Islam, or do they love Israel like President Trump?

It must have been about ten years ago that I realized that something had changed at the BBC. Suddenly, I saw reports about Muslim festivals, informing their viewers of the details of, say, Eid al-Fitr, and how this was a beautiful time of feasting, prayer, and gift-giving. It's not that the BBC never covers Jewish Festivals, but the tone of the piece was more than informative. To my mind, it bordered on proselytizing. It smacked of a trailer for Islam 101.

Arab investors have significantly invested in the UK. For example, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund owns stakes in Barclays Bank, Sainsbury's, and Heathrow Airport, and they also own Harrods and the Ritz. The UAE has also made major investments, such as Abu Dhabi's investments in the UK's renewable energy sector. All of these investments show the strong economic connections between the Gulf states and the UK. The BBC is primarily

funded by the UK television license fee and does not receive direct funding from Arab states, but there is a definite Arab bias there for all to see. The pro-Arab tendency in British society is not new. The connection between the Brits and the Arabs goes back to the late nineteenth century, and before.

Several notable English Arabists include writer, archaeologist, and political officer Gertrude Bell, who played a significant role in the formation of modern Iraq and was deeply involved in Middle Eastern politics in the early 20th century. Harry St. John Philby, also known as Jack Philby, was an advisor to King Abdulaziz ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia. He converted to Islam in 1930 and later became an adviser to Ibn Saud, urging him to unite the Arabian Peninsula under Saudi rule. The Arab Legion in Jordan was founded and led by another Englishman, Glubb 'Pasha,' whose full name was John Bagot Glubb. He was instrumental in organizing and commanding the Arab Legion, which became a key part of Jordan's military forces. And of course, most famous of all was T.E. Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia, who played a crucial role in fomenting the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War One.

Why do the English and the Arabs have this mutual 'love affair'?

It could be that they are so opposite – the climate and topography of Devon could not be more different than the Nedy desert – and opposites attract. Both nations place a high premium on honor.

But there is also a significant pro-Jewish strain that runs through English culture: George Eliot, Lord Palmerston, and Benjamin Disraeli, were notable philo-Semites of the 19th century, along with Sir Robert Peel, who supported Jewish emancipation, and Thomas Babington Macaulay, who spoke in favor of Jewish civil rights. Also, Charles Dickens shifted later in life toward a more positive view of the Jews. Historian Paul Johnson points out that in the First World War, just at the time when the British government was in a position to create a Jewish national home in the Middle East, the leaders or that government, including David Lloyd George were largely low-church Presbyterians who had all been brought up on a diet of Tanach. To them, the return of Israel to its Land was axiomatic.

So which is it? Is Edom, the West in a symbiotic partnership with Islam to dominate the Jews – or are they like Donald Trump who says, "May G-d bless Israel?"

The Midrash says that when Hashem was giving us the Torah, everything in the world stopped. Everything was silent. The nations of the world, fearing another giant flood, sent for Bilaam, their prophet, to ask him what was happening. Bilaam replied with the words of Psalm 29, that Hashem was not bringing a flood or destruction, but "Hashem was giving 'Oz' — the Torah — to His People." To which the Nations replied, "May Hashem bless His people with peace."

If we want to ingratiate ourselves with the nations of the world, they will turn around and say, "You are not like us. You are a nation that dwells alone. (Bamidbar 23:9)"

But when we, as proud Jews, sanctify the name of the Torah, when we behave like Jews who stood at Sinai, then the whole world will put on its Donald Trump hat and proclaim, "May Hashem bless His people with peace!"

from: RIETS Kollel Elyon Substack <riets@substack.com>

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Chukat and July 4th: American Independence and Moses' Mysterious Mistake

Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

Just what exactly did Moses do that was so, irreparably, wrong?

Commentators have struggled for centuries to identify the unforgivable mistake that Moses commits in this week's Torah reading, which seals his fate and blocks his entry into the land of Israel. According to Rashi (Num. 20:12), his choosing to hit the rock rather than speak to it was the crucial error; Nachmanides, however, argues on this. If the concern is, as the verse indicates, that an opportunity to impress the people with a miraculous display was lost, it is no more natural for a rock to produce water when being struck

than it is when being spoken to. What, then, was so different about the path that he took?

A further question revolves around the apparently unforgivable nature of Moses' action. The Torah later will tell us again about Moses' repeated entreaties to have his fate reversed, and to be allowed entry into the lands. And yet it is all to no avail. Not only was this devastating for him, it is discouraging for us; we read about this again (Deut. 32:48-52), right before Yom Kippur, a time when belief in the power of repentance is crucial and axiomatic. And yet we enter into those days with a message of apparent futility in undoing a divine decree, and hopelessness in an effort to change the consequences of a mistake.

The ambiguity in the text as to the precise nature of Moses' offense has led to a multiplicity of suggestions in the commentaries, which in turn has heaped much more guilt on Moses than he deserves; in the words of Shadal, he "committed one sin but the commentators piled upon him thirteen sins and more, as each invented a new sin". And yet, Moses, who bore so much for the Jewish people, is doing so once again; he is serving as the tableau for the "seventy faces of the Torah", which allows for multiple messages to emerge from a single source.

To address first the irrevocability of the decree upon Moses, some suggest that it reflects the fact that it was actually not a punishment, which should have been responsive to repentance. Rather, it cemented the reality that Moses was not the leader who met that moment in time. (See Rabbi Jacob J. Schachter, *Mitokh HaHa-Ohel*, I, pp. 477-482, for a fascinating suggestion along these lines, and for a detailed discussion of this topic.)

Perhaps there is room for yet one more interpretation in that vein. If indeed it is to be understood that the consequence for Moses was not a punishment but rather a reflection of his incapability for the role of leader of the next phase, this can inform our understanding of what went wrong at that moment.

This point in time was a transition from a state of slavery in Egypt to a state of independence and freedom in the Land of Israel, with a transitional phase in between of overt miraculous divine protection in the desert. The crucial difference between slavery and freedom is that of personal agency. The slave has no control over his choices; he can only carry out his master's will, and should he hesitate or refuse to do so, his master will coerce him physically, perhaps by striking him. In fact, Moses's first entry into the lives of the Jewish people was his intervention when one such master was striking a Jewish slave.

In contrast, a free person has agency and free will to make his own choices. In the Torah's vision, this does not mean simply so that he can do whatever he wants; it is so. In this exposition of the verse, the words 'this is the Torah' are taken to refer to the study of Torah, and the tent mentioned in the verse is taken to refer to the study hall of Torah. One may ask why this principle is derived specifically from a verse found in the laws of the red heifer. What is the connection between these laws and the study of Torah? Rav Mordechai Ilan, in his work *Mikdash Mordechai*, cites a midrash which says that the parah adumah is actually an allusion to the Jewish nation. He offers two explanations to this midrash. First, he says that a unique characteristic of the Jewish nation is its readiness to accept all of God's laws even before knowing what they entailed, as reflected in their statement at Mt. Sinai, 'we will do and we will listen,' meaning that they agreed to observe the Torah's commandments before learning what they entailed. In this way, they were accepting all of the Torah as, ultimately, being a *chok*, a decree from God which they accepted upon themselves without first understanding it. The parah adumah is the classical example of a *chok*, whose purpose is extremely hard to fathom. The Jewish nation, thus, accepted all of the Torah upon themselves as if it consisted completely of laws such as the parah adumah, and that is why the midrash says that the parah adumah alludes to the Jewish people. Rabbi Ilan's second explanation of the midrash is that the parah adumah is able to bring about purity and impurity, and this is also something that the Jewish people has been able to do historically. Achaz, for example who worshipped idols and closed down the study halls, gave birth to Chizkiyahu, who, in his years of king of Yehudah, made sure that everyone in the nation was learned in even the most esoteric laws of the

Torah, such as the laws of purity and impurity. According to both of these explanations, in any case, the midrash is telling us that the red heifer, or parah adumah, alludes to some special characteristic of the Jewish nation as a whole.

Based on this midrash, we can understand why the principle of the need to 'kill oneself' in the tents of Torah in order for one's Torah study to have permanence is derived from a verse that is found in the middle of the laws of the red heifer. The verse states, 'when a man dies in a tent, the word used for 'man' here is 'adam.' As we have mentioned many times in the past, Rabbi Ephraim of Lunshitz, in his *Olelos Ephraim*, points out that of all the words for 'man' in the Hebrew language- ish, gever, enosh and adam- only the word adam retains its singular form when used to indicate the plural. This is because the individual Jew is always associated with the nation as a whole, which is a characteristic *nit* shared by any other nation. That is why, according to one opinion in the Talmud, the corpse of a non-Jew does not cause defilement to someone who is in the same tent, because the verse from which this kind of defilement derived, the word adam is used to refer to the corpse. Only a Jew is referred to by the term 'adam.' We can, then, extrapolate that when the Talmud in *Berachos* derives a principle regarding Torah study from the verse introducing the laws of defilement through being in the same tent as a human corpse, this principle has something to do with the corporate nature of Torah study by the Jewish people. The Torah has been described by many great rabbis, including Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, as the soul of the Jewish people. When one studies Torah, he must do so with a recognition of this fact, and gear his study toward the actualization of the Jewish soul. Someone who studies for his own personal benefit, out of intellectual curiosity, or to be known as a scholar, is certainly meritorious in that he is, after all, studying God's word, but he is missing the wider picture. Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook explained the statement of the Talmud that the land lay waste because people did not make the blessing over the Torah before they engaged in its study to mean that they did not take into consideration, in their Torah study, the message of that blessing, which says that God chose us from among all the nations and gave us His Torah. In other words, people studied Torah for their own purposes, and not in order to develop the soul of the nation and help it actualize its national destiny. Perhaps, then, the idea of killing oneself in the tents of Torah is to minimize one's personal interests when he studies Torah, and emphasize the importance of the Torah for the proper development of the Jewish nation. Only when Torah is studied with this goal in mind will it have permanence.

Rav Kook on Chukat: Beyond Human Logic

Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

Thu, Jul 3, 5:03 AM (19 hours ago)

Rav Kook Torah

Chukat: Beyond Human Logic Even King Solomon, renowned for his profound wisdom, failed to grasp its meaning. "I thought I would attain wisdom," he admitted, "but it is distant from me" (Ecc. 7:23).

What was it that eluded Solomon's powerful intellect? The Talmud in *Niddah* 9a explains that he was referring to the Parah Adumah, the red heifer whose ashes were used for ritual purification. The true meaning of this ritual is uniquely profound, beyond the grasp of the human intellect.

Why is this mitzvah so difficult to understand?

Repairing the Sin of the Golden Calf

According to the Sages, the Parah Adumah comes to atone for the Sin of the Golden Calf. The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:8) explains this by way of a parable: when the maidservant's son sullied the king's palace, it was his mother who needed to come and clean up the mess.

What exactly is the connection between the ritual of the Red Heifer and the Sin of the Golden Calf? After all, the golden calf was formed out of gold jewelry donated by the people; it was not born to a cow.

What was the essence of the Sin of the Golden Calf? Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (*Kuzari* 1:97) and other medieval commentators explained that only when taking into account the unique spiritual level of the Jewish people at that time does their action count as a grievous offense. For other peoples, not

only would it not have been deemed a sin, it might have even been considered a meritorious deed.

The people's motivations were sincere. They did not wish to abandon God. On the contrary, they sought to remain close to Him. They created an image — the prevalent form of worship at that time, like a house of prayer nowadays — in order to have a tangible focal point toward which they could direct their offerings and prayers. Even those who erred by praying directly to the golden image did not reject God. They announced, "O Israel! This is your God, Who brought you out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:8).

If so, what was their mistake? They erred in their attempt to gain closeness to God through actions dictated by their own logic and reasoning. God specifically forbade this form of worship. The image they created — despite their good intentions — contradicted God's command, and it became a stumbling block for those who worshipped the Golden Calf as an actual idol. Understanding God's Rule

Why did God forbid us from using our powers of reason to establish new mitzvot and modify existing ones, using methods that, according to our understanding, would allow us to become closer to God?

If we want to know what God wants, we need to examine His actions and the ways through which He governs the world. Theoretically, the percipient individual should be able to discern wonderful aspects of God's rule of the universe, and thereby understand His ways and Divine Will. This would work had God organized creation in such a way that all paths leading to the final goal reflect Divine perfection. Then all aspects of the universe would provide an accurate understanding of God and His Will, allowing us to recognize the proper way to serve Him.

God, however, in His lofty wisdom, organized the universe differently. He decreed that purity might be the end result of impure paths. Even those means which contravene God's Will will lead toward the final goal. Thus it is impossible to deduce what God truly wants simply by observing the ways of the world. Our service of God can only be guided by those directives which God explicitly transmitted through His Torah.

Acknowledging Our Limitations

How is this connected to the purifying ashes of the Red Heifer? Purity and impurity are a function of closeness or distance from God. True purity is the ability to draw near to God and fulfill His will. Death, on the other hand, is *avi avot ha-tum'ah*, the primary source of impurity. Death is an example of a phenomenon in the world that is diametrically opposed to the genuine intention of God, Who desires life. A person noting the phenomenon of death could deduce the exact opposite of God's true intention in the world, concluding that God does not wish that His creations live.

How do we purify ourselves from the impurity of death? To correct the misleading impression of death, we need to recognize the limits of the human intellect in understanding God's rule in the world. By performing the ritual of Parah Adumah, a mitzvah that by definition transcends logic, we acknowledge the limitations of our intellect, and avoid the pitfall of inferring God's will from the phenomenon of death.

We can also understand why those who prepare the purifying ashes of the Red Heifer become defiled in the process. God's Will cannot be deduced from the ways of the world, only from the final goal; so too, the process of the Parah Adumah generates impurity, and only the end result provides purification.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 317-320)

Dvar Torah - Carrying a Big Stick
Project Genesis Jul 3, 2025, 8:27 PM

Dvar Torah By Rabbi Label Lam

Parshas Chukas - Carrying a Big Stick

HASHEM spoke to Moshe, saying: "Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and speak to the rock in their presence so that it will give forth its water. (Bamidbar 20:7-8) It's not so easy to pinpoint the mistake that caused Moshe and Aaron not to enter the Holy Land. It seems purposely obscured. Was it that Moshe hit the rock rather than speaking to it? Was it that he hit it twice? Was it that he

spoke disparagingly about the congregation? Was it a loss of patience? In any case, why was Moshe told to take a stick if he was to speak to the rock? Is that not a mixed signal and a cause for confusion? Is he to speak to the rock or to hit it? What was the purpose of telling Moshe to take the stick if the intention was for him to speak?

A friend of mine shared with me an educational point. It helps to speak to the rock when you have a stick in your hand! Even if you don't use the stick, having that giant symbol of authority, helps pry open the ears of the listener. It's no mystery that a policeman gets a little more respect because of the billy club he swings or the fire power he carries on his hip. It's like Teddy Roosevelt had famously uttered, "Speak softly and carry a big stick!" This is a good thing for everybody if properly understood!

Someone told me that a young man came to visit the previous Skverer Rebbe and he sat down in a very casual manner, bordering on disrespect. The Rebbe was noticing his posture when the young man declared confidently, "I am only afraid of HASHEM!" The Rebbe responded, "Do you know how many "Yiras" — "Layers of fear" — that you have to go through to come to Yiras HASHEM!"

The impressive part about speaking while holding a stick is that the authority figure is choosing to speak even though he has a license to employ a stick. Rabbi Kalish told our teachers at an in-service session, "Let's say a young high school boy in my Yeshiva misses Davening in the morning. I have enough clout and leverage to guarantee that he will come to Davening the next day.

However, I want him to come to Davening 30 years from now." He went on to explain the famous verse from Mishlei 22:6, "Chanoch L'Naar Al Pi Darcho, Gam Ki Yazkin, Lo Yasir Mimena" — "Raise the child according to his way, so that when he grows old, he will not depart from it". He said that everybody emphasizes the first part of that verse but too many lose sight of the second part. Whatever methodologies we employ when educating, we should have the long game in mind. We can win a single battle by using force but lose the war or we can lose many battles and still win the war. There is a world of difference between Chinuch — Education and Control. I read in a book entitled, "Spare the Child", multiple cases of parents, who with noble intentions, by exercising control, turned what would otherwise have been pleasant and holy experiences, into something so supercharged with negative neuro-associations that their child can no longer enter a Shul or open a Siddur, and the parent insists, "I emphasized Davening!" It was not Chinuch though!

The Prophet Zacharia (4:7) writes, "Not with force and not with power, but by My spirit, says HASHEM the G-d of Hosts". The Piascenzo Rebbe writes in the introduction to Chovos HaTalmidim that Chinuch, education is a process of mining out from inside the child rather than piling on from without.

I have become proficient at starting fireplace fires in recent years. There is a lot to be learned from this exercise. You start a fire with small stuff, not big logs. They are the last to catch on! Once the little branches and twigs are burning long enough, then the big logs start to catch on and the fire is a success.

Our job as parents and teachers is to provide gentle encouragement, long enough, until the young adult has developed a fire of their own. The big stick is like a match to catalyze, but the real fire is the inspiration that has been awakened within. This is what can happen when we speak softly even though we are carrying a big stick!

Tidbits • Parashas Chukas 5785

Ira Zlotowitz <iraz@klalgovoaah.org>

Thu, Jul 3, 7:00 PM (5 hours ago)

Parashas Chukas • July 5th • 9 Tamuz 5785

In memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZTL

The final opportunity for Kiddush Levana is on Wednesday night, July 9th. Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Avodah Zara 17 • Oraysa (coming week): Moed Katan 3b-5b ... The Y'mei Bein Hametzarim, the Three Weeks, begin Motzaei Shabbos Parashas Balak, July 12th. The fast of Shiva Asar B'Tamuz

is on Sunday, July 13th. Rosh Chodesh Av is Shabbos Parashas Matos Masei, July 26th. Tisha B'av begins Motzaei Shabbos Parashas Devarim, August 2nd.

Summary: CHUKAS: Laws of the Parah Adumah - its preparation and use in the Tahara process • Miriam dies; the be'er well stops producing water, and the people complain • Moshe and Aharon are told to bring forth water by speaking to the rock; Moshe eventually hits the rock instead • Moshe and Aharon are told of the punishment for their sin • Bnei Yisrael ask for passage through Edom and are rebuffed • Aharon passes away at Hor Hahar • The Canaanites (really Amalek) attack and are defeated at Chorma • The people complain about the Mon and are attacked by snakes • The 'healing' copper snake • The great miracle of Nachal Arnon • Shiras Habe'er • The defeats of Sichon and Og

Haftarah: The parashah relates the capture of the lands of Sichon by the Bnei Yisrael. The pesukim in Shoftim 11:1-33 tell us that certain lands initially owned by Amon and Moav were forbidden to be captured, as antagonizing those nations was forbidden. However, once they were captured by Sichon, the Bnei Yisrael were allowed to take them.

Parashas Chukas: 87 Pesukim • 3 Obligations 1) Kohanim should oversee the preparation of the ashes of the parah adumah. 2) Observe the laws of tumas meis. 3) A Kohen shall purify someone who is tamei using the ashes of the parah adumah. Mitzvah Highlight: Zos Chukas HaTorah - Parah Adumah is the prime example of a mitzvah (chok) that we perform solely to fulfill Hashem's command, even though we do not understand it.

“וַיִּדֹּף אֶת־הַסֵּלַע בְּמַשְׁהוֹ... יָשָׁן לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתָּם כִּי לִהְיוֹתִי יֵשֵׁן”

“And he hit the rock with his stick...because you had not trusted in Me to sanctify Me” (Bamidbar 20:10-11)

Moshe Rabbeinu performed a great miracle of bringing forth water from the rock. However, Moshe was punished and barred from entering Eretz Yisrael because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l points out that this was a neis, no matter by what means was used to bring forth this supernatural occurrence. What was lacking by Moshe's failure to speak to the rock?

Rav Moshe explains that this event was intended to demonstrate the importance of delivering words of instruction even to one who may not be able to fully grasp the concept, for example, a young child who appears to a parent as not quite ready to understand a certain message. Hashem demonstrated that just as a Divine message can penetrate even a rock and compel it to serve Hashem, we must speak to and be mechaneich even someone with limited understanding, as eventually the lessons will penetrate.

https://blog.artscroll.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/artscroll-shabbos-newsletter_chukas-pgs.pdf

LANGUAGE LESSON

On the Shoulders of Giants by Rabbi Shmuel Bloom

An incident that occurred in a camp in the Catskills sheds light on the importance of words.

While I was attending Camp Munk in Ferndale, New York, Rabbi Michael (Yecheil Arie) Munk, the camp director, once suspected that a camper had uttered a word that was, shall we say, not quite one of the holiest words in the English language. An outstanding mechanech and former principal of Bais Yaakov of Borough Park, Rabbi Munk asked a favor of the young man: to bring him a Shulchan Aruch and open it up to Chapter 275 in the Orach Chaim section. Try as he might, the young man simply could not find the chapter. Rabbi Munk then asked him to find Chapter 344. Again, despite his best efforts, the young man could not find the chapter.

Rabbi Munk explained to the perplexed young man: “These chapter numbers spell out words. Chapter 275 spells out the word ‘reish ayin hey — evil.’ Rav Yosef Caro wanted to avoid the appearance of this word in his work; he therefore changed the letter sequence to ayin reish hey. Chapter 344 spells out the word ‘shmad — destruction.’ He therefore changed the lettering to shin daled mem. He did this to teach us that words do matter; that mere words can affect the purity and wellbeing of a person's soul. You should keep this in mind, young man.”

Yes, words do matter. They can affect us negatively and they can inspire us positively. Words, whether through the use of positive ones or the avoidance of negative ones, can be a catalyst for change. They can allow us to achieve spiritual and moral goals, and to pursue lofty personal and national aspirations as well.

from: The **Rabbi Sacks Legacy** <info@rabbisacks.org>

date: Jul 3, 2025, 11:15 AM

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Losing Miriam

Chukat 2012

It is a scene that still has the power to shock and disturb. The people complain. There is no water. It is an old complaint and a predictable one. That is what happens in a desert. Moses should have been able to handle it with ease. He has been through far tougher challenges in his time. Yet suddenly at Mei Meriva (“the waters of contention”), he exploded into vituperative anger:

“Listen, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?” Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff.” Num. 20:10–11

In past essays I have argued that Moses did not sin. It was simply that he was the right leader for the generation that left Egypt but not the right leader for their children who would cross the Jordan and engage in conquering a land and building a society. The fact that he was not permitted to lead the next generation was not a failure but an inevitability. As a group of slaves facing freedom, a new relationship with God, and a difficult journey, both physically and spiritually, the Children of Israel needed a strong leader capable of contending with them and with God. But as builders of a new society, they needed a leader who would not do the work for them but who would instead inspire them to do it for themselves.

The face of Moses was like the sun, the face of Joshua was like the moon (Bava Batra 75a). The difference is that sunlight is so strong it leaves no work for a candle to do, whereas a candle can illuminate when the only other source of light is the moon. Joshua empowered his generation more than a figure as strong as Moses would have done.

But there is another question altogether about the episode we read of this week. What made this trial different? Why did Moses momentarily lose control? Why then? Why there? He had faced just this challenge before. The Torah mentions two previous episodes. One took place at Mara, almost immediately after the division of the Red Sea. The people found water but it was bitter. Moses prayed to God, God told him how to sweeten the water, and the episode passed. The second episode occurred at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1–7). This time there was no water at all.

Moses rebuked the people: “Why are you quarrelling with me? Are you trying to test God?” He then turned to God and said, “What am I to do with this people? Before long they will stone me!” God told him to go to a rock at Horeb, take his staff, and hit the rock. Moses did so, and water came out. There was drama, tension, but nothing like the emotional distress evident in this week's parsha of Chukat. Surely Moses, by now almost forty years older, with a generation of experience behind him, should have coped with this challenge without drama. He had been there before.

The text gives us a clue, but in so understated a way that we can easily miss it. The chapter begins thus: “In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. Now there was no water for the community...” (Num. 20:1–2). Many commentators see the connection between this and what follows in terms of the sudden loss of water after the death of Miriam. Tradition tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during Miriam's lifetime in her merit.[1] When she died, the water ceased. There is, though, another way of reading the connection. Moses lost control because his sister Miriam had just died. He was in mourning for his eldest sibling. It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a brother or sister. They are your generation. You feel the Angel of Death come suddenly close. You face your own mortality.

Miriam was more than a sister to Moses. She was the one, while still a child, to follow the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the Nile. She had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity.

In a truly remarkable passage, the Sages said that Miriam persuaded her father Amram, the leading scholar of his generation, to annul his decree that Hebrew husbands should divorce their wives and have no more children because there was a 50 per cent chance that any child born would be killed. "Your decree," said Miriam, "is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, yours applies to females also. He intends to rob children of life in this world; you would deny them even life in the World to Come." [2] Amram admitted her superior logic. Husbands and wives were reunited. Yocheved became pregnant and Moses was born. Note that this Midrash, told by the Sages, unambiguously implies that a six-year-old girl had more faith and wisdom than the leading rabbi of the generation!

Moses surely knew what he owed his elder sister. According to the Midrash, without her he would not have been born. According to the plain sense of the text, he would not have grown up knowing who his true parents were and to which people he belonged. Though they had been separated during his years of exile in Midian, once he returned, Miriam had accompanied him throughout his mission. She had led the women in song at the Red Sea. The one episode that seems to cast her in a negative light – when she "began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife" (Num. 12:1), for which she was punished with leprosy – was interpreted more positively by the Sages. They said she was critical of Moses for breaking off marital relations with his wife Tziporah. He had done so because he needed to be in a state of readiness for Divine communication at any time. Miriam felt Tziporah's plight and sense of abandonment. Besides which, she and Aaron had also received Divine communication but they had not been commanded to be celibate. She may have been wrong, suggested the Sages, but not maliciously so. She spoke not out of jealousy of her brother but out of sympathy for her sister-in-law.

So it was not simply the Israelites' demand for water that led Moses to lose control of his emotions, but rather his own deep grief. The Israelites may have lost their water, but Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership in her role as leader of the women.

It is a moment that reminds us of words from the book of Judges said by Israel's chief of staff, Barak, to its judge-and-leader Deborah: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I cannot go" (Judges 4:8). The relationship between Barak and Deborah was much less close than that between Moses and Miriam, yet Barak acknowledged his dependence on a wise and courageous woman. Can Moses have felt less?

Bereavement leaves us deeply vulnerable. In the midst of loss we can find it hard to control our emotions. We make mistakes. We act rashly. We suffer from a momentary lack of judgement. These are common symptoms even for ordinary humans like us. In Moses' case, however, there was an additional factor. He was a prophet, and grief can occlude or eclipse the prophetic spirit. Maimonides answers the well-known question as to why Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive, with the simplest possible answer: grief banishes prophecy. For twenty-two years, mourning his missing son, Jacob could not receive the Divine word. [3] Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, remained in touch with God. It was God, after all, who told him to "speak to the rock." But somehow the message did not penetrate his consciousness fully. That was the effect of grief.

So the details are, in truth, secondary to the human drama played out that day. Yes, Moses did things he might not have done, should not have done. He struck the rock, said "we" instead of "God," and lost his temper with the people. The real story, though, is about Moses the human being in an onslaught of grief, vulnerable, exposed, caught in a vortex of emotions, suddenly bereft of the sisterly presence that had been the most important bass

note of his life. Miriam had been the precociously wise and plucky child who had taken control of the situation when the life of her three-month-old brother lay in the balance, undaunted by either an Egyptian princess or a rabbi-father. She had led the Israelite women in song, and sympathised with her sister-in-law when she saw the price she paid for being the wife of a leader. The Midrash speaks of her as the woman in whose merit the people had water in a parched land. In Moses' anguish at the rock, we sense the loss of the elder sister without whom he felt bereft and alone.

The story of the moment Moses lost his confidence and calm is ultimately less about leadership and crisis, or about a staff and a rock, than about a great Jewish woman, Miriam, appreciated fully only when she was no longer there.

[1] Rashi, Commentary to Num. 20:2; Ta'anit 9a; Song of Songs Rabbah 4:14, 27. [2] Midrash Lekach Tov to Ex. 2:1. [3] Maimonides, Shemoneh Perakim, ch. 7.

Potomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Shabbat Chuchat 5785
Alan Fisher <afisherads@yahoo.com>

BS"D I strongly recommend the Internet Torah Sheet, which normally posts shortly after midnight on Thursday nights -- available at parsha.net. I also strongly recommend Rabbi Marc Angel's history of the Sephardic community in the United States, going back nearly 371 years -- long before the founding of the United States. Shabbat Shalom, Alan
 BS"D July 4, 2025 Potomac Torah Study Center Vol. 12 #37, July 4-5, 2025; 9 Tammuz 5785; Chukat 5785

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace. Mazal tov to Deborah & Josh Wilbur on the marriage of their daughter Ashley to Josh Kokhavim, son of Romina & Iraj Kokhavim. Mazal-Tov also to Ashley's grandparents, Merryl & Nat Shaffir.

Chukat represents a transition in the Torah in many ways. B'Nai Yisrael arrive at the base of Har Sinai approximately a month and a half after departing from Egypt – Rosh Hodesh Sivan 2448. They depart from the base of Har Sinai on 20 Iyar 2449 (the second year) (Bemidbar 10:11). Once the people leave the base of Har Sinai, they start looking for reasons to complain, and Moshe and God both immediately call the complaints evil. Behaalotecha, Shelach Lecha, and Korach record massive, continuous complaints. The three serious sins of the second year after the Exodus all take place in a single week (See Torah Anthology 13.333-34). Miriam speaks lashon hara about Moshe's wife Tziporah on 22 Sivan, and God strikes her with tzaraat. While the people wait seven days for Miriam to recover from tzaraat and become tahor again (29 Sivan), Korach and his followers rise up against Moshe and Aharon. The Meraglim depart on 29 Sivan to explore Canaan, the quality of the land, the strength of the people, and prospects for defeating them in battle). (They return of 8 Av, give their reports, and the people cry in fear all night). Hashem has enough and decrees that all the adults twenty years old or older at the time of the Exodus will die in the Midbar, and only their children will survive to enter the land. Chukat opens with chapter 19, the decree of the Red Heifer, which gives the procedure of becoming tahor again after exposure to a dead body. While God presents the decree to Moshe a year earlier at the base of Har Sinai, the Torah presents it here, after the death of many who sin during the last week of Sivan. Also, almost all of the adults still alive at that time will die during the following 38 years. The Torah concludes the story of the generation of the Exodus at this point, and there is no discussion of the rest of the wanderings until the Torah continues during the 40th year (chapter 21). After Miriam dies and her well dries up, the people complain of thirst. God tells Moshe to take his staff and ask Miriam's rock to give the people water. Moshe becomes angry, calls the people rebels, and strikes the rock.

Although the rock does give water for the people, Hashem is angry because Moshe does not use the opportunity to make a Kiddush Hashem. God wants Moshe to show that if an inanimate rock obeys a request of God, then how much more should we Jews, for whom Hashem has performed so many miracles and given so many gifts, also obey God's mitzvot. An important lesson of Chukat is that careless speech is the final shortcoming for which God denies Moshe and Aharon permission to enter the land.

What does Chukat mean to us today? For me, Kohelet gives one answer: there is a time and place for everything. During a long period of slavery, the Jews reach a low point in merit and must regain the status of Yosef and his immediate family. Through teshuvah and help from Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem, B'Nai Yisrael raise themselves high enough to merit God's direct intervention to lift our ancestors out of slavery and to bring them to the base of Har Sinai to learn Hashem's mitzvot. This generation, however, looks to Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem for all its needs. As long as God leads the people directly, with Moshe's immediate assistance, they can survive. However, living in Israel, with Hashem's hidden face (operating only in the background, out of direct observation of humans), is beyond this generation.

When the Meraglim return and the people fall apart, God sees that only a new generation, which has not been slaves, will be able to survive on its own (when God operates out of sight of humans).

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander teaches us that speech is vitally important, for good or for evil. Miriam lifts her voice in song several times to inspire the people to learn that with pure faith in Hashem, He will take care of the Jews. However, when Miriam speaks lashon hara about Tziporah (Moshe's wife), God punishes her with tzaraat. Ten of the Meraglim speak lashon hara about the land of Israel, and they die for the sin. Korach exaggerates about several of the mitzvot, and he and his followers end up being buried alive for their sins.

The Chofetz Chaim may be best known for his focus on eliminating lashon hara. A lack of care with speech leads to several sins of the generation of the Exodus. Rabbi Brander recounts the story of Yiftach, subject of the Haftarah – a great military hero who saves the Jews from Ammon (in present day Jordan). Yiftach makes a vow to God that if He enables the Jews to defeat Ammon, he will offer as an olah (burnt offering) whoever is first to emerge from his house when he returns home. The first to emerge happens to be his daughter, an only child. Yiftach's reward for his great military victory is having to sacrifice his only child, his beloved daughter, because of his careless and evil speech.

Later in history, Chazal blame lashon hara for the destruction of the second Temple. (We often read this horrible story at some time during Tisha B'Av.)

Rabbi Brander summarizes his lesson as follows:

The underlying message of our parsha and Haftarah is timelessly relevant: Speech is the currency of connection, and has the power to work in ways both good and bad. With it, we build relationships, teach values, and shape community. Misused, it becomes a weapon that divides and destroys. Chukat reminds us that every interaction — with God, with family, with society — begins with how we speak and how we listen. In an age inundated by constant communication, may we never forget the sacred weight of our words, and may we use them wisely, as tools for healing, holiness, and harmony.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, helped generations of Jews appreciate Jewish mitzvot and history. He started me on my journey to greater knowledge, and he was thrilled watching his congregants learn and become leaders of their generation over half a century of leading congregations. His lessons certainly qualify as lashon tov!

I return to Kohelet with one more lesson for our times. The generation that founded the modern state of Israel has survived numerous wars and semi wars with enemies who want to eliminate Jews from the Middle East and the rest of the world. Those of us who were alive in 1948, and those born shortly after, have done what we could. A few countries in the Middle East have accepted Israel, and some have even entered into the Abraham Accords.

Perhaps it is time for a younger generation to move forward and try to bring Israel and our fellow Jews into peace with our enemies.

A time for everything. In the past week, we have observed yahrzeits for two grandfathers and for the Rebbe. On one of the yahrzeits, our friends Deborah & Josh Wilbur, and Meryll & Nat Shaffir, celebrated the wedding of their daughter/granddaughter Ashley (Wilbur) to Josh Kokhavim. Terrific young Jews like Ashley and Josh represent the future of our people, and may their mitzvot help start a golden period, with peace and safety for all our people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom, Hannah & Alan

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The Pain Does Not Dissapear, But It Can Heal Me

Essay by Rabbi YY Jacobson

No Complaining

After seventy years of communist oppression and seven hours of flying, Boris, a burly immigrant from Moscow steps off the plane in a free land to begin his new life in his new home, Israel. Standing at the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, a young and enthusiastic Israeli reporter plunges a microphone in front of him with a level of excitement that is only seen when an inside scoop is about to be caught. The reporter asks with focus: "Tell me, what was life back in Russia like?"

To which the Russian immigrant replies: "I couldn't complain."

An obviously unexpected answer, the young reporter continues to probe:

"Well how were your living quarters there?" To which the Russian responds "I couldn't complain."

Not expecting this answer either, the reporter decides to hit him with a question that is bound to get the answer he is looking for: "What about your standard of living?" To which the Russian replies again: "I couldn't complain."

At this point, the reporter's frustration with the new immigrant's answers reaches a crescendo, and so in a derogatory tone the reporter yells out, "Well, if everything was so wonderful back in Russia, then why did you even bother to come here?"

To which the new immigrant replies with gusto: "Oh, here I can complain!"

The Serpents

It is a strange episode -- in this week's portion of Chukas.

When poisonous snakes attack the Jews in the desert, G-d instructs Moses to fashion a special healing instrument: a pole topped with the form of a snake. Moses sculpted a snake of copper and duly placed it on top of a pole. Those who had been afflicted by the snake bite would gaze on the serpentine image on the pole and be cured [1].

According to some historians, this was the forerunner of the caduceus, the snake-entwined rod which is today the emblem of the medical profession. Yet the question is obvious: What was the point of placing a snake on top of the pole to cure the Jews who were bitten? If it was G-d who was healing them miraculously, why the need to look up at a copper snake atop a pole? The question is raised in the Talmud [2]:

"But is the snake capable of determining life and death?!" the Talmud asks.

And the answer is this: "Rather, when Israel would gaze upward and bind their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be healed; and if not, they

would perish." Fixing their eyes on the snake alone would not yield any cure; it was looking upward toward G-d, it was the relationship with G-d, which brought the cure.

But if so, why bother to carve out a copper snake in the first place, which can only make people believe that it is the copper snake that is the cause of healing?

In fact, this is exactly what occurred. The copper snake that Moses made was preserved for centuries. In the passage of time, however, its meaning became distorted, and people began to say that the snake possessed powers of its own. When it reached the point of becoming an image of idolatry, the Jewish King Hezekiah (in the 6th century BCE) destroyed the copper snake fashioned by Moses, and that was the end of that special copper snake [3]. Which only reinforces the question: Why ask people to look up at a man-made snake, which can lead down the path to a theological error of deifying the snake?

There is another question. The snake was the reptile that caused the harm in the first place. Healing, it would seem, would come from staying far away from serpents. Why, in this case, was the remedy born from gazing at the very venomous creature that caused the damage to begin with, which can only trigger more anxiety [4]?

A Tale of Two Snakes

The snake in the biblical story -- as all biblical stories capture the timeless journeys of the human psyche -- is also a metaphor for all of the "snakes" in our lives. Have you ever been bitten by a "venomous snake"? Poisoned by harmful people, burnt by life, or by abusive situations? Have you ever been crushed by a clueless principal, challenging parent, a manipulative boss, a deceiving partner, a toxic relationship? Were you ever back-stabbed by people you trusted? Is your anxiety killing you? Are you weary and demoralized by your life experience?

What is the deeper meaning of suffering? And how do some people know how to accept affliction with love and grace?

These are good questions that cannot be answered easily, if at all. But one perspective is presented in the story of the serpents. G-d tells Moses: "Make a serpent and place it on a pole. Whoever gets bitten should look at it and he will live." The key to healing, the Torah suggests, is not by fleeing the cause of the suffering, but by gazing at it. Don't run from the snake; look at it. Because deep inside the challenge, you will find the cure. Deep inside the pain, you will find the healing light.

But there is one qualification: you must look up to the snake; you must peer into the reality of the snake above, on top of the elevated pole, not on the serpent crawling here below.

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who had three Jewish grandparents and was considered by many to be one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, once said that his aim as a philosopher was, "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." The fly keeps banging its head against the glass in a vain attempt to get out. The more it tries, the more it fails, until it drops from exhaustion. The one thing it forgets to do is look to the sky.

Every experience in life can be seen from two dimensions -- from a concrete, earthly perspective, or from a higher, more sublime vantage point, appreciating its true nature and meaning from the Divine perspective. There is the "snake" down here, and there is the very same "snake" up there.

I can experience my challenges, struggles, and difficulties in the way they are manifested down here. But I can also look at these very same struggles from a more elevated point of view. The circumstances may not change, but their meaning and significance will. From the "downer" perspective, these challenges, curveballs, painful confrontations, and realizations can throw me into despair or drain me of my sap. From the "higher" perspective, the way G-d sees these very same realities, every challenge contains the seeds for rebirth. Within every crisis lies the possibility of a new and deeper discovery. Many of us know this from our personal stories: Events that at the time were so painful to endure, in retrospect were those that inspired the most growth. Those painful events moved us from the surface to the depths, challenging us

to become larger than we ever thought we can be, and stimulating conviction and clarity unknown to us before.

This is not about suppressing the pain. On the contrary, it is about taking the pain back to its deepest origin; going with it back to its primal source, seeing it for what it really is in its pristine state. We do not run from the snake, we rather look at it, but from a more sublime vantage point.

To perceive clarity from the midst of agonizing turmoil we are empowered to train ourselves to look upward. When faced with a "snake," with a challenge, many people look to their right or to their left. Either they fight, or they cave in. But there is another path: look upwards. See the "snake" from the perspective above.

Yes, I can feel the pain and have compassion for the grief. If I bypass this part, I may never find the higher snake, as I am just repressing or suppressing. Yet as I feel the "bite," I can now surrender and go deeper and higher.

And in that upward gaze, you might find a new sense of healing: the questions might become the very answers, the problems may become the solutions, and the venom may become the cure. Remarkably, snakebites today are cured with anti-venom manufactured from small quantities of snake venom that stimulate the production of antibodies in the blood. Sometimes, you will discover that you never really needed an intellectual answer. What you needed was to know that you are infinitely valuable and sacred, infinite and Divine. You are part of G-d even as you endure these experiences; essentially it was G-d who was experiencing all of this through you.

It's the same idea taught by Moses: The source of the affliction itself becomes the remedy [5]. This is true in all areas of life. As viewed by the Creator, from the perspective above, transgression is the potential for a new self-discovery; failure is the potential for deeper success, holes in a marriage are the seeds of "renovation" to recreate a far deeper relationship, the end of an era is always the beginning of a new one, pain is a springboard for deeper love and frustration is the mother of a new awareness [6].

Bless Me

This is the meaning in that famous, enigmatic passage in Genesis 32 in which Jacob, far from home, wrestles with an unknown, unnamed adversary from night until the break of day. The mysterious man maims Jacob, causing him to limp.

And yet at the end of a struggling night, a night to remember, Jacob says to the stranger/angel/God: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

"Bless me?!" Is this how you bid farewell to a man who attempts to destroy you?

Jacob was teaching us the secret of Jewish resilience. To be a Jew is to possess that unique ability to say to every crisis: "I will not let you go until you bless me."

I know that deep down your entire objective is to elevate me, to bring me to a higher place, to climb the mountain leading to the truth, allowing me to emerge stronger, wiser, and more blessed.[7]

[1] Numbers 21:6-10. [2] Rosh Hashana 29. [3] II Kings 18:4. [4] See Ramban: "This was a miracle within a miracle." The literal answer is that it was indeed insufficient to just ask G-d to save them, without the snake-on-a-pole therapy. The people had to gaze upon the snake and focus on the fact that only G-d, who created the snake in the first place, could transform that same venomous creature into a medium of healing. The people had to acknowledge that albeit they were bitten by a snake it was not the snake itself, but the creator of the snake, which was responsible for their life and death. They were looking at a snake but they were seeing G-d. The deeper perspective is presented below. [5] This same method of healing is used elsewhere. Moses used a bitter stick to sweeten bitter waters (Exodus 15:25). And it was salt that Elisha used to purify the harmful water (II Kings chapter 2). [6] The verse in Deuteronomy (13:4) "For G-d is testing you," is interpreted also as "For G-d is elevating you." In Hebrew, the same word -- Nesayon -- is used for a "test" and for "elevation." Every test, each challenge, is essentially also an invitation, an opportunity, for an elevation, for growth. In the story of the serpents too, the word used is "place it on a

pole," "sim oso al nes," on an elevated object. [7] This essay is based on Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi, Likkutei Torah Chukas pp. 61d-62b. For an elaborate explanation of this discourse in Likkutei Torah, see Sichas 12 Tamuz, 5729 (1969). The final insight about Yaakov's struggle I saw in an essay by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

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date: Jul 2, 2025, 4:30 AM subject: #34 שיעור שבועי בשיחות ראשי הישיבה תשפ"ה

שיעור שבועי בשיחות ראשי הישיבה תשפ"ה #34
חקת | טהרת מי חטאת – נצחון על המוות
הרב יעקב מדין תנ"ך
השיחה הועברה בפרשת חקת תשפ"ה, סוכה על ידי איתן סיון ונערכה על ידי שמואל ארגמן. סיכום השיחה עבר את ביקורת הרב

מה המצווה הזאת
פרשת חוקת נפתחת עם מענה לבעיה אשר נוצרת בעקבות טומאת המת. אדם אשר נטמא, אסור בקרבה אל המקדש ואל הקב"ה. על כן, ה' נותן פתרון לטמאת המת – הפרה האדומה. על ידי הזאת אפר שריפת הפרה בערבוב עם מים, האדם נטהר מטומאתו. מצוות פרה אדומה מזוהה עם קבוצת המצוות אשר איננו מבינים מה עומד בשרוש המצווה, ואולי היא המצווה הכי פחות ברורה. מפורסמים דברי רש"י בפתחת הפרשה
זאת חקת התורה – לפי שהשטן ואומות העולם מונין את ישראל לומר מה המצווה הזאת ומה טעם יש בה, לפיכך כתב בה חקת: גזירה היא מלפני ואין לך רשות להרהר אחריה. (על במדבר יט, ב)

אומות העולם שואלים מה טעם במצווה זו, וטוענים שאין מאחוריה שום היגיון. אך מה ראו לנכון השטן ואומות העולם לדבר עם בני ישראל דווקא על הציווי של פרה אדומה, הרי יש מצוות רבות אשר לא מובנות לנו כלל. מה ראו לנכון להעדיף את מצוות פרה אדומה על פני מרכיבי הקטורת, הפרים המוקרבים בכל יום בסוכות, או החוקים המדויקים בתורת הנסכים? נראה שעל מנת לענות על שאלה זו יש להתבונן בחלק ממנגנוני הפרה האדומה היחודיים לה, על מנת להבין את קטרוגם של השטן ואומות העולם. חרף התפיסה הרווחת כי אין טעם במצווה, ננסה לעמוד ולהבין חלק מצומצם מהציווי התמוה של פרה אדומה

שחוטין חוץ
ראשית כל, יש להבין את המנגנון התמוה אשר מוכר לנו מתהליך ההיטהרות – בו דווקא בתהליך של טהרה שנוצר בעקבות אפר הפרה, האדם שמתעסק בה נהיה טמא והשורץ אהב יכבס בגדיו במים ורחץ בשרו במים וטמא עד הערב: ... וכבס האספסוף את אפר הפרה את בשרו וטמא עד הערב ורחץ בשרו במים וטמא עד הערב: (ויקרא יז, ט-ז)

מעין בפרשיית התורה, נדמה שהציוויים אשר מופיעים בפרה אדומה, שחיתתה ושריפתה, מקבילים במידה רבה לדיני הקרבנות ביום הכיפורים
ישנה הקבלה בין השעיר המשלח ופרה אדומה, בכך ששניהם נשחטים מחוץ למקדש. השעיר לעזאזל, כידוע, לאחר סמיכה על ידי הכהן הגדול (המדמה תהליך של קרבן), נזרק מראש ההר ומושמד כליל. גם 'הקרב' הפרה האדומה נעשית מחוץ למקדש, בהר המשחה, הר הזיתים עוד מרכיב המדמה את יום הכיפורים הוא ההקבלה של פרה האדומה לפר כהן גדול. שניהם נשרפים באופן מלא מחוץ למשכן – פר הציבור נשרף לאחר הקרבת אימוריו, וגם בו יש מרכיב מסוים שמדמה את שחיתת החוץ

בא לו אצל פר ושעיר הנשרפין, קרען והוציא את אימוריהן, נתנן במגיס והקטירן על גבי המזבח. קלען במקלעות, והוציאן לבית השריפה. (משנה יומא ו, ז)
בדומה אליו, על מנת להפיק את אפר הפרה האדומה יש לשרוף את כל הפרה עד היסוד לכאורה, שלושת הקרבנות האלו אמורים לגרום לאדם מישראל לנוע באי נוחות, שהרי ידוע: שיש איסור חמור להקרבת קורבנות מחוץ למשכן
איש איש מבית ישראל אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחַט שׂוֹר או כֶּשֶׂב או עֵז בַּמִּתְּנָה או אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחַט מִחוּץ לַמִּתְּנָה: וְאֵל פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תָבִיאוּ לְהַקְרִיב קָרְבָן לַה' לִפְנֵי מִשְׁכַּן ה' דָּם יִחָשֵׁב לְאִישׁ הַהוּא דָם שִׁפְךָ וְנִקְרָת הָאִישׁ הַהוּא מִקֶּרֶב עַמּוֹ: (ויקרא יז, ג-ד)

נראה כי זוהי הסיבה שהשטן ואומות העולם בחרו להתמקד דווקא במצווה זו, שהרי לכאורה היא סותרת את רצונו של הקב"ה! אומות העולם מבקרים את עם ישראל, שגם הם מקריבים קורבנות בחוץ, לכאורה בדומה לעובדי עבודה זרה

נראה, שאכן יש בעיתיות בשחיתת הפרה ושרפתה מחוץ למקדש, ובשל כך כל אדם שמתעסק בשחיתת ובאיסוף האפר נטמא. לאחר שהבנו את הטומאה של המטהר, עלינו להבין מה עומד בשרוש תהליך טהרתו של הטמא

אפר ומים חיים
בעת הזאת אפר הפרה האדומה, האדם אשר אפר הפרה נוגע עליו נטהר מטומאתו. תהליך הטהרה אינו טריוויאלי ממבט ראשוני – היה מקום לחשוב שאדם שנטמא בטומאת המת יהיה טמא נצחי, ממש כמו מותו של האדם שהוא נצחי. הבנה חדשה נלמדת מביטוי מפת שמופיע בפסוקים:
וְלִקְחוּ לְטָמֵא מִעֵפֶר שְׂרֵפֶת הַחַטָּאת וְנָתַן עָלָיו מִים חַיִּים אֶל קָלִי. (במדבר יט, יז)

הביטוי 'עפר' ביחס לאפר שריפת הפרה תמוה מאוד. אמנם ניתן לטעון כי האפר התערבב עם העפר אשר על פני הקרקע, אך השימוש של התורה בביטוי עפר תמוה, שהרי עדיין יש כאן "אפר כתוצאה משריפת הפרה, ולמה בחרה התורה לקרוא לחומר זה 'עפר'?

השילוב בין עפר ואפר מופיע במילותיו של אברהם ל-ה' בסיפור התחינה על אנשי סדום וצֵעַן אֲבָרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאֵלְתִּי לְדָבָר אֵל אֲדֹנָי וְאֲנִי עֹפֶר וְאֶפֶר. (בראשית יח, כז)
המדרש (בראשית רבה מט, יא) מסביר שבאמירת 'וְאֲנִי עֹפֶר וְאֶפֶר' אברהם אומר שכבר היה עליו למות. נראה ששורש ביטוי זה נעוץ בדרכי הקבורה. בתרבויות העתיקות היה למת שני דרכים להתייחס לגופו ביציאתו מהעולם – שריפה וקבורה, אפר ועפר. כלומר ביטוי זה מסמל מוות וסופיות

האדם הראשון נברא כאדם אשר היה אמור להתקיים לנצח. ואכן, הרושם של הקורא את פסוקי בראשית בפעם הראשונה הינה שלאחר בריאת העולם יש אוטופיה גמורה, אך כוחות האופל בעולם – בדמותו של הנחש – גרמו לאדם לחטוא ולאבד את חייו ובכך 'להרוס' את התוכנית של הקב"ה. המוות מהווה אות ניצחון של כוחות האופל על ייעודו של ה' לאדם מנגד, אפר הפרה האדומה מתערבב עם מים חיים. המים מסמלים את הנצחיות התמידית – מים חיים. בפסוקי הבריאה, לא מוזכר כי הקב"ה ברא את המים יש מאין, אלא רק שינה בהם את 'הצורה בהם היו. כלומר, עוד לפני בריאת העולם המים היו קיימים, ונשארו עד היום 'חיים' בראשית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ יְיָ מְרַחֵף עַל פְּתוֹחַ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֵף עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: (בראשית א, א-ב) מְקַדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם: וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָרָקִיעַ וַיְבָרֶךְ בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֶשֶׁר אֶשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לָרָקִיעַ וַיְבִרְךְ בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֶשֶׁר מִעַל לָרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי כֵן: (שם, ו-ז)

המים מייצגים לידה מחדש, חיים מחודשים. כיוון זה מובן לנו בטהרתו של הזב, בו הטמא טובל במקווה מים חיים – מעין – וכתוצאה מכך נברא מחדש. הסמליות של המים כהתחלה חדשה עומדת כהפך הגמור למוות אשר מזכיר האפר

נראה כי השילוב בין האפר למים, בהזאה על האדם שראה וקרב אל המת, מסמל ניגודיות שנוצרת במוות. המת, גופתו נעלמת מן העולם ונבלעת בעפר, אך נראה שיש בו מרכיב שלא ימות לעולם, המים החיים שבו – הנשמה, שתחיה לנצח. הפרה האדומה מלמדת אותנו כי יש לאדם נצחיות, ויש תקווה ואמונה בעולמנו, יש לאדם משמעות לחיות את חייו – שהרי גם אם מחר ימות, חלק ממנו ימשיך להתקיים לנצח. הגיוני גם לקשר זאת לנצחון של הקב"ה והאור בעולם על החושך שהטיל הנחש על חיינו בכך שנהפך האדם לבן תמותה, ומעין תיקון על חטא האדם הראשון

כך גם הטהרה מסמלת תקווה שיש בעולם, הטומאה אינה תמידית – לאדם יש יכולת לצאת מהטומאה ולהיטהר ולחזור לתלם. הפרה האדומה בפרטיה, מסמלת את נצחיות הנשמה, את התקווה מאחורי הייאוש שמאחורי המוות ואיבוד הגוף לנצח

Parshas Chukat: Revisiting Mei Merivah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. The Text: Bamidar 20:1-13

1 And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. 2 And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: >Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before Hashem! 4 And why have you brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? 5 And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.= 6 And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of Hashem appeared unto them. 7 And Hashem spoke unto Moses, saying: 8 >Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock; so thou shalt give the congregation and their cattle drink.= 9 And Moses took the rod from before Hashem, as He commanded him. 10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said unto them: >Hear now, ye rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?= 11 And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. 12 And Hashem said unto Moses and Aaron: >Because ye believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.= 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Hashem, and He was sanctified in them.

II. The Method

A: The panoramic view

Immediately when reading the text, besides the well-known question of the gravity of the punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron and identifying the particular sin of which they are held liable B we find another oddity. The mention of the death and burial of Miriam seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the story and doesn't seem to belong here. (The midrashic device of Miriam=s well [Tosefta Sotah 11:1, Seder Olam Rabbah Ch. 10] seems to have been introduced to solve this problem. The gist of the Midrash is that perhaps her death occasioned an unexpected thirst that caused the crisis. A cursory look at the sources cited above will bear this out.)

Any student of Tanakh will have long realized that deaths and burials are never inherently significant (except, perhaps, in the royal chronicles of Melakhim as part of the royal-biography formula) B deaths and/or burials mentioned in the text are reported due to another consideration. Often as not, it is a demonstration of the fulfillment of a Divine promise (e.g. the funeral of Jacob was a direct fulfillment of God=s last words to him in Gen. 46:4; the death of Sarah was occasion for Abraham to finally realize God=s commitment of over 60 years that he will inherit the Land); as such, the mention of Miriam=s death and burial seems to be unnecessary here.

Note that the complaint of the people isn't about thirst B they only mention Au-mayim ayin lish=tot@ (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought B strangely enough, their main complaint is about the desert not being a land for seed, figs, grapes and pomegranates, which rests upon an odd premise. Why would the Israelites think that this way-station on their way to the Agood, wide land@ should have any of those resources?

In numerous essays, I=ve underscored that a successful reader of Tanakh must become Apart of the story@ B we, the omniscient reader, know how everything is going to turn out; we know that Pharaoh will refuse, we know that Esau will discover Jacob=s masquerade, we know that Rachel will die on the road B and we know that Moses will never enter the Land. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do B either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are B just that they have been traveling for a long time with a beautiful land awaiting them at the end of that journey. They may have heard that the Land is Aflowing with milk and honey,@ they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8) B but all that they=ve seen is grapes, figs and pomegranates B which, surprisingly, lists exactly the same three types of fruit brought back by the scouts (above, 13:23), the absence of which they bemoaned here.

SoYthe Israelites must have thought they were in Israel B and that=s why they are complaining about the lack of fig and pomegranate trees and grape vines. What might have given them the idea that they had already reached that Land?

The answer lies in again, using the frame of reference of the people themselves; in the middle of our camp, held in trust by the Levites, is a box containing Joseph=s bones. Why didn=t we bury our ancestor in Egypt? Evidently, we bury important people in the Land B Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried Aout there@ (except for the entire generation that passed away in the dessert and whose death was a fulfillment of a Divine decree). SoYif Miriam died and was buried Athere@ (Asham@), we must have arrived at the Land!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis B the people believe that they=ve arrived B but the Abeautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit@ is nowhere to be seen. AAnd what of the grapes, figs and pomegranates which we=ve seen with our own eyes (or our parents saw and related to us)?@

B: Anticipatory reading

We would expect that Moses= response B or that directed by God that he take B would be to assure them that they are still on the road, not yet arrived and that, indeed, the Land to which they are coming is truly filled with luscious fruits and grains.

It takes a strong imagination to be able to see the text as it is not, to imagine what might have come next and then to Abe surprised@ at what actually ensues. This is nothing less than the traditional approach of Midrash (especially Midrash Halakhah) which is built on what should be written and then allowing what is written to teach additional lessons. We train ourselves to recognize a rhetorical pattern in Tanakh, whether it be nomenclature (see Rashi=s comment at Gen. 1:1 noting that the Aunexpected@ use of Elokim followed, in ch. 2 [v. 4 ff.] by Hashem Elokim indicates a change in ADivine Policy@ vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of Biblical literature, we train ourselves to notice what is Aoff@ about a particular passage and what that unusual twist may be signaling. This also makes reading the classical medieval commentators that much more empowering and impactful, as the students can already identify with Awhat=s bothering Rashi/Ramban/ibn Ezra (etc.).?@

As such, we are surprised that God neither instructs Moses to march them into the Land or to inform them that they haven=t yet arrived B which we can take in one of two ways. Either our hypothesis is wrong and the confrontation between Moses and the people isn=t about the Land, but about thirst B or we may be right, but there may also be something bigger going on, beneath the superficial complaint, and that is what God is instructing Moses to address.

C: Back to the panoramic view

If we take a look at the passage, we can see that the people=s complaint doesn=t jibe with what we know about the narrative. We know that God took the people out of Egypt, that God is leading them through the desert and directing their travels B but we are so accustomed to hearing the people=s plaint to Moses (and Aaron): AWhy have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wildernessYAnd why have YOU made us to come up out of EgyptY@ that we don=t necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren=t they angry at B or disappointed with B God, who has led them to this place?

There is a simple answer which, at once, illuminates and disappoints: The Israelites of this new generation believe, as did their parents, that it was Moses and Aaron who led them out of Egypt and who are leading them through the desertYin effect, nothing has changed since the complaints first registered just after we were miraculously brought through the Sea (Exodus chapters 15-17).

D: The Crisis: A Summary

We can identify three different issues going on in our passage B

- 1) An elemental and existential need for water B as confirmed by v. 2
- 2) A disenchantment with the ALand@ that they believe they have come to (v. 5)
- 3) A gross theological error about who (or Who) is leading them

Furthermore, we can then identify a causal chain of malaise: The lack of water opens up the wounds about the place, which in turns reveals a festering problem of belief.

E: Testing the hypothesis

If we are right, then we should expect God=s response to address the ultimate problem of belief; He does so (as we will discover forthwith) without sacrificing a solution to the most immediate problem of water. He directs Moses to act in such a way that belief in God=s all-encompassing role in their deliverance, journeys and eventual destination would be confirmed.

The command to take the staff implies that Moses should use it to strike the rock (as ibn Ezra argues, and based on the parallel story in Exodus 17; see, however, R. Yoseph B=chor Shor=s comments here); what are we to make of the directive Ave-dibbartem el ha-sela@. Here again, the students= familiarity with the rest of Tanakh, their learning to focus only on the text (and suspend interpretive memories) and to read with anticipation will help.

Here is where our trusty tool, the Concordance, comes in handy. To be fair, a concordance proper wouldn=t help here; but familiarity with Tanakh (Abekiut@) is the larger meaning and intent here. As there is no other occasion in all of Tanakh when anyone is commanded to speak to (and command) an inanimate object, perhaps we should challenge the usual translation of the prepositional el and to read, rather al (here we can use a Areal@ concordance; there are dozens of examples in the canon where the two are interchanged) and read, rather, Aspeak about the boulder@ and understand that Moses and Aaron were directed to speak to the people, in front of the rock, about that selfsame boulder. But what were they to say?

Once we recall the underlying crisis of faith that lies at the heart of our textual onion, we may come to the conclusion that Moses and Aaron were to use the rock as a way of showing the people that it was God, not they, who were directing the people=s lives, feeding them, leading them and protecting them through the desert.

Our hypothesis, that the real cause of the crisis was the people=s misconception about Moses and Aaron=s role in their destiny, can now be substantiated and, at the very least, we can continue to use it as a tentative approach as we come to the denouement of the passage.

F: The Asin@

What do we expect Moses to say at this point? (more Aanticipatory reading@) Al will bring water from the rock, something no human can accomplish B therefore, you all see that it is God Almighty who is protecting and leading us@Y.or something to that effect.

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point Aha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?@ B but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen=s mother declares ADo you call this a clean room@ B her son understands that she is calling it a mess B but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing B he may think that she is impressed with his work or even asking him what he thinks about the room.

Evidently, the new generation of Israelites didn't properly understand Moses' intent and his opportunity to inspire belief was lost & they could have been moved by his words to renew their belief in God, but instead (evidently) understood his words as anger, or defiance; either way, as confirmation of their belief in Moses as the Wizard who was leading them.

A careful read of God's punishment is not that Moses and Aaron were punished with being condemned to die in the desert; but were stripped of their leadership. Read not *Alo tavo=* & you shall not come & rather *Alo tavi=* & you shall not lead; the inability to lead this new generation, evidenced by a communication gap between the old leader and the new community, necessitated a removal of Moses from the helm of leadership.

III. AFTERWORD

In this brief essay, we've looked at the infamous Waters of Strife, a scene that, in one sense or another, signals the end of Moses' leadership of the people. We've utilized various methodological tools to assay the narrative and to cut between the lines of the story to identify the underlying issues and how they interrelate. By using our familiarity with Tanakh in general, with the desert narratives in particular, we were able to identify several anomalies in the text and place them in (tentative) proper perspective. By utilizing the skill of Anticipatory reading, we allowed ourselves to be surprised by the text and to take a fresh look at this well-studied Parashah.

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Parshat Chukat

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Parashat Hukat is a potpourri of different events and literary modes: it begins with halakha (Para Aduma) and then moves to narrative, recounting a(nother) tale of rebellion (a two-fold tale of rebellion, as we shall see), moving on to several military battles (or near-battles) with other nations, and telling of the death of Aharon. Besides legal and narrative material, there is also a light sprinkling of poetry.

So much for the overview. We will focus on the episode of Mei Meriva, the place where Moshe and Aharon disobey Hashem's command:

1. What is Moshe's crime? Is the crime simply that he strikes instead of speaking to the rock, and that this is not precisely what Hashem had commanded? If there is deeper significance to the crime, what is it?
2. Perhaps another way to ask the question: what does Hashem want to accomplish in having the rock provide water when spoken to, and how does Moshe's action fail to accomplish this goal? If Hashem wants to impress the people with this miracle, what is the difference whether the rock provides water when spoken to or when struck? Isn't it a miracle either way? And what's the big deal anyway -- Hashem has split the sea for this nation, causes their daily bread to rain from the sky, caused the Earth to swallow some rebels in last week's parasha; are these people going to be impressed by water from a rock?
3. What is Aharon's crime, given that the Torah tells us that Moshe is the one who strikes the rock?
4. Why does Moshe hit the rock twice instead of just once? Or, to phrase it somewhat differently, why doesn't Hashem cause the water to come out after just one hit?
5. Why do Moshe and Aharon do it? Why, after all, do they disobey Hashem and hit the rock? We are not talking about the common folk, malingerers, complainers, yesterday's slaves -- we are talking about Moshe and Aharon! Moshe, "My servant Moshe," "the most trusted in My entire house," the one God speaks to "like a man speaks to his friend." How is this very same Moshe capable of rebellion? Aharon, the chosen holiest -- joining the rebels against Hashem?
6. What exactly is their punishment for disobeying Hashem? Take a careful look at the text to see how the punishment is worded.
7. How is this punishment appropriate to the crime?
8. In the end of this short section, we hear that Hashem is "sanctified" ("va-yi-kkadesh"). But how is He sanctified?
9. There are several poems in the parasha. At least one of them may be very important for understanding our story. Which is it, and why is it important?
10. It is crucial also to look at other places in which the Torah refers to this story. See the following places: BeMidbar 20, BeMidbar 27, Devarim 1, Devarim 3, Devarim 32, Devarim 34.

TO BEGIN:

One way in which to understand the episode facing us is to look through the Torah for whatever evidence seems relevant. So before commenting extensively on any one section, we will first survey the various places in the Torah where the episode is mentioned.

BEMIDBAR 20:1-13 – Now they came, Bnei Yisrael, the entire community, to the wilderness of Tzin, in the first month. The people stayed in Kadesh. Miryam died there, and she was buried there.

Now there was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moshe and against Aharon; the people quarreled with Moshe, they said, saying: "Would that we had expired when our brothers expired before the presence of Hashem!"

Why did you bring the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness, to die there, us and our cattle? Why did you make us go up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place -- not a place of seeds and figs, vines and pomegranates! And water there is none to drink!"

Moshe and Aharon came away from the presence of the Assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Appointment, and flung themselves upon their faces. The glory of Hashem appeared to them, and Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aharon your brother; you are to speak to the boulder before their eyes so that it gives forth its water; thus you are to bring out for them water from the boulder, that you may give drink to the assembly and to their cattle."

So Moshe took the staff from before the presence of Hashem, as He had commanded him. And Moshe and Aharon assembled the Assembly facing the boulder. He said to them: "Now hear, you rebels, from this boulder shall we bring you out water?" Moshe raised his hand and struck the boulder with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out; and the community and their cattle drank. Now Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon: "Because you did not trust in Me, to sanctify me before the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I give to them!" Those were the waters of Meriva/quarreling, where Bnei Yisrael quarreled with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them.

BEMIDBAR 20:22-29 – They marched on from Kadesh, and they came, Bnei Yisrael, the entire community, to Hor ha-Har. Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon at Hor ha-Har, by the border of the land of Edom, saying: "Let Aharon be gathered to his people, for he is not to enter the Land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael, since you rebelled against My orders at the waters of Meriva. Take Aharon and Elazar his son, and bring them up on Hor ha-Har; strip Aharon of his garments and clothe in them Elazar, his son. Aharon will be gathered up and will die there." So Moshe did as Hashem commanded him: they went up Hor ha-Har before the eyes of the entire community; Moshe stripped Aharon of his garments and clothed in them Elazar, his son. So Aharon died there on top of the hill. When Moshe and Elazar came down from the hill, the entire community saw that Aharon had expired, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the whole House of Yisrael.

BEMIDBAR 27:12-19 – Hashem said to Moshe: "Go up this mountain . . . and see the land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael. When you have seen it, you will be gathered to your people, even you, as Aharon your brother was gathered; since you rebelled against My order in the wilderness of Tzin when the community quarreled, to sanctify Me through water before their eyes; they are the waters of quarreling at Kadesh, in the wilderness of Tzin."

Then Moshe spoke to Hashem, saying: "Let Hashem, the God of the spirits of all flesh, designate a man over the community who will go out before them, who will come back before them, who will lead them out, who will bring them back, so that the community of Hashem will not be like a flock that has no shepherd." Hashem said to Moshe: "Take yourself Yehoshua son of Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, and lean your hand upon him. You are to stand him before Elazar the priest and before the entire community, and you are to commission him before their eyes."

DEVARIM 1:37-38 – "Also at me was Hashem angry for your sake, saying: "You also will not enter there! Yehoshua son of Nun, who stands before you, he will enter there; him shall you strengthen, for he will give it as inheritance to Yisrael."

DEVARIM 3:24-29 – "I pleaded with Hashem at that time, saying: 'My Lord Hashem, You have begun to let Your servant see Your greatness and Your strong hand; who is so powerful in heaven and on earth that he can do the like of Your deeds and Your power! Pray, let me cross over, that I may see the good land that is across the Jordan, this good hill country, and the Lebanon!' But Hashem was angry with me on your account, and He would not listen to me. Hashem said to me: 'Enough for you! Do not speak to Me any more again about this matter! Go up to the top of the range and lift up your eyes -- toward the sea, toward the north, toward the south, and toward sunrise; see it with your eyes, for you will not cross this Jordan! But command Yehoshua, make him strong, make him courageous, for he will cross over before this people, and he will cause them to inherit the land that you see.'"

DEVARIM 32:48-52 – Hashem spoke to Moshe on that same day, saying: "Go up these heights . . . Mount Nevo, that is in the land of Mo'av, that faces Jericho, and see the land of Canaan that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael for a holding. You are to

die on the mountain that you are going up, and are to be gathered to your people, as Aharon your brother died . . . and was gathered to his people, because you *MA'ALTEM* Me in the midst of Bnei Yisrael at the waters of the quarrel at Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin, because you did not sanctify Me among Bnei Yisrael. Indeed, at a distance you shall see the land, but there you shall not enter, the land that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael."

*note: "ma'altam" comes from the root "ma'al," to take something which is dedicated to a holy purpose, i.e., property of Hashem, and use it for personal benefit.

DEVARIM 34:1-6 – Moshe went up from the Plains of Mo'av to Mount Nevo, at the top of the range that faces Jericho, and Hashem let him see all the land: Gil'ad as far as Dan, and all Naftali, and the land of Efrayyim and Menashe, and all the land of Yehuda, as far as the hindmost sea, and the Negev and the round-plain, the cleft of Jericho, the town of palms, as far as Tzo'ar. And Hashem said to him, "This is the land that I swore to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to Ya'akov, saying, 'To your seed I give it!' I have let you see it with your eyes, but there you shall not cross!" So there died Moshe, servant of Hashem

Two distinct patterns appear in almost all of these passages:

1) There is a consistent pattern of "seeing":

- a) Bem. 20: The original event at Kadesh takes places "in the EYES of the congregation": Hashem wants everyone to gather and witness the miracle.
- b) Bem. 20: Aharon ascends the mountain "in the EYES of the people." When Moshe returns, the entire nation "SEES" that Aharon has died.
- c) Bem. 27: Moshe is told -- twice -- that he will "SEE the land" but not enter it. Then Hashem repeats that the sin he committed was "in the EYES of Bnei Yisrael."
- d) Dev. 1: [no "seeing" pattern here].
- e) Dev. 3: Moshe begs to "SEE the land," by which he means to allow him to enter the land; Hashem refuses him, telling him he will only "SEE with his EYES," but not enter there.
- f) Dev. 32: Hashem repeats -- twice more -- that Moshe is to "SEE the land" but cannot enter it.
- g) Dev. 34: Hashem "SHOWS" Moshe the land, then tells him, "I have SHOWN you in your EYES, but you will not pass to there."

2) There is also a consistent pattern of succession and successors connected explicitly with the punishment of Moshe and Aharon. This confirms that the punishment is not merely a personal one -- that these two people will lose their privilege of entering Eretz Yisrael -- but that they are punished by losing the leadership of the people. They will not lead the people into the Land:

- a) Bem. 20: The original event: "You shall not bring the people"
- b) Bem. 20: Aharon dies in such a manner as to make the succession of Elazar an integral part of his death: the High Priestly clothing is removed from him and placed upon his son, and then he dies, as his son succeeds him.
- c) Bem. 27: when Hashem commands that he die, Moshe responds by worrying about the succession; Hashem commands him to appoint Yehoshua, and he does so.
- d) Dev. 1: "Encourage Yehoshua."
- e) Dev. 3: "Encourage Yehoshua."
- f) Dev. 32: "Encourage Yehoshua" (not in the text above, but just before the Song of Ha'azinu, 32:22-23).

g) Dev. 34: [not part of the succession pattern].

These two patterns are important because they hint at 1) what Moshe and Aharon's crime is, and 2) what the nature of their punishment is. **The crime is somehow tied to seeing, to the people's seeing something they should not have seen, and the punishment is played out in their losing their positions as leaders of the people. We will return to these issues in the course of our discussion.**

To move back to the account in BeMidbar 20 itself, what does the Torah tell us about the sin? Mefarshim (commentators) offer many possibilities:

1) Abravanel: this is the straw that broke the camel's back. In truth, Aharon loses the right to enter Eretz Yisrael because he built the Egel (Golden Calf) back in Sefer Shemot (Exodus); Moshe is punished for encouraging the meraglim (spies) in Parashat Shelah, which we read two weeks ago. Both of these episodes contributed to the people's loss of their privilege to enter the land; the crime at Kadesh was only the minor crime of hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it, but it added just enough to tip the scales in favor of punishment for Moshe and Aharon.

Abravanel is motivated to suggest this interpretation because hitting the rock seems so minor a crime, and the punishment which ensues seems too harsh. His solution: the punishment addresses more serious wrongs. One weakness with this interpretation, however, is that, as the above citations from the Torah show, the Torah repeatedly focuses on this *particular* episode as the key to Moshe and Aharon's loss of their privilege to enter the Land. This focus is undue if the real focus is on the Egel and the spies.

2) **Hazal: the crime was that Moshe spoke roughly to the people as he provided them with water:** "Listen, you rebels!" Despite its didactic significance, this interpretation is difficult, as several mefarshim (commentators) point out: if Moshe's manner of addressing the people is such a great crime, Moshe seems not to have learned his lesson, as in Sefer Devarim (Deuteronomy), he tells the people, "You have been rebels against Hashem from the day I knew you!"

3) Several mefarshim suggest that hitting is less impressive than speaking, so by hitting the rock, Moshe destroyed an opportunity for greater kiddush Hashem (sanctification of God's name). Ramban responds to this suggestion by pointing out that from the perspective of physics, hitting and speaking should be equally likely to cause water to come out of a rock, so both would be equally miraculous. Abravanel raises the additional problem that hitting as opposed to speaking seems too minor a crime to merit such a weighty punishment.

4) Rashi: speaking to the rock would have inspired people to draw a "kal va-homer" (a fortiori reasoning) to themselves: "If the rock is obedient when Hashem (or His servant) speaks to it, surely we should be at least as obedient as the rock!" As an inspiring midrashic perspective, this suggestion is beautiful and has much merit. But it is difficult to believe that the stiff-necked people we know so well from the rest of BeMidbar would be so easily and so subtly inspired. In addition, as Ramban points out, if this is indeed the crime, why does Hashem later describe it as "me'ila," which implies that Moshe and Aharon usurped a prerogative of Hashem's?

5) **Rambam (Shemona Perakim): the crime was Moshe and Aharon's inappropriate anger with the people.** This suggestion is vehemently and powerfully rejected by the Ramban, who points out that this does not account for the phrases we find in the various descriptions of the sin: "You did not believe in Me," "You rebelled against My word," etc. [Rambam's suggestion does, of course, fit nicely with his view of anger: unlike other personal characteristics, with regard to which Rambam advocates moderation, when it comes to anger (and arrogance), Rambam insists that we must be radical, allowing no room at all for this emotion. It is understandable, in this light, how anger in Moshe and Aharon would be understood as a fundamental failing and a grave sin.]

6) Ibn Ezra: Moshe's sin was in his momentary distraction from his usually perfect spiritual concentration on Hashem. This, I believe, is difficult to refute, but even more difficult to support from the text or from logic.

7) Rabbeinu Hananel, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Ramban, Sefer Ha-Ikkarim (R. Yosef Albo): Moshe and Aharon did not make clear who had caused the water to come out; it sounded like Moshe and Aharon were ascribing to themselves (rather than to Hashem) the act of providing water. This is supported by the text, which has Moshe and Aharon saying, "Now hear, you rebels, from this boulder shall ****we**** bring water for you?"

This last possibility is the one to which we will now turn our attention, as it is a fascinating and usually neglected perspective.

Read Bem. 20 again and think about the following: What is the people's complaint? Is it any different from any of the complaints we have seen before?

The people blame Moshe and Aharon for their misery and for the entire process which has ripped them away from Egypt -- that great carefree vacation-land, that Eden of luxury and leisure -- and dropped them into the barren and waterless desert. There is nothing new about this sort of talk. But one element seems new: the people refer to themselves as "Hashem's people"! Instead of just saying "us," they refer to themselves as "Hashem's nation." In other words, it is not just "us," a group of innocent people whom you have harmed -- it is Hashem who has been stricken, in effect, by your leading His nation into this predicament! This is a new level of chutzpah: accusing Hashem's chief messenger of having led His people astray!

Moshe and Aharon have no response. This, too, is not new, as we noted in Parashat Shelah, where Moshe has no response to the evil report of the spies. Moshe and Aharon now turn to Hashem, who delivers a series of instructions to them. Hashem wants to provide water for the people in a public, miraculous way: "Speak to the rock and extract from it water for the people and their animals."

Moshe bitterly says to the people, "You rebels! Will we now take water from this rock for you?" Let us leave this enigmatic phrase for now; we will return to it soon.

Now look at the poem in 21:17-18:

"Then Israel sang this song:
'Spring up, O well, sing in chorus to it;
The well that was dug out by princes
That was excavated by nobles of the people
With scepter
With their rods.'"

Now, to whom do the people give credit for the well in this joyous song? To Moshe and Aharon: they are the "princes" or "nobles" who dug out the well with their "scepter," their staff! The people give Moshe and Aharon credit for the great miracle of providing them with water; the credit was supposed to have gone to Hashem, but instead goes to Moshe and Aharon. Now look back at the story of the rock: where is the source for the people's giving credit for the miracle to Moshe and Aharon?

"Will ****we**** now take water for you from this rock?"

There are a number of ways to understand this enigmatic phrase:

1) "You ungrateful people! Don't you realize Hashem is among you, providing all your needs? Look here -- can Aharon and I get water from a rock? Certainly not! So if water does indeed come out of this rock, you will know that it is Hashem who has done it!"

2) "You ungrateful people! Don't you see what Aharon and I have done for you, providing for all your needs (by representing you before Hashem)? How can you accuse us of bringing 'Hashem's people' into the wilderness to die? You ungrateful rebels, we are about to facilitate another miracle for you, even as you rebel against us and reject us -- look here, is it possible for us to get water from this rock? Watch closely!"

Which of these interpretations is superior? Let us give some context to this story, and then we will decide. (Please note that all of what follows is brief summary of issues we have discussed in much greater detail in previous weeks, so if you haven't been with us for those weeks and think that the stuff below seems kind of skimpy and unsubstantiated, please visit <http://parsha-themes.homepage.com> for these parshiot.)

Sefer BeMidbar starts with the organization of the nation into an integrated religious and military organism. But these grand structures soon begin to crumble, as the people refuse to bend themselves into the shapes demanded by the new structure.

1) BeHa'alotekha: The people complain for water, then for meat. Moshe experiences a catastrophic sense of failure as a leader: he is unable to provide for his "baby," as he puts it. He cannot meet the people's needs, and he turns to Hashem in anger at the burden placed upon him. Hashem accedes to Moshe's request to share the burden of leadership with others -- the Zekenim (Elders). While this spreads the burden onto other shoulders, it does not mitigate Moshe's feeling of powerlessness and failure. He believes that he may have been right from the very beginning, when he said to Hashem in Sefer Shemot: "I am not a man of words"; "Send someone else -- anyone!"; "I am a man of uncircumcised lips." Send someone else, I am not capable of the job.

Hashem then turns to the problem at hand -- providing the people with meat -- and instructs Moshe to let the people know that meat will soon be arriving. Moshe refuses to believe it: there is not enough meat in the whole world for the people! Hashem scolds Moshe, but gently: "Is God's arm too short? Now you shall see if My words come to pass or not!" In Moshe's mind, the task of feeding the people had for a moment loomed impossibly enormous, so overwhelming that it surpassed even what Hashem could do. Moshe's feeling of failure and despair is so black that for a moment, it is not only *he* who cannot feed the people, but that the people simply cannot be fed. It is an impossible task.

This is the first sign that Moshe's faltering belief in himself has begun to affect his function as the conduit between Hashem and the people: he momentarily loses sight of Hashem's omnipotence.

The next crucial event is Miryam's harsh criticism of Moshe, which we discussed in detail last week. Miryam's words are so painful to Moshe not only because they are so patently false -- the humblest of all men did not marry a Cushite woman in order to take on airs -- but because it is his very sister who voices the words, and Moshe, the humblest of all men, is deeply affected by them. Moshe is shaken: perhaps she is right -- perhaps he has taken more honor and authority than his due. Moshe, so vulnerable, so humble, is so hurt by Miryam's words. Hashem responds ferociously, trying to prop Moshe up by purposely scolding Miryam in Moshe's presence. Hashem delivers a breathtaking account of Moshe's special place in Hashem's "house," attempting to undo the damage Miryam's words have done, but it is too late. Moshe has been seriously weakened.

2) Shelah: the debacle of the spies shows again how Moshe has been weakened. He sends the spies with the hope that they will return with beautiful fruits, with an impressive report of the Land and its riches. When they return with an evil report instead, Moshe is silenced: he makes no response, abandoning the stage to Yehoshua and Calev. Moshe manages to save the people's lives when Hashem threatens to kill them on the spot, but he can do more: he has lost faith in himself and in the people, and he cannot generate the will to beg Hashem to forgive the people (and allow them to enter the Land), as he did after the Egel. Hashem offers him opportunity after opportunity to jump in and demand that He forgive them, but Moshe remains eerily silent. He cannot take up the cause of the nation because he has lost faith in their ability to accomplish the mission, and because they have attempted to replace him as leader: "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!"

3) Korah: as we discussed last week, Moshe first interprets Korah's attack as directed against Aharon, but eventually discovers, to his shock, anger and frustration, that the people are rejecting him as well. He becomes defensive and bitter, insisting on his innocence of any abuse of power. More importantly, when he at first sees the attack as directed against Aharon, he responds by telling the people that they are really attacking Hashem, not Aharon. But when he realizes that he is a target as well, he does not say the same thing: he turns to Hashem and defends himself instead of deflecting the attack and telling the people (and himself!) that the real target is Hashem, and that there is no cause for him to be defensive.

Moshe continues to defend himself as the parasha goes on -- another sign of trouble. He summons the Earth to swallow the rebels in order to prove his legitimacy as leader, not in order to defend Hashem per se. When the people then accuse Moshe and Aharon of having murdered the people who died, Hashem becomes angry with them: have they not learned by now that He is behind Moshe and Aharon? But there is an echo of truth in the people's accusation -- it is not clear how much of what has happened was for Hashem, and how much was necessary to prop up Moshe's and Aharon's

leadership.

4) Then comes Hukkat: Moshe is wounded, angry at the people for rejecting his selfless leadership and for accusing him of self-aggrandizement. But then the people complain once again, and this time it is too much. As usual, the people complain not against Hashem, but against Moshe and Aharon. In fact, they specifically acknowledge Hashem, referring to themselves as His people. So the villains are Moshe and Aharon, not Hashem. But this time it is too much. Moshe responds differently to this rebellion than he has in the past. Instead of trying to show the rebels that their real complaint is with Hashem and not with him, Moshe simply becomes angry at the people.

Hashem instructs Moshe and Aharon to provide the people with water from a rock. This is just the latest chapter in the long process of the people's learning to trust Hashem. One more miracle. Not a great one, nothing like the splitting of a sea, but impressive nevertheless. And perhaps impressive also because of its mundanity: there is no dramatic backdrop here, no Egyptian cavalry giving murderous chase, there are only thirsty people and thirsty animals. And Hashem cares enough to perform a miracle to provide for them.

It is also an opportunity for Moshe to show that he is dedicated to the people's welfare, repudiating their claim that he has imposed his leadership on them for his own aggrandizement and that he has led them to die in the desert. But Moshe is already impatient with the people and angry at their accusations. For him, the personal issue has begun to overshadow all else. Extracting water from the rock is not just another effort to strengthen the people's faith in Hashem, it is a chance to bitterly blast the people for their attacks on him and to demonstrate his continued readiness to care for their needs despite their behavior. "Ungrateful rebels! I provide you with everything I can, even as you reject me again and again! And here I offer you water from this rock!"

It is not that Moshe believes that he (and not Hashem) has made the water come out of the rock. It is that he feels vilified by the people, accused of having his own interests at heart instead of theirs, accused of having done them wrong. Moshe says bitterly, "I remain devoted to you even as you reject me!" Moshe means only to show the people that he now does and always did do his best to help provide for the people's needs. Moshe does not mean for the people to understand that he and Aharon should get the credit for the miracle -- but that is exactly what happens. This is what the people sing as they celebrate the "digging" of this magical well. Moshe did not mean to give himself credit as opposed to Hashem, he meant only to defend himself, to show that he was devoted to the people even as they rebelled against him, but the result was that what should have been an opportunity to nurture the people's trust in Hashem became instead an opportunity for the people to acknowledge Moshe and Aharon as devoted to their care.

Moshe's function from the beginning has been to be the conduit between Hashem and the people. He hears the Torah from God and teaches it to the people; he leads the people out of Egypt as Hashem's messenger. He brings Hashem to the people. But once he is attacked and rejected by the people, he becomes defensive. He makes personal use of what should have been another opportunity to act as that identity-less conduit to Hashem. The people come away impressed with Moshe, not with Hashem.

For a religious leader, this misstep is fatal. A religious leader is so only insofar as he bridges the gap between Hashem and the people. The degree to which his personal issues cloud his actions is the degree to which he fails as a religious leader.

"Since you did not believe in Me" -- as Ramban interprets, "You did not cause the people to believe in Me" -- you caused them only to believe in you!

"To sanctify Me in the eyes of the Bnei Yisrael" -- to make Me appear special in the eyes of the people; instead, you made yourself seem special.

"Therefore you shall not bring" -- therefore, you are removed as leaders. **The punishment is not formulated as a "personal" one, that Moshe the man and Aharon the man will never enter the Land, but that they will not bring the nation to the Land: they are no longer the leaders because instead of taking this opportunity to sanctify Hashem, they use it to sanctify themselves in the eyes of the people. This is why, every time this story is mentioned afterward in the Torah, it is always connected with Elazar and Yehoshua. Moshe and Aharon's punishment is not simply not entering the Land, but joining the failed generation of the desert as its failed leaders, never to enter**

the Land as leaders of the successful new generation.

"And He was sanctified in them" -- do not think that just because Moshe and Aharon failed to sanctify Hashem here with the water, that He is not sanctified through this event: He sanctifies Himself through Moshe and Aharon themselves! As punishment for not sanctifying Hashem through the rock, Moshe and Aharon themselves become objects through which Hashem is sanctified. **The entire people was supposed to have SEEN Hashem's great miracle, but they SAW "Moshe and Aharon's great miracle" instead;** in return, the entire nation SAW as Aharon ascended the mountain, and the entire nation SAW that he did not return: they SAW that Hashem had denied him the opportunity to lead into Eretz Yisrael, and had replaced him with his son. And the same with Moshe, who in addition is told time and again that he will "SEE" the land but never enter it. He sinned by distracting the SIGHT of the nation from Hashem, so his own VISION of the Land would be only from afar. By punishing Moshe and Aharon publicly for usurping the stage, Hashem demonstrates to the people His power.

"Ma'altem bi" -- appropriating something dedicated for a higher purpose, and using it for personal use: "You stole from Me an opportunity to show My caring for the people and My power, a chance to sanctify Myself, and used it to show the people that YOU cared for them."

"I have shown it to you with your eyes" -- I have shown it to you with your EYES, but you will not go there as leader, because of the PEOPLE'S eyes -- because you took advantage of the people's sight for your purposes. The moment your orientation became personal, you automatically ceased to be a religious leader, and therefore, "to there you shall not go."

Shabbat Shalom
Emphasis added

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for PARSHAT CHUKAT[& DEVARIM]

**BETWEEN KADESH & KADESH BARNEA
(or When did the Mei Meriva incident take place?)**

How (and where) did Bnei Yisrael spend their 38 years in the desert? Most of us would answer: 'wandering somewhere in the desert'. Yet, in Parshat Devarim there appears to be a more precise answer; an answer that could radically change our understanding of certain events that take place in Sefer Bamidbar.

To explore this possibility, the following shiur will undertake a careful reading of several psukim in Parshat Devarim and compare them to their parallel sources in Sefer Bamidbar.

[To follow the shiur, you'll definitely need a Tanach in hand; in fact using two Tanachim (and a "mikraot gdolot") would come in very handy.]

INTRODUCTION

Just about everyone takes for granted that the Mei Meriva incident takes place in the 40th year. The reason why is quite simple - Mei Meriva takes place immediately after the death of Miriam (see Bamidbar 20:1), and Miriam died in the first month of the FORTIETH year - didn't she?

Let's double check this assumption by taking a closer look at that pasuk in Parshat Chukat:

"And Bnei Yisrael [the entire congregation] arrived at MIDBAR TZIN on the first month, and the people settled down in Kadesh, there Miriam died and was buried." (20:1)

Note, that we are only told that this took place on the first month, but there is no mention of the year at all! So why does everyone assume that it is year FORTY?

Most of the classical commentators deal with this question. Let's start with Rashbam's explanation (on 20:1):

"And Miriam died there: On the first month at the end of the FORTY years - for Aharon died on the fifth month of the fortieth year, as it states [explicitly] in Parshat Masei."

Rashbam's logic is quite straightforward. Since later in this same chapter we learn about Aharon's death (see 20:22-29), AND since Parshat Masei states explicitly that Aharon died on the fifth month of the FORTIETH year - therefore we assume that Miriam died (four months earlier) during that SAME year.

Note however that Rashbam's assumption is based on "parshanut" (exegesis) and not on a "masoret" (tradition).

[In other words, Rashbam doesn't say that we have a tradition that tells that Miriam died in the 40th year, rather, one can deduce this date from the psukim. Therefore, if by using the same tools of "parshanut" [i.e. by carefully studying all of the psukim involved] one arrives at a different conclusion, it is permitted to suggest (and discuss and debate) other possibilities as well - better known as "la'asok b'divrei Torah"/ "v'akmal"]

IBN EZRA in his pirush (on 20:1) gets right to the point:

"In the first month: In the FORTIETH YEAR. And (thus) behold that there is neither a story nor a prophecy in the Torah other than in the FIRST year and in the FORTIETH year."

Ibn Ezra makes a very bold statement. He claims that from the moment that God decreed the punishment of forty years (after chet ha'meraglim) Chumash goes into a 'coma' for 38 years, no stories, no mitzvot - we learn about nothing until the fortieth year, and those events begin here in chapter 20!

[One could ask concerning the story of Korach which would seem to have taken place in the interim, but recall that Ibn Ezra

himself claims that narrative to be 'out of order' and places it BEFORE Bnei Yisrael left Har Sinai! See his pirush to Bamidbar 16:1 and Ramban's refutation as well.]

However, Ibn Ezra does not explain here how he arrives at that conclusion. [We'll return to a possible source later in the shiur, but most probably he would explain as Rashbam does.]

Also RAMBAN agrees that Bnei Yisrael first arrive at Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year. [Later we'll see how he and why he argues here with Ibn Ezra.] But most important is how he concludes his pirush to 20:

"But this KADESH is located in MIDBAR TZIN, and [Bnei Yisrael] arrived there in the FORTIETH year, and there Miriam died, and the psukim are EXPLICIT!"

[Note that the "girsat" in Torat Chaim's Ramban is "u'mikraot m'furashim HEYM" while Chavel's edition has: "u'mikraot m'furashim SHAM"!]

Now Ramban tells us that the psukim are explicit, but he doesn't say which psukim he is referring to!

[Note again how neither Chavel's Ramban nor Torat Chaim's provide a footnote to explain what psukim Ramban is referring to (even though you would expect them to).]

Most likely, Ramban is referring to psukim in Moshe's first speech in Sefer Devarim. In fact, in CHIZKUNI's parallel explanation (on 20:1/ he concurs that they arrive at Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year), he attempts to reconcile these psukim with parallel psukim both in Parshat Masei and in Sefer Devarim.

[I suggest that you see that Chizkuni inside, but AFTER you are familiar with those sources.]

To figure out what Ramban is referring to we must first take a step back and try to follow the flow of events, and then take inventory of all of the related sources in Chumash that describe this leg of Bnei Yisrael's journey.

WHERE HAVE THEY BEEN TILL NOW?

Where were Bnei Yisrael before they arrive at KADESH Midbar Tzin (in 20:1)? Let's work backwards to figure it out.

The previous story in Sefer Bamidbar was the incident with Korach. But no where in that narrative are we told WHERE that story took place. [That is what allows Ramban & Ibn Ezra to argue about it.] Therefore we must work our way backwards again to the story of the "meraglim" in Parshat Shlach which took place in KADESH BARNEA.

In other words, the last PLACE (in Chumash) before Miriam's death that Bnei Yisrael were 'spotted' was in KADESH BARNEA. But the Torah never tells us WHEN they left Kadesh Barnea, and what they did (and how longed they travelled) until they arrived at Midbar Tzin!

However, if we return to the story of the "meraglim", we can bring a very strong proof that they must have left Kadesh Barnea soon after. Recall that immediately after the chet ha'meraglim God commands them to leave Kadesh Barnea and head SOUTH:

"... the Amalekites and Canaanites are sitting in the valley, TOMORROW turn around and travel into the desert towards the Red Sea." (14:25)

Despite this warning the "ma'aplim" decide to attack anyhow (and are defeated/ see 14:39-45), but that defeat would not be a reason for Bnei Yisrael to stay in Kadesh Barnea. That incident would only be an additional reason for them to travel into the desert - to the south- AWAY from Eretz Canaan. If they would stay near Kadesh Barnea, there would be fear of an attack by Canaanites who most likely are already on guard because of the 'rumors' about Bnei Yisrael's plan to conquer 'their' land.

Now Parshat Shlach stops right here without telling us if, when, or how they actually left Kadesh Barnea; but according to "pshat", based on 14:25 (quoted above), it would be safe to assume that they left immediately, just as God commanded them to!

As Sefer Bamdibar continues, the next time an encampment is recorded is in Parshat Chukat, as Bnei Yisrael arrive at Kadesh Midbar Tzin (see 20:1). What happened in the meantime. How many year elapsed? Did they travel to (or toward) the Red Sea as God commanded them?

At least partial answers to these questions are found in Parshat Masei and in Sefer Devarim.

THE 18 STOP JOURNEY IN PARSHAT MASEI

Parshat Masei provides with a detailed list of Bnei Yisrael's journey through the desert (see 33:1-49). Even though that account mentions many locations that are not mentioned elsewhere in Chumash (and skips many locations that are mentioned - such as Kadesh Barnea itself!) - it will still be helpful for our discussion.

Let's pick up Parshat Masei as it records Bnei Yisrael's journey from Har Sinai (see 33:16). From Sinai they travel to Kivrot ha'taava, and then to Chatzerot, and then to Ritma. Now Kivrot ha'taava and Chatzerot have already been mentioned in Parshat Bha'alotcha (see 11:34-35), but Ritma is not. However, Parshat Bha'alotcha tells us that they camped next in Midbar Paraan (see 12:16), and from there Moshe sent the meraglim (see 13:3) from an area known as KADESH BARNEA in Midbar Paraan.

[Parshat Shlach never mentions Kadesh Barnea itself, but everywhere else in Chumash when chet ha'mergalim is mentioned, it states explicitly KADESH BARNEA - see Bamidbar 32:8 and Devarim 1:3,19; 2:14; and 9:23! Most likely "Kadesha" mentioned in 13:26 refers to (and is a short form of) Kadesh Barnea.]

Therefore, Chazal identify Ritma with Kadesh Barnea, and its 'new name' reflects the events which took place there (see Rashi 33:18). Then Parshat Masei mentions an additional 18 stops from Ritma until Bnei Yisrael arrive in Midbar Tzin (see 33:18-36), which were not mentioned anywhere else earlier in Sefer Bamidbar.

[Now you can read the first part of the Chizkuni on 20:1 and better understand what he's talking about.]

Now among the 18 locations we find Yotvata and Etzion Gaver, sites which almost for sure are somewhere in the SOUTHERN Negev, not far from the Red Sea (i.e. near Eilat). Most likely, this journey SOUTHWARD was a fulfillment of God's command to leave Kadesh Barnea towards the Red Sea (see again 14:25).

Then, Parshat Masei tells us that Bnei Yisrael travel from Etzion Gaver and arrive at Kadesh Midbar Tzin (see 33:36-38/ compare with 20:1), but does not tell us on what year they arrived.

[However, it is quite clear that they LEAVE Kadesh Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year, for from Kadesh they travel to Hor Ha'Har to bury Aharon - and that event for sure took place in year 40 as the pasuk itself testifies (33:38).]

So was Kadesh Midbar Tzin the LAST stop after a long 38 year journey wandering through the desert, OR was Kadesh Midbar Tzin the LONG stopover where Bnei Yisrael may have spent MOST of the years while waiting for the first generation to die?

Enter Parshat Devarim!

Recall that in Moshe Rabeinu's first speech in Sefer Devarim (chapters 1-4), he explains why forty years had elapsed since Bnei Yisrael SHOULD have entered. Therefore, the first part of that speech includes the story of chet ha'meraglim, for that was the primary reason for the forty year delay.

WILL THE REAL 'KADESH' PLEASE STAND UP

That story states specifically that the meraglim were sent from KADESH BARNEA (see 1:19), and also includes God's

commandment that Bnei Yisrael must immediately leave and travel back into the desert toward the Red Sea (see 1:40). But after the story of the "ma'apilim" (see 1:41-45) there is one small, but very important pasuk:

"va'teshvu ba'KADESH yamim rabim, kayamim asher ya'shavtem."

[And you settled (or sat) in KADESH many days - as the days that you settled (or sat) there." (1:46)]

[Note the difficulty in translating this pasuk! See for example JPS and its footnote.]

So what KADESH is this pasuk referring to? There are two 'candidates':

- 1) KADESH BARNEA - where the meraglim were sent from
- 2) KADESH MIDBAR TZIN - where the Mei Meriva story took place

But based on our analysis above, it CANNOT be Kadesh Barnea! After all, God commanded them to LEAVE Kadesh Barnea - "machar" - the NEXT DAY. Why then would they stay there for a long time?

[It cannot be because the ma'apilim lost their battle, since that defeat is only more reason to retreat to a safer location farther away. Most likely the Canaanites have heard rumors of Bnei Yisrael's impending attack and now that they are camped so close [Kadesh Barnea borders on eretz canaan (see Bamidbar 34:4)] - God commands that they move to the south for their own safety. Otherwise they will be attacked and God is no longer 'with them' to protect them in battle.]

So why do almost all of the commentators explain that KADESH here means KADESH BARNEA? [see Ibn Ezra & Chizkuni]

After all, in this very same chapter Kadesh Barnea has already been mentioned twice (see 1:3 & 1:19 and 2:14) and each by its full name KADESH BARNEA! Why then would Moshe refer to it now simply as KADESH - especially when there is another location called KADESH (i.e. Kadesh Midbar Tzin) which is always referred to simply as KADESH?!

THE EVENTS FROM MERAGLIM TO ARVOT MOAV

Most probably, the reason why everyone explains KADESH here as KADESH BARNEA is because of the immediate context of this pasuk.

[Before continuing, you must review 1:40->2:14 on your own, and attempt to follow the flow. Compare them with the parallel account in Bamidbar 20:14->21:4, and especially 20:16 & 21:4! Pay careful attention to Dvarim 2:14 as well.]

Let's follow the flow:

- * the story of chet ha'meraglim (1:19-40)
- * God's command to LEAVE Kadesh Barnea -> Yam Suf (1:40)
- * The "ma'apilim" are defeated, Bnei Yisrael cry (1:41-45)
- ** -- AND YOU SETTLED IN KADESH FOR MANY DAYS (1:46)
- * "Then we turned and travelled into the DESERT towards YAM SUF, as GOD HAD COMMANDED US, and we circled Har Seir for many days". (22:1 / this pasuk is KEY)

The last pasuk which we quoted is the KEY to understanding what happened, [and its most likely what Ramban was referring to when he said "ha'mikraot m'furashim"].

As Chizkuni (on 2:1) explains - the travel described in this pasuk is precisely the same 18 stops described in Parshat Masei from Ritma to Kadesh Midbar Tzin. Most likely, he reaches this conclusion for the following reason:

Since God commanded Bnei Yisrael to travel towards Yam Suf in 1:40, it only makes sense that this pasuk describes HOW Bnei Yisrael fulfilled this command. In fact the pasuk states explicitly "as God had commanded us" (2:1) - i.e. his command in 1:40. Furthermore, that journey took "many days" - therefore it coincides perfectly with the 18 stop journey from Ritma to Kadesh

as described in Parshat Masei. If so, then KADESH which is mentioned in the previous pasuk (1:46) CANNOT be Kadesh Midbar Tzin, since Bnei Yisrael had not arrived there yet, since they only arrive there after the journey described in 2:1. Therefore, KADESH in 1:46 must be KADESH BARNEA, and it would seem that Bnei Yisrael remained for a long time in Kadesh Barnea, most probably feeling quite devastated by the events of the meraglim and ma'apilim.

But what about God's command of "machar, pnu u'su lachem" (1:40)? Should they not have left right away?

On the other hand, 2:1 must be talking about the 18 stop journey, for that is the only journey when Bnei Yisrael travel for 'many days' in the direction of Yam Suf. [Isn't it?]

Therefore all of the commentators prefer this explanation of 2:1, and prefer to overlook the problem with "machar" (in 1:40) - and hence KADESH in 1:46 must be KADESH BARNEA and therefore, they only arrive in Kadesh Midbar Tzin in the fortieth year.

[I'm almost sure that this is how all of the rishonim understood these psukim, if anyone has heard a different explanation - please write me.]

NOT SO FAST!

However, there is one small 'hole' in this interpretation. The assumption that 2:1 refers to the 18 stop journey was based on two very strong points:

- 1) they travelled south to Yam Suf/ at that was only once.
- 2) just as God had commanded / in 1:40

But one can argue with both of these points. [It's a bit complicated, so follow carefully with your Tanach in hand.]

Note how the next set of psukim in Sefer Devarim (see 2:2-8) relate BACK to the journey described in 2:1. Let's explain how:

"Then God said to me saying: You have been circling this mountain for too long - turn to the NORTH. And command the people saying: You are passing now along the border of your brother Esav... then we passed thru the land of 'bnei Esav' along the way of the ARAVA from Eilat & Etzion Gaver and then we passed Moav... until we reached Nachal Zared."

(see 2:2-14)

Now this journey CANNOT be the 18 stop journey from Ritma to Kadesh, since this journey ends in Transjordan, in the land of Moav. In fact, this is the final journey of the end of the fortieth year when Bnei Yisrael pass thru Seir, Moav, and Amon and fight with Sichon & Og and camp in Arvot Moav. In other words, this is no the journey of 33:16-36 in Parshat Masei, rather it is the last leg of the journey described in Parshat Masei, i.e. 33:40-49, AFTER they leave Kadesh Midbar Tzin.

And if the journey described in 2:2-13 is from Kadesh Midbar Tzin to Arvot Moav, then (based in its context) so must be the journey described in 2:1!

And if 2:1 describes this last leg of the journey, the KADESH mentioned in 1:46 must be Kadesh Midbar Tzin - just as its name implies!

But how about our two anchors? How can this last leg of the journey be considered a travel TOWARDS YAM SUF, and how could it be referred to "as God had commanded us" (see 2:1)?

The answer is simple. Go back to Parshat Chukat and the parallel account of Bnei Yisrael's departure from KADESH Midbar Tzin:

"And Moshe sent messengers from KADESH to the King of Edom saying:... we are now in Kadesh - a city on your border - let us pass thru your land..." (see Bamidbar 20:14-21)

But Edom [=bnei Esav] did not allow Bnei Yisrael to pass. But God COMMANDED them not to attack Edom, but instead to CIRCLE the land Edom by travelling south TOWARDS YAM SUF, and then crossing the ARAVA towards the east, and then turning north towards Moav!

And this is exactly what Parshat Chukat tells us in the next chapter:

"And we left Hor ha'Har (next to Kadesh), and travelled

TOWARDS YAM SUF, to CIRCLE the land of EDOM..." (21:4)

[From there they travelled north (see 21:10-20) thru Moav etc. ending up in Arvot Moav. Compare this journey with the second leg in Parshat Masei (33:38-48/ you'll see that its the same journey!]

So lo and behold we find a SECOND journey, commanded by God, where Bnei Yisrael travel TOWARDS YAM SUF and CIRCLE HAR SEIR. It is this journey, described in Parshat Chukat and detailed in Parshat Masei (33:38-48) that Devarim 2:1 could very easily be referring to! And hence, this SECOND journey as well fulfills both criteria mentioned above ("derech Yam Suf" and "as God commanded")- and KADESH in 1:46 can still be KADESH Midbar Tzin -and all of the psukim work out perfectly!

The final proof that Bnei Yisrael must have left Kadesh Barnea immediately and not waited there for too long is from Devarim 2:14:

"And the days that we travelled from KADESH BARNEA until we reached NACHAL ZARED (border with Moav) were 38 YEARS..."

This pasuk states explicitly that Bnei Yisrael LEFT Kadesh Barnea in YEAR 2, and therefore, they could not have stayed there for "yamim rabim" [which implies many years / see Breishit 24:55].

IN CONCLUSION / & SOME REMARKS

So "l'mai nafka minah" - what difference does it make when Bnei Yisrael first arrived in KADESH.

If we understand that they arrive in Kadesh Midbar Tzin only in year 40, the Mei Meriva takes place in year 40 and begins the events of that final year, and Miriam dies at an age well over 130!

If we understand that they possibly could have arrived in Kadesh Midbar Tzin only several years after chet ha'meraglim, i.e. after the 18 stop journey towards Yam Suf back, then back north to Kadesh (which could have taken several years and served as a precaution against any further Canaanite attacks); then Moshe's sin at Mei Meriva could have taken place only a short time after chet ha'meraglim and the story of Korach. If so, this would fit in thematically very nicely with our shiurim on Bhaalotcha, Shlach, and Korach, which all indicate a slow but definite gap between Moshe and people and hence the collapse of his leadership. [It would also have Miriam's death at an age under 120.]

There are several other implications, but the main purpose of the shiur is simply to study Chumash, trying to figure out all of the possibilities. Once again, it could be I missed something, since I'd expect to find the possibility in one of the commentaries. [I haven't looked that much yet, so if anyone finds something, please write. Also if anyone finds a mistake in the shiur or another source that I overlooked, please write.]

In the meantime, it's a two hours before sunset in Israel and want to send it out before shabbat (at least for those of you in the western hemisphere). As you must have noticed, the shiur is a very rough draft, hopefully, after hearing your comments, by next year we'll have an edited and updated version. Till then,

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Note also from Bamidbar 34:4 that Kadesh Barnea is located on the SOUTHERN border of Eretz Canaan, and that's exactly why the meraglim are sent from there. (Today, this area is identified just over the Egyptian border with Israel in the Negev, about 20 kilometers east of Sdeh Boker and south of Nitzana.)

PARSHAT CHUKAT - Mei Meriva

Ask most anyone:

- * What was Moshe Rabeinu's 'sin' at Mei Meriva?
They will answer: He hit the rock instead of talking to it.
- * What was his punishment?
They will answer: He was not allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael.
- * Does this punishment seem fair?
They'll say: No, but God must be extra strict with tzadikim.

Even though there is nothing 'wrong' about any of the above answers, they certainly 'oversimplify' a very complex topic.

In this week's shiur, as we carefully analyze the story of Mei Meriva, we will see how and why there are many other ways to understand both Moshe's 'sin' and his 'punishment'. In Part One, we undertake a careful textual analysis to explain why there are so many different opinions. In Part Two, we re-examine this entire topic from a 'wider angle' to show how Moshe may not have sinned after all.

INTRODUCTION

Rashi's explanation - that Moshe is punished for hitting the rock instead of talking to it - is definitely the most popular explanation of Moshe's sin. However, just about every other commentator disagrees and offers a different reason instead. For example:

- * IBN EZRA -
claims that he hit the rock TWICE, instead of once;
- * RAMBAM -
argues that Moshe 'lost his temper' and spoke harshly;
- * RAMBAN -
(quoting Rabeinu Chananel) explains that Moshe was not careful in his speech, for he said: "can WE get water from this rock?" instead of saying: "can GOD get water from this rock?".

In fact, Abrabanel (commenting on Devarim 1:37) summarizes some TEN different opinions; and proves why each one is incorrect.

There is a very simple reason why we find such a variety of opinion. Even though the Torah tells us WHY Moshe and Aharon were punished, we are never told WHAT they did wrong. To appreciate this distinction, let's carefully note how the Torah informs us of their punishment:

"...because you did not 'believe' in Me ["lo he'emantem bi"] to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you will not lead Bnei Yisrael into the land...." (see 20:12)

[Note that this is a very difficult pasuk to translate. (Note as well that just about every English translation translates this pasuk in a different manner.)]

Clearly, this pasuk implies that Moshe & Aharon did something wrong, but it doesn't tell us precisely WHAT that was. Nevertheless, because this pasuk forms the conclusion of the Mei Meriva story, we can safely assume that somewhere within that incident there must be a flaw in their behavior. Therefore, all the commentators scrutinize the psukim that describe that event, in search for some action that would warrant this punishment.

To appreciate their various conclusions, let's begin by doing exactly what they did, i.e. let's carefully study those psukim that immediately precede the punishment - Bamidbar 20:7-11.

[This is very important methodological point. Our assumption is that the variety of conclusions stems from the analysis of these psukim by each commentator [= "parshanut"], and not from a variance in passed down traditions [= "mesora"] from generation to generation since the time of Chumash. This assumption not only explains why there are so many different opinions, it also explains why each new generation continues to study Chumash in search of additional possible explanations.]

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS!

As you review 20:7-11, note how 20:7-8 describes God's command to Moshe and Aharon; while 20:9-11 describes its fulfillment.

Therefore, it should be quite simple to figure out what they did wrong. We simply need to compare what God had commanded - to what Moshe actually did! Let's begin with God's instructions to Moshe, noting how they contains several explicit commands:

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: TAKE the staff, and GATHER the congregation together, you and Aharon your brother, and SPEAK to the rock before their eyes that it should give water, and TAKE OUT for them water from the rock, and GIVE DRINK to the people and their animals." (20:7-8)

Review these psukim one more time, paying attention to the FIVE commands that Moshe (and Aharon) must execute:

- (1) TAKE the staff;
- (2) GATHER the congregation;
- (3) SPEAK to the rock... and it will give water;
- (4) TAKE OUT for them water from the rock;
- (5) GIVE DRINK to the people.

Note how each of these five commands contains an active verb, and hence requires that Moshe take a specific action. [In other words, Moshe must (1) TAKE the staff, (2) GATHER the people, and (3) SPEAK to the rock, etc.]

However, there appears to be a contradiction between the third and the fourth command (concerning how the water would be taken out of the rock).

According to command #3, Moshe should speak to the rock, whereupon it should immediately start giving its water. But the next command (#4) is for Moshe to 'take water out of the rock' (without explaining HOW he should do it). But if by SPEAKING to the rock (3) the rock will already be giving its water, how can Moshe fulfill command (4) to TAKE OUT water from the rock? The rock is already giving its water - so what would command (4) entail?

As we continue our analysis, keep this question in mind.

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

The next step of our analysis will help us understand the underlying reason for the various opinions. We begin our analysis (of 20:9-11) to see how Moshe fulfilled (or didn't fulfill) each of these five commands.

We will compare each command to its execution in search of any slight variance that could be considered a lack of "emunah" that would warrant such a severe punishment (as described in 20:12).

COMMAND #1 - "TAKE the staff"; (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"And Moshe TOOK the staff from before the Lord, as God had commanded him..." (20:9)

Nothing seems to be wrong here, after all the pasuk itself testifies: "as God commanded him". Certainly, this could not be a sin.

[Later in the shiur we will return to this pasuk.]

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COMMAND #2 - GATHER the "eydah" (congregation)... (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"And Moshe and Aharon GATHERED the "kahal" (congregation) people together in front of the rock..." (20:10)

Here again, nothing appears to have been done wrong. [There is slight discrepancy between "kehal" and "eydah", but these two words in Chumash are usually synonymous. [It should be noted that Malbim disagrees.]

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COMMAND #3 - SPEAK to the rock that it should give water...

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"...And he [Moshe] said to THEM (i.e. to the people): Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that WE can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

Here we finally find our first major problem. Even though God had instructed Moshe to speak TO the rock- so that it would give water; instead Moshe speaks to the PEOPLE - ABOUT the rock (that it would give water)! Therefore, most of the commentators [Rashi, Rambam, Ramban, Rashbam] will find fault with some aspect of Moshe's behavior in this pasuk (which will be discussed below).

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COMMAND #4 - TAKE OUT for them water from the rock... (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"... and Moshe lifted his hand and HIT the rock with his staff TWO times, then much water came out..." (20:11)

Even though RASHI claims that this is Moshe's primary transgression [for he hit the rock INSTEAD of 'talking' to it], based on this careful comparison it becomes clear why other commentators disagree. After all, God commanded him to 'take out water', but didn't tell him HOW to accomplish this. It seems as though Moshe understood that he was supposed to use his staff to do so (as he had done forty years earlier). Furthermore, God had commanded him to 'take his staff' (i.e. command #1) -if he wasn't supposed to hit the rock, why was he commanded to take his staff? Ibn Ezra advances this argument, and concludes instead that Moshe erred by hitting the rock TWICE instead of once.

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COMMAND #5 - Give drink to the people and their animals. (20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

"...and the people and their animals drank. (20:11)

Clearly, Moshe does nothing wrong in this final stage. After all, we surely don't expect Moshe to 'pour drinks' for everyone; rather he fulfills this command by allowing the people to gather the water for their needs.

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This analysis shows that the primary problem in Moshe's behavior lies somewhere between his execution of commands 3 & 4. Let's return to our discussion of command #3. Recall how God had instructed Moshe:

"SPEAK to the rock and [or that] it should [or will] give water..."

[Note the two possible translations.]

Considering that we never find that Moshe actually talked to the rock (and based on the above parallel comparison), we must conclude that the following phrase is Moshe's execution of this command:

"...And he [Moshe] said to THEM (i.e. to the people): Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that we can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

At first glance, it even appears as though there may have been a small 'misunderstanding'. As we explained above, even though God had instructed Moshe to speak TO the rock, instead Moshe speaks to the people ABOUT the rock. At this point, there are three different approaches that one can follow:

- a) Moshe indeed misunderstood what God wanted.
Hence his transgression would fall under the category of "shogeg" - an unintentional sin / see Rashbam.
- b) Moshe understood God's command; but acted differently.
In other words, he acted defiantly [= "mayzid" - an intentional transgression]. This leads Rashi to his conclusion that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it.
- c) Moshe acted properly (in this regard), and understood God's command.

In other words, speaking to the people about the rock was precisely what God commanded. As Ramban explains, in the phrase "v'dbartem EL ha'sela" - the word "el" should be understood as "odot" (about). God commands Moshe to speak to the people ABOUT the rock THAT it should give water; and that is exactly what Moshe does!

Even though this third possibility (that this was indeed God's intention) may seem a bit 'stretched', it definitely can be supported from the next commandment: "And you shall TAKE OUT water for them from the rock" (see 20:8). As we pointed out earlier, this fourth command implies that Moshe must now do something to 'take out' water from the rock.

Therefore, it is possible that hitting the rock was exactly what God expected Moshe to do. After all, this is exactly how God had instructed him to take water from the 'rock at Chorev' many years earlier (see Shmot 17:6). Furthermore, once Moshe understands that 'speak TO the rock' means 'speak ABOUT the rock' then obviously "take out water" must imply to take a certain action to

extract the water - i.e. to hit the rock! Certainly, it would be no less of a miracle now than it was forty years earlier!

Because of these considerations, all of the commentators (except Rashi) must search elsewhere for a flaw in Moshe's behavior. For example, Rambam and Ramban take issue with how Moshe's words his rebuke:

"...And he [Moshe] said to them: Listen here you rebellious people, is it possible that WE can take water from this rock?" (20:10)

Rambam takes issue with the TONE of this rebuke, while Ramban takes issue with its CONTENT.

RAMBAM claims that the tone of Moshe's statement - "listen you rebels..." - reflects an unnecessary anger which caused a "chillul Hashem" (a desecration of God's Name). [See Rambam in "shmoneh perakim", or simply see its quote by Ramban in his pirush to 20:7.]

RAMBAN claims that Moshe caused a "chilul Hashem" by saying 'we' in their rhetorical question - "is it possible that WE can take out water from this rock". This 'careless' statement may have caused the people to conclude that it was Moshe and Aharon (and not God) who cause the water to come out from the rock.

[See Ramban 20:7 in name of Rabeinu Chananel.]

Nonetheless, it remains possible to understand that Moshe's rebuke in this pasuk was entirely in order. This leads Ibn Ezra to find fault in the next stage:

"... and Moshe lifted his hand and HIT the rock with his staff TWO times, then much water came out..." (20:11)

After refuting all of the other opinions, Ibn Ezra finds Moshe's flaw in the fact that he hit the rock TWICE instead of only once. [It seems that according to Ibn Ezra, this reason 'wins by default'. Note that Ramban (towards the end of his commentary) also supports this opinion - to a certain extent.]

Thus, by careful comparing Moshe's execution of each of God's commands, we are able to find the underlying reason for the opinions of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Rashbam, Ramban, etc.

Nonetheless, no matter how we explain WHAT Moshe's sin was, a more fundamental question remains - i.e. WHY was his punishment so severe?

PART II

DID MOSHE DO ANYTHING 'WRONG' ?

From the above analysis, a very interesting possibility arises. If we combine all of the reasons advanced by each commentator to reject the other interpretations - we could conclude that Moshe did nothing wrong at all!

[See the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Abrabanel on this sugya. Each of them present very convincing arguments why all of the other opinions are wrong.]

In fact, Abrabanel himself raises this possibility, then he advances his own opinion (based on Devarim 1:37) that Moshe & Aharon are really being punished for earlier sins - Moshe for "chet ha'mergalim" and Aharon for "chet ha'egel". Mei Meriva, he explains, serves as a kind of 'cover-up' to differentiate between Moshe &

Aharon's punishment, and the punishment of the nation.

Nonetheless, his interpretation remains difficult because the text states explicitly that Moshe is punished because of the events that took place at MEI MERIVA! [See not only here in 20:12-13, but also in 20:24, 27:14 and Devarim 32:51.] Therefore, we should be quite reluctant to look for the PRIMARY reason elsewhere.

But, where else can we look to find Moshe's sin? On the one hand, it must be related to the events of Mei Meriva, but when we examined those psukim, it was very hard to pinpoint a 'sin'; and certainly not a sin severe enough to deserve such a harsh punishment.

To answer this question, we must first take a closer look at precisely WHAT their punishment was.

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

It is commonly understood that Moshe and Aharon's punishment is that they are forbidden from ENTERING the land of Israel. However, this popular assumption is not precise. Let's take a look once again how the Chumash explains their punishment:

"And God told Moshe... because you did not trust Me enough to sanctify Me... therefore you shall NOT LEAD THIS NATION into the LAND which I promised them..." (20:12)

Note, that God doesn't say that they cannot enter the Land; rather they cannot LEAD the people into the Land. In other words, Moshe and Aharon are not being punished as INDIVIDUALS, rather as NATIONAL LEADERS. As such, their 'sin' must relate in some manner to a flaw in their leadership traits.

In fact, the very pasuk that explains their punishment already hints to a flaw in leadership:

"...BECAUSE you did not trust Me enough TO SANCTIFY ME in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael..." (20:12)

God's statement implies that He had expected Moshe and Aharon to take the rebellion at Mei Meriva and somehow create from it a "kiddush Hashem" - a sanctification of God's Name. Therefore, to find that 'sin', we must examine the Mei Meriva once again, in search of leadership crisis. But this time, we must begin by studying those events from their onset.

LET'S START FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

Recall that the Mei Meriva incident began when Bnei Yisrael encountered a terrible water shortage immediately upon their arrival at Midbar Tzin. Let's begin our study by taking a closer look at how the Torah described that crisis:

"And Bnei Yisrael arrived at Midbar Tzin... but there was not enough water for the people, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon. They argued with Moshe saying: It would had been better had we died with our brethren "lifnei Hashem" [before God]... So - why did you bring us to this desert to die?...and why did you take us out of Egypt to bring us to this terrible place... - there are no fruits here and there is no water to drink." (see 20:1-5)

Not only did Bnei Yisrael ask for water, they expressed their total disgust with the entire process of Yetziat Mitzraim. Even though they direct these harsh complaints to Moshe and Aharon, they can be understood no less as a complaint against God; questioning not only His ability to save them, but also the very

purpose of their special relationship.

How should Moshe and Aharon respond to these blasphemous complaints? Should they not argue by defending God? Should they not encourage the people to remain faithful?

Instead, Chumash describes what appears to be a rather 'pathetic' reaction:

"And Moshe and Aharon came to the Ohel Moed [in fear] from the congregation, and they fell on their faces..." (20:6)

One could suggest that already at this stage a leadership crisis has unfolded. To clarify this point, let's compare this event to the parallel incident that took place when Bnei Yisrael complained for water at Refidim many years earlier (see Shmot 17:1-7). Note Moshe's immediate response to an almost identical complaint:

"mah trivun iy'madi, mah t'nasun et Hashem" -Why are you arguing with me, why are you TESTING God? (see 17:2)

At Refidim, Moshe immediately challenged the people - reprimanding them how their complaint reflected a lack of faith in God. Afterward, when the people continued to complain, Moshe cries out to God, begging for a solution (see 17:4).

In contrast, at "Mei Meriva" Moshe's reaction is quite different. Instead of confronting these almost identical complaints, Moshe & Aharon immediately 'run away' to the Ohel Moed and 'fall on their faces' (20:6). [Even if this means that they prayed - is this a time for prayer? Compare with Shmot 14:15 and its context!]

Was 'running away' the proper reaction? Should they not have assured the people that God will indeed take care of their needs. Should they not have challenged the people's irreverent statement that "it would have been better had they remained in Egypt"?

One could suggest that already at this early stage in the narrative - Moshe & Aharon have already 'failed' as national leaders, for they do not SANCTIFY God's name when the opportunity arose. In fact, this may be precisely what God is referring to when He states: "because you did not trust Me enough to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael..." (20:12).

Even though God immediately gives Moshe & Aharon specific instructions on how to deal with the situation, it is already too late. As soon as the incident is over, even though Moshe & Aharon may have properly fulfilled all of God's instructions when hitting the rock, God informs them that their days as the nation's leaders are numbered. Before Bnei Yisrael will begin their conquest of Eretz Canaan, it will be necessary to appoint new leadership.

[Note that later in Sefer Devarim when Moshe begs that he be allowed see the land (3:23-26), he does not ask to LEAD, only to ENTER and see for himself.]

However, if this interpretation is correct, why do we need the story of 'hitting the rock' (20:7-11) in between? Let the Torah first inform us of Moshe's punishment, and then let God provide water for the people.

To answer this question, and to understand this entire incident in its wider perspective, we must turn back a few pages to a related event in Parshat Korach.

WHOSE STAFF IS IT?

To our surprise, the key to understanding this complicated sugya lies in its connection to Parshat Korach! To appreciate that connection, let's pay careful attention to how the narrative continues (after Moshe & Aharon run away to the Ohel Moed):

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: "kach et ha'mateh" - take THE STAFF and gather the people..." (see 20:8)

It is commonly assumed that Moshe is instructed to take his own staff, i.e. the very same staff with which he brought the plagues; split the sea; and brought forth water from the rock at Chorev; etc.

However, it cannot be Moshe's own staff, for the pasuk states explicitly:

"And Moshe took the staff - M'LIFNEI HASHEM - from before God, as God had commanded him..." (20:9)

In Chumash, "lifnei Hashem" usually refers to in front of the ARON, i.e. the ark of the covenant located in the holiest domain of the Mishkan (see Shmot 29:11,42;30:8; etc.). Surely, Moshe would not keep his staff "lifnei Hashem"! [The "kodesh kedoshim" is not his personal closet!]

[Note that God commands Moshe -"kach et HA'mateh" - THE staff, not -"matecha" - YOUR staff. Compare with Shmot 14:16, 17:5.]

If it is not his own staff that Moshe must take, then what staff is it? Is there someone else who keeps his staff in the "kodesh ha'kedoshim"?!

The answer, as Rashbam and Chizkuni so beautifully explain (see their commentaries to 20:8), is quite simple - it is AHARON's special staff!

Recall from Parshat Korach that God had commanded Moshe to conduct a test between the staffs of each of the tribal leaders (see 17:16-24) to establish that the tribe of Levi is indeed chosen. Carefully note God's command to Moshe after Aharon's staff wins that test:

"... return the STAFF OF AHARON - "lifnei ha'eydut" - [in front of the 'tablets of testimony', i.e. the ARON] for safe keeping, in order that it be a SIGN FOR ANY REBELLIOUS GROUP ["ot l'bnei meri"]- so that they will stop complaining and not die..." (17:25-26)

In other words, God tells Moshe - NEXT TIME that Bnei Yisrael complain or rebel, take out Aharon's staff from the Ohel Moed and REMIND them of what happened to Korach's rebellion.

And sure enough - the next complaint in Chumash is the incident at Mei Meriva!

This not only explains Rashbam's pirush, but it also neatly explains why the Torah (in 20:9) must inform us that Moshe takes specifically the staff "m'lifnei Hashem" - from before God. Moshe doesn't take his own staff - he takes the staff of AHARON that was kept "lifnei Hashem" - for it was set aside for specifically for this purpose.

In other words, in 20:8 God instructs Moshe to do exactly what Moshe should have done on his own!

This also beautifully explains why Moshe prefaces his rebuke with: "shimu na ha'MORIM" [listen o' you rebellious ones /see 20:10]. Considering that God had instructed Moshe to take the "mateh Aharon" which was set aside for an "ot l'bnei MERI", it is only appropriate that he would rebuke the people by saying: "shimu na ha'MORIM"! [See Chizkuni on 20:10, note also that "meri" & "morim" are derived from the same shorash.]

In a similar manner, the Torah's use of the word GAVANU in both these parshiot provides additional (textual) support for this interpretation. Recall how the complaints at Mei Meriva first began:

"And the people quarrelled with Moshe saying: 'loo GAVANU B'GVA acheinu...' - if only we had perished with our brothers" (20:3)

This complaint echoes the cry of Bnei Yisrael in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion (immediately after Aharon's staff is set aside/ see 17:25-27):

"And Bnei Yisrael said to Moshe: 'heyn GAVANU avadnu' - lo, we perish, we are lost... anyone who comes close to the Mishkan will die, alas we are doomed to perish..." (17:27-28) [Compare also 20:4-5 with 16:13-14.]

MAKING NO MISTAKES

Once we explain that Moshe was commanded to take MATEH AHARON - almost every following action that he takes makes perfect sense. Let's explain why:

As we explained earlier, because MATEH AHARON is an "ot l'bnei meri", it is only logical that Moshe understands "speak to the rock" as "speak ABOUT the rock" and therefore begins his rebuke with "SHIMU NA HA'MORIM".

Then, Moshe's next statement: "Can we take water from this rock?" can be explained as precisely what God commanded him to do: i.e. to speak about (or at) the rock - "v'natan meimav" - THAT IT SHOULD give water. In other words, God instructs Moshe is to challenge the people's belief, to ask them - is it possible for a rock to give water? - And that's exactly what he does!

This also explains why Moshe hit the rock. Once he understands that "speak TO the rock" means "speak ABOUT the rock", then God's next instruction: "v'hotzeita" [you shall TAKE OUT water] must imply that Moshe himself must cause the water to come out. How? Exactly as he did forty years earlier by the rock in Chorev, using his OWN mateh (not Aharon's / read 20:11 carefully - "matey'hu").

[This implies that there were actually TWO staffs at Mei Meriva:

- (1) The staff of Aharon - was taken by Moshe and most probably given to Aharon to hold up in front of the people during this entire event. And (2)- the staff of Moshe - which he himself used to hit the rock to bring forth water.]

The only detail that remains to be explained is why Moshe hit the rock twice (see Ibn Ezra). However, as Ramban asks, could it be that hitting the rock twice instead of once makes the miracle any less impressive? Furthermore, God did not tell Moshe to hit the rock ONCE or TWICE! He just commanded him to 'take out water'. Certainly, Moshe should have the leeway to hit the rock as many times as he feels necessary. [Even at Chorev, it never mentions how many times Moshe hit the rock. And even if this action was incorrect, could this slight 'transgression' warrant such a severe punishment?]

This explanation of "mateh AHARON" only strengthens our claim that Moshe indeed followed God's instructions properly - but he and Aharon are punished for not sanctifying God's Name earlier - when Bnei Yisrael FIRST complained at Mei Meriva.

With this background, it becomes easier to understand why their punishment relates to this leadership crisis. Failure in

leadership is not necessarily because the leader does something 'wrong', nor is it a sin. Leadership, as its name implies, must LEAD the people - i.e. it must do something right, it must take an initiative.

As individuals, Moshe & Aharon never 'sinned' at Mei Meriva, but as leaders they failed. Therefore, God reaches the conclusion that they will not be able to succeed should they be the leaders who will take Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land.

BELIEVING or SUPPORTING

Based on this interpretation, we can suggest an alternate understanding of the word "EMUNAH" (used in the pasuk which explains the reason for their punishment):

"ya'an lo he'EMANTEM BI" - because you did not have FAITH IN ME in the EYES of Bnei Yisrael" (see 20:12).

The word "emunah" in this pasuk may not refer to belief in God in the theological sense. Surely, Moshe and Aharon 'believe' in God. However, they were not 'supportive' enough of God in the eyes of the people. The Hebrew word "emunah" stems from the shresh aleph.mem.nun which means to support or sustain.

[For example, in Shmot 17:12 - "v'haya yadav emunah..." in the war against Amalek, when Aharon & Chur support Moshe's arm, or in Megilat Esther (2:7) - "va'yehi OMEYN et Hadassah..." - i.e. Mordechai supported (or adopted) Esther, or "omnot ha'bayit" the pillars supporting the Beit Ha'Mikdash (II Melachim 18:16), or the word "amen", which confirms or supports a bracha or statement made by others, etc.]

In hindsight, the reason for Moshe's 'punishment' may even be quite logical. Considering the many difficulties that will face Bnei Yisrael once they begin conquest of the Land, it is only inevitable that many more rebellious situations such as these will arise. Leadership, which can deal with such complaints, is essential.

THE FINAL STRAW

Had this been the only incident where Moshe & Aharon's leadership faltered, their punishment may not have been so harsh. However, this problem of leadership had already surfaced numerous times in Sefer Bamidbar. In fact it could almost be considered its secondary theme. Recall, that from the time Bnei Yisrael leave Har Sinai, almost every event which Chumash records reflects this pattern of faltering leadership:

- * At "kivrot ha'taaveh" Moshe himself claims that he can no longer lead the people (11:11-15).
- * Later, even Miriam, Moshe's own sister, complains about his leadership (12:1-3).
- * When the "meraglim" return, Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces (14:5); Kalev and Yehoshua take leadership positions.
- * In the rebellion of Korach (chapter 16), again Moshe and Aharon's leadership is challenged, again they fall on their faces (16:4,22).

[This approach also explains why later in Sefer Devarim, Moshe claims that it was because of "chet ha'meraglim" that he could not enter the land (see Devarim 1:37).]

As we have explained, surely as individuals, Moshe and Aharon are "tzadikim"; they do nothing 'wrong'. However, as happens over and over again in Sefer Bamidbar, their leadership fails. At Mei Meriva, possibly a personal example of patience, stamina, confidence, and calm rebuke may have been able to create the necessary

"kiddush Hashem"; but this did not happen.

Can we be critical of Moshe and Aharon for their behavior? Should we consider their actions as sinful? Not necessarily! This leadership crisis does not have to be considered a question of 'good or bad' behavior. Rather, it could be considered a tragedy - a problem of compatibility.

As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Shlach, already when Bnei Yisrael first left Har Sinai, there were signs of a lack of compatibility between Moshe Rabeinu and Bnei Yisrael. After all, Moshe had spent months on Har Sinai with the SHCHINA, and was no longer capable of dealing with complaints concerning mundane manners. [Note also Shmot 34:35. See also commentary of the Sfat Emet on the Mei Meriva incident.]

To meet the challenges of taking Am Yisrael into the Promised Land, new leadership was essential. Not necessarily because Moshe and Aharon did anything 'wrong', rather because Am Yisrael were not worthy of their leadership.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. One could even go one step further and suggest that Moshe, even before God's command, should have taken MATEH AHARON and shown it to the people and rebuked them. If so, then God's first command to Moshe - "kach et ha'mateh" may simply be a reminder to Moshe of what he SHOULD HAVE DONE on his own (as he was instructed in Parshat Korach)! This could explain "ka'asher tzivahu" in 20:9. It may imply: as God commanded him - not just now, but earlier - in PARSHAT KORACH!]

B. Later in the Parsha, a similar situation where the people need water, arises at "B'ey'rah" (21:16-18). There Moshe gathers the people together, God provides water, and the people respond with a song of praise! This shows that given the proper circumstances, such a situation can result in a "kiddush Hashem". Moshe may have learned his lesson, however, by then it is already too late for God to change His decision.]

C. REASONS OR INDICATORS

Our interpretation in the shiur (part two) does not necessarily have to conflict with the various opinions raised by the "rishonim" which we discussed in Part One. One could suggest that each of those reasons can be understood as INDICATORS of this faltering leadership, not just REASONS for Moshe's punishment. For example, Moshe and Aharon's use of a harsh tone; their quick anger; their lack of patience hitting the rock twice instead of once; their running away to the Ohel Moed, etc. All of these opinions point to the same general problem of leadership.

D. According to our explanation above, the most difficult pasuk to explain is 20:24, in relation to Aharon's death at Hor haHar:

"... al asher m'ritem et pi, lmei m'riva"

"meri" implies more than not doing something right, it seems as though something of a rebellious nature was done.

1. Explain why this pasuk led many commentators to explain the sin as hitting the rock instead of speaking to it.

2. How else can one explain this pasuk?

3. Explain the "lamed" in "lmei m'riva".

4. Read Devarim 32:51. What does "m'altem" mean?

(What is "me'ilah", in general)?

Relate this pasuk to Bamidbar 20:24 and 20:12-13, and use it to explain your answer to 1 & 2 above.

E. See the Netziv's pirush in Emek Davar to Bamidbar 20:8-11.

Note how he insists that the mateh is Moshe's mateh, and hence he must explain that "ka'asher tzivayhu" - is that God had sometime earlier commanded Moshe to take his "mateh" and put it next to the Aron. He also solves the problem of the contradiction between command 3 and 4 by explaining that God gave Moshe TWO options for bringing water: 1) speak to the people that they should pray for water, and if that didn't work, as a back up - he could alternately hit the rock, and that would also bring forth water. Even though our shiur has followed a very different approach, it is interesting to note the originality of the Netziv's approach, and how he deals with many of the questions that we raised in the above shiur.