

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) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

Parashat Chukat focuses on death. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, puts it, the Torah presents a remedy before the disease. The Torah therefore presents the Torah doctrine of the red heifer, the ritual for regaining ritual purity after contact with a dead body, immediately before reporting the death of Miriam, notice of impending death of Aharon and Moshe, and death of Aharon. It is fitting that I am writing these words on 8 Tammuz, the yahrzeit of my grandfather, David Fisher, the first death of anyone close to me when I was old enough for the event to affect me profoundly.

Chukat is also a memorial to the generation of the Exodus. With the deaths of Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe, only Yehoshua and Caleb remain of the generation who were adults in Egypt. The Torah presents the red heifer in chapter 19, and then, with no transition, the Torah resumes in chapter 20 with the story of year 40 in the midbar. One can only determine from the context that there is a gap of 38 years between chapters 19 and 20. After the sins of Miriam's tzaraat, the Meraglim, and Korach, the Torah makes no more mention of any of the first generation, other than reporting the deaths of Moshe and his siblings.

Rabbi Haim Ovadia's Dvar Torah (below) presents a beautiful, clear exposition of the ritual of the red heifer and its significance. The ritual is full of symbols of death and dust. The priest who attends to the mourner becomes tamei (ritually impure) for a day while the mourner becomes tamei for a week. Contact with death and a near experience with death both require a period to recover – longer for the person with direct contact, but also a period for one who assists and therefore comes close to experiencing death.

Rabbi David Fohrman observes that the language in chapter 19 contains echoes of the story of Kayin and Hevel, the first death in the Torah. Perhaps the biggest horror in that story is that Kayin shows no remorse or sense of loss after killing his brother. The ritual of the red heifer comes to remind us, especially by repeating language from the Kayin/Hevel story, of the horror of death.

Rabbi Ovadia reminds us that we read Parah (chapter 19 of Chukat) the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Nisan. The Torah cares about those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death and survive. One part of recovering from this experience is remembering that Nisan – Peach – is coming soon, and with it, our redemption.

I have previously mentioned Rabbi Fohrman's insight that Miriam taught Moshe (and us) the importance of having pure faith that God watches over B'Nai Yisrael and will find a solution to our crises -- if we maintain our faith that He will find a solution. When she has to put baby Moshe in a teva in the Nile, Miriam watches with complete faith that Hashem will find a way to save her baby brother, even though she has no idea how. She has the same faith when the people reach the Sea of Reeds on the seventh day after leaving Egypt, and the same faith when the people encounter only rocks with no water. Rabbi Fohrman interprets that the sin of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva is not to maintain Miriam's pure faith. By calling the people rebels and striking the rock instead of talking to the rock, Moshe loses the opportunity to teach the people that Hashem listens to us when we demonstrate faith in His love for B'Nai Yisrael.

Miriam's yahrzeit is 10 Nisan, which is also the yahrzeit of my beloved sister Maureen, who was nifter on 10 Nissan 5753. Like Miriam for Moshe, Maureen was my closest friend and support throughout my life. Since then, I have missed her

every day, but her lessons stay with me. Chukat gives us very similar lessons. We must face death and find healing from confronting our near death experiences. We must look forward to redemption, for which Pesach is our symbol. 10 Nisan is the day when B'Nai Yisrael bring a lamb into their homes and prepare to sacrifice this symbol of Egypt's pagan gods on the way to their redemption.

While Moshe's sin at Mei Meriva is obscure in the Torah, I find Rabbi Fohrman's explanation the most satisfying I have found. As we work our way back from the pain of losing a loved one, our faith in Hashem is our path to redemption. In the cycle of physical life, people come, live for their allotted periods of time, and then die to return to dust. Our spirits live on in the memories of those whom we touch, those who remember us and our mitzvot. God promises that while individuals and other nations come and go, there will always be Jews. We all have our opportunity to add our mitzvot to the story of our people.

In remembering those who touched my life and whom I remember as helping make me who I am, I owe a huge debt to my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, my Rabbi and close mentor for nearly 50 years. May we all find our personal mentors, special Rebbes, and models for contributing as many mitzvot as possible. Shabbat Shalom.

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 the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,
Hannah & Alan

Dvar Torah: Chukas: There Was Water

by Rabbi Label Lam © 2007

HASHEM spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take the staff and gather together 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."
(Bamidbar 20:7-8)

Why was Moshe told to speak to the rock "before the eyes of the assembly"? What impression was meant to be made upon the eyes of the people? They wanted water. Why educate the eye?

The Sefas Emes cleverly connects this incident to another situation where someone was dying from thirst. When Hagar and Yishmael were cast out they found themselves in the dessert without water and in one moment after the boy cried out the verse testifies, "And G-d opened her eyes and she saw a spring of water, and she went and filled the skin with water and gave to the youth to drink." (Breishis 21:19) About this the Midrash comments, "And G-d opened her eyes" – Was she blind? Rabbi Binyamin says, "Everyone has a status of being blind until The Holy One Blessed is He enlightens their eyes..." Quoting from his grandfather and teacher the Chidushei HaRim he writes, "In reality that which is necessary for every creature is prepared, in every place and at all times, only it is hidden from the materialistic eye, and The Holy One Blessed is He enlightens his eyes and he sees that everything is in front of him. And so it is here that the desire of The Holy One Blessed is He was that the eyes of the Children of Israel should be opened and they should see that water was prepared for them in the rock."

In a book entitled *The Klausenberger Rebbe, The War Years*, Judah Lifschiltz records the following remarkable incident about the Klausenberger Rebbe on a Nazi death march.

The night was dark. The moon's silver light was obscured by clouds. The beaten marchers were surrounded by SS guards who had fallen asleep at their posts. A whisper quickly rustled through the prisoners surrounding the Rebbe. "He says to try... everyone should dig beneath himself. G-d's salvation comes in the blink of an eye." A glimmer of hope was kindled among the downtrodden Jews. During the three days of the march the Rebbe had pleaded with the prisoners not to drink from the dirty puddles on the side of the road...the Rebbe cautioned, begging for restraint. Now the Rebbe had given a positive command about the water, the prisoners had faith in him. Everyone began to dig – some with spoons and some with pieces of wood, others with fingers and fingernails. At first there were only a few small holes. Then the holes became larger...and then, the water began to flow in small spurts. As the water appeared, joy engulfed the camp...Fresh water... prisoners hugged and kissed each other out of joy and happiness. Half-dead Jews were returned to life in a moment. Feverishly they dug more and more, deeper and deeper. The spurts grew stronger and stronger. ...Springs of water shot up everywhere...Thousands of prisoners gulped down the water until their thirst was quenched and their exhausted limbs were refreshed...

When asked if the amazing story was true the Rebbe answered, "If anyone doubted, chas v'shalom, the Torah's stories about Avraham Avinu's ram or Miriam's well, he saw clearly on that day that the Master of the Universe truly provides for his creations precisely what they need, and exactly when they need it.

I had heard this same incident recounted by an eye witness. When describing how the Rebbe reached into the ground, he suddenly burst into uncontrollable tears saying, "There was water! There was water!"

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5768-chukas/>

Which Direction? Thoughts for Parashat Hukkat

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

In this week's Parasha, we read of the Israelites' complaint of lack of water; of God's instruction to Moses to speak to the rock; of Moses striking the rock to bring forth water; of God informing Moses that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Moses had erred; he and Aaron were told by God: "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Bemidbar 20:12).

Upon hearing this news, Moses must have felt devastated. After all the years of devoted service, he was now told that he would not be allowed to finish his mission.

How does the Torah describe Moses' reaction to God's decree? Do we read of Moses asking forgiveness? Do we learn that he atoned for his transgression? Do we see Moses crying, beseeching, praying, asking for another chance?

No, none of the above.

Immediately after the verses in which God's decree is announced, the Torah goes on: "And Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom..."(20:14). Moses was moving ahead with plans to direct the Israelites into the Promised Land. He was seeking permission from the neighboring rulers to let the Israelites pass through their lands, as they proceeded to the land that God had given to them.

Yes, as his death approached, Moses did plead with the Almighty for the privilege of entering the Promised Land (Devarim 3:23-25). But at the very moment of God's decree, the Torah does not report any reaction on the part of Moses. Rather, it describes Moses proceeding with his work as though nothing fateful had just happened to him.

Moses placed the needs of the people above his own personal concerns. He must have been heartbroken at hearing God's decree, but he did not let his own feelings and frustrations get in the way of his leadership of the Israelites.

Moses was a singular leader. He kept focused on his responsibilities to his people, even at great personal sacrifice.

Moses set an example of what true leadership entails. He provided guidance on the nature of responsibility. In a recent talk, Rabbi Avi Weiss described "mission-directed" leadership. Such leaders have a grand vision of what needs to be accomplished and they devote their lives to striving toward their goals. Rabbi Weiss contrasted this kind of leader to one who is "function-directed." The latter does his/her job, with better or worse results, without any overriding idealism.

These types of leaders are paralleled by the kinds of institutions they lead. Function-directed synagogues provide prayer services, some classes, and other programs that congregants may demand. They operate as function-providing businesses. Their goal is to operate from day to day, and year to year, as they have done in the past.

Mission-directed synagogues are very different. They not only provide the services of function-directed synagogues, but they have long term goals, idealistic plans, religious vision. They plan for the future in creative ways. They seek to attract people by offering a spiritual message.

Some rabbis and lay leaders think that it is enough to maintain the status quo, or to promote their "businesses" with p.r. efforts. Such function-directed leaders and institutions betray the very ideals and idealism upon which religious institutions must be based. They tend to put their own egos before the religious needs of the community. They use the synagogue for self-promotion; they hunger for control and influence.

Other rabbis and lay leaders are mission-directed. They strive to bring the Divine Presence into the midst of their synagogues and their congregants. They serve with utmost idealism and piety, not for self-aggrandizement or personal gain. Such mission-directed leaders and their communities seek to go beyond providing functions; they seek to inspire ideals, to enhance spirituality, to actively work for the betterment of society as a whole.

Moses is remembered in our tradition as "Moshe Rabbeinu," Moses our teacher. We look to his example as a mission-directed leader. He devoted his life to bringing his people closer to God, and God closer to his people. Moses faced many challenges and frustrations; but he did not lose his sense of mission. Even when he was faced with a personally devastating decree, his first reaction was: what shall I do next to help my people achieve their goal?

Are our rabbis and synagogues mission-directed, or only function-directed? This is a question we ignore at our own spiritual peril.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/which-direction-thoughts-parashat-hukkat>

Maimonides: Pioneer of Positive Psychology

Dr. Edward Hoffman *

For more than 800 years, Moses Maimonides has been a towering figure in Judaism. Not only did he become the leader of world Jewry in a tumultuous era, but his religious works, including the monumental Mishneh Torah and the Introduction to the Mishnah, remain avidly studied today. His *Guide of the Perplexed*, seeking to integrate classic Greek thought with Hebraic monotheism, has exerted an enduring influence on Western philosophy. And yet, Maimonides' extensive writings are both important and relevant for another, rapidly growing field of knowledge: namely, positive psychology. Why? Many people are seeking to gain a greater sense of spirituality in their lives by applying its seemingly contemporary insights. In

this article, I'd like to highlight Maimonides' teachings related to this important new specialty, what its originators have called "the study of character strengths and virtues."

The Science of Positive Psychology

The mental health field today is rightfully accepting "character strengths and virtues" as vital to understanding human nature. This development is long overdue; more than a century ago, the founding American psychologist William James urged that the new science of psychology explore the heights of human attainment, including altruism and transcendental experience, rather than focus on laboratory studies involving the sensory sensations of average people. Unfortunately, James' declaration was largely ignored for nearly a half-century, until Abraham Maslow in the 1950s and 1960s co-founded the field of humanistic psychology. Maslow's 25-year emphasis on studying emotionally healthy and high-achieving persons — those whom he termed self-actualizing — had great impact on academia and popular culture, but lessened significantly after his death in 1970.

About a decade ago, Martin Seligman and his American colleagues launched the field of positive psychology, drawing partly upon growth-oriented conceptions of personality — but stressing empirical research to validate their viewpoint. Since then, positive psychology has grown tremendously around the world, with courses offered at more than 200 American universities, several new academic journals established, including *The Journal of Happiness Studies* and *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and popular books such as Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* and *Happier* by Israeli psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar gaining wide media attention.

Central to such works has been a focus on such topics as hope and optimism, flourishing, gratitude and wisdom, love of learning, friendship and harmonious marriage, the mind-body relationship, courage, resilience, and happiness. Though the leaders of positive psychology are generally secularists from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, they have recently — and astutely — turned their attention to the writings of history's great religious thinkers for insights into character-building and the attainment of life-meaning and direction.

In this regard, a major figure in Judaism is highly relevant: Moses Maimonides. Though he lived long ago, Maimonides can be viewed as a pioneer in this domain — as both a brilliant rabbinic thinker and esteemed physician. Throughout his voluminous writings, Maimonides highlighted the importance of emotional and physical wellness for leading an upright, spiritual life. Let me highlight five aspects of Maimonides' teachings that are especially relevant to positive psychology today.

Human beings are creatures of habit.

The notion that habit plays a key role in molding personality was first advanced by William James in the 1890s. He famously described habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society" — propelling our lives in ways that lie outside our conscious awareness. Consistent with this longstanding view, positive psychology today has affirmed the utility of making habitual various forms of character-building activity, such as daily writing in a gratitude journal to "count one's blessings" or maintaining a diary to strengthen "learned optimism."

Maimonides repeatedly stressed the importance of habit in fostering ethical and altruistic behavior. It's fascinating to note that he specifically highlighted the importance of repetition in building positive habits. For example, in his influential formulation on charity, he observed that performing many small acts over time is more conducive to building character than if we perform one tremendous act with the same philanthropic value. Why? Because we are inwardly changed by our own behavior and thereby become more compassionate.

Maimonides' emphasis on the psychological significance of "small-act repetition" is precisely consistent with recent research in marriage and couples counseling—revealing that marriages collapse mainly due to many small acts of hurtfulness or neglect between spouses, not one huge calamitous event.

We are powerfully affected by our social milieu.

Since Alfred Bandura advanced social learning theory in the 1970s, developmental psychologists have known that in childhood our attitudes and behaviors are shaped by our social milieu: specifically, by those with power to dispense rewards and punishments, namely our parents. We imitate what they do, not what they say, in order to gain their approval and affection.

Based on this viewpoint, positive psychology has begun to unravel how desirable behaviors of kindness, altruism, and empathy arise in certain social settings but rarely so in others.

Consistent with talmudic thought, Maimonides stressed the role of social surroundings in affecting individual behavior. Though readily acknowledging the influence of heredity, he contended that its impact on human conduct was much less than our daily social milieu. Maimonides recommended that we seek teachers, mentors, and friends in order to uplift our daily conduct — even paying for the opportunity, if necessary, to be positively influenced by moral exemplars.

Conversely, he repeatedly warned against associating with unethical companions due to their harmful impact on our character. If there are no ethical people with whom to associate, Maimonides advised, then dwell alone in a cave rather than succumb to bad social influence.

Develop good social skills.

Among the main interests of positive psychology today is the development of what are known as social competencies, or collectively, as social intelligence. Recent research in organizational psychology has shown that socially oriented traits such as conscientiousness and extroversion are predictive of workplace achievement as well as job satisfaction. Clinical studies, too, have revealed a strong relationship between mental health and the presence of friends and confidants in one's life. Conversely, social isolation is an important indicator of depression at virtually all ages. In Maimonides' relevant view, the cultivation of such social attributes as cheerfulness, friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, and kindness is not only ethically important, but also represents a true path for success in life. Thus, Maimonides endorsed the teachings of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) that positive social relations are the hallmark of the sage.

Avoid negative emotions, especially anger.

To maximize mental health, positive psychology is concerned with strengthening such life-enhancing emotions as optimism, gratitude, and admiration — and lessening the force of our negative emotions. This view is consistent with increasing evidence from behavioral medicine that chronic anger exerts severe strain on the body and causes premature aging and reduced longevity. Here, too, Maimonides was a pioneering thinker, for throughout his Judaic and medical writings, he repeatedly warned against negative emotions for their destructive effects.

For example, in the Mishneh Torah (Book II, chapter 3), Maimonides asserted that "Anger is a most evil quality. One should keep aloof from it to the opposite extreme, and train oneself not to be upset even by a thing over which it would be legitimate to be annoyed." In the same volume, he stated that "The life of an angry person is not truly life. The sages have therefore advised that one keep far from anger until being accustomed not to take notice even of things that provoke annoyance. This is a good way."

Cultivate mindfulness.

The fields of positive psychology and behavioral medicine today are increasingly recommending mindfulness training (that is, learning to stay focused in the present moment) for its therapeutic value. The scientific evidence is clear that such training is effective not only in reducing harmful emotions like anger and fear, but also in strengthening the body — by lowering blood pressure and heart-rate, for example. In this regard, it's fascinating to learn that Maimonides addressed this topic in his influential *Guide of the Perplexed* (volume 1, chapter 60):

"If we pray with the motion of our lips and our face toward the wall, but simultaneously think of business; if we read the Torah with our tongue while our heart is occupied with the building of our house, and we do not think of what we are reading; if we perform the commandments only with our limbs; then we are like those who are engaged in digging the ground or hewing wood in the forest without reflecting on the nature of those acts, or by whom they are commanded, or what is their purpose."

Indeed, Maimonides attributed so much importance to mindfulness for establishing a healthful lifestyle that he even provided specific advice on how his fellow Jews could cultivate this trait: "The first thing you must do is turn your thoughts away from everything while you say the Shema or other daily prayers. Do not content yourself with being pious when you read merely the first verse of Shema or the first paragraph of the Amidah prayer. When you have successfully practiced

this for many years, try when reading or listening to the Torah to have all your heart and thoughts occupied with understanding what you read or hear... After some time, when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing...direct your mind exclusively to what you are doing."

Maimonides' career as a rabbinic scholar, communal leader, and physician spanned decades. His legacy has been profound and enduring. His psychological insights can enrich the new scientific specialty known as positive psychology with its important emphasis on fostering individual character strengths and virtues. In this regard, Maimonides' teachings also provide specific ways to advance Jewish spirituality in everyday life.

* New York State licensed psychologist and an adjunct associate psychology professor at Yeshiva University. This article appears in issue 9 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/remembering-justice-benjamin-nathan-cardozo>

Chukas – Speaking softly, while carrying a big stick

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine * © 2015

The Jews in the desert benefited from an ongoing water supply in the merit of Miriam. In the beginning of their sojourn in the desert Moshe is told to speak softly hit a rock and, in the merit of Miriam, water miraculously flowed from it.

In this week's Parsha we are told that when Miriam died the rock ceased to give its water. A crisis and panic ensue, and Moshe is told to talk to the rock and it will again give its water. Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. He was punished that he was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel because of this violation.

Why indeed was the Divine Directive to speak to the rock, instead of the way water was obtained 40 years earlier, by hitting it?

The Medrash explains: When a child is young, sometimes a parent might hit the child to make a point. As the child gets older, the communication is conveyed through speech.

This message was to be illustrated by the Divine Directive to talk to the rock. After a forty year relationship there should be no need to hit. Verbal expression should be enough to obtain compliance.

This concept can be applied to our own personal lives as well, in the sense of self-mentorship. After all, we all are our own coaches for personal growth. In the beginning of spiritual growth, striving to do a mitzvah may be difficult. We may find ourselves feeling constrained or even afflicted as we consider an increased commitment to a mitzvah. As we grow older in our spiritual commitments, noble decisions come more naturally. What has happened is that over the years we have trained our bodies to be responsive to our higher calling. At that point we achieve the great level that we need only "speak" to ourselves, and our bodies are ready to respond.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of over 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.**

<http://www.teach613.org/chukas-speaking-softly-while-carrying-a-big-stick/>

Chukas -- Divine Direction

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

In our parsha, we learn of the incident known as "Mei Merivah" – "Waters of Strife." The rock which had miraculously provided water for the nation during their travels through the desert was called the Well of Miriam and it was understood that this miracle occurred in Miriam's merit. When Miriam passed away, the rock left the camp and the nation found itself without a water source. They came to Moshe in turmoil and challenged him to provide water, asking what value there was in having left Egypt forty years ago just to die of thirst in the desert.

Despite Moshe's great humility and patience, he was in some small way angered by their rebellious outburst. Our rabbis teach us that anger can even cause the wisest and greatest of people to make mistakes, and they tell us that Moshe was no exception. G-d told Moshe where to find the rock, and that it would continue to provide water. However, G-d gave Moshe different instructions for how to get water from the rock than He had given him forty years earlier. The first time, G-d had told Moshe to hit the rock. This time G-d instructed Moshe to speak to the rock. Due to his anger and the pressure put on him by the nation, Moshe erred and hit the rock. For this error, Moshe was punished that he would not be able to enter the Land of Israel.

Rash'i discusses this incident in two places and appears to give two different explanations for what Moshe's error was. In our parsha, Rash'i explains that Moshe accidentally spoke to the wrong rock. When the rock he was speaking to did not provide water, he thought that perhaps after he spoke to the rock, he also needed to hit the rock as he had done originally. When he went to hit the rock, the rocks shifted and he struck the correct rock. (Bamidbar 20:11) In Parshas Matos, Rash'i discusses this incident again but does not mention that there were two rocks. Instead he says that Moshe's mistake was that he chose to hit the rock.

The Ta"z, in his commentary *Divrei Dovid*, learns that these mistakes were in fact both true. Moshe initially erred by choosing the wrong rock, and this is why speaking to the rock didn't work. He then made a second error in choosing to hit the rock as he had done forty years ago. He goes on to explain that this second error was the greater of the two and the main reason why Moshe was punished. Moshe had such a high level of faith and trust in G-d that he should have realized that G-d would provide all necessary guidance. When speaking to the rock didn't work, he should have realized that he must not have followed G-d's guidance properly. After all, if he had followed G-d's guidance properly, the rock should have given water. Moshe would have then realized on his own that he must have chosen the wrong rock. At the very least, he concludes, Moshe should have waited for G-d to give him further instructions.

The Ta"z implies that G-d provides guidance, one way or another, whenever we need it. Moshe should have felt so secure in this fact that he should have simply stopped and waited for a prophecy from G-d, when the water didn't come forth. This begs the question, though: how does G-d provide us with the guidance we need today? We are not privy to direct prophecy, and so often feel lost when facing difficult decisions.

When we analyze the Ta"z carefully, I think we find the answer to this question. Waiting for prophecy was the secondary option. He first says that really Moshe should have figured out that he had chosen the wrong rock. Moshe was responsible to analyze the situation and to figure out for himself what Hashem wanted him to do differently. G-d provides us with the wisdom and tools to find the answer, but it is our job to understand how it applies. We must analyze what we do know and determine how to apply it to the choices in front of us.

The Gr'a in Mishlei (16:4) goes even further and notes that we even have the equivalence of prophecy today. He says that a gut feeling is a form of prophecy. When we have done all we can to determine what we need to do in life, if we still don't know, G-d will enable our own soul to direct us. We are truly never alone.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

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.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

** This Dvar Torah arrived too late to include it last year.

Heifer-Therapy

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia **

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, נַחַר, 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 minuscule change in the name of the therapeutic tonic from to **עָפָר**.

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.

** Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>** Hebrew quotes from the Torah, omitted here, are in Rabbi Ovadia's original in Sefaria.

Chukat: Bring Your B-Game

By Rabbi Eliezer Weinbach *

Your community is running a fundraiser but you've never made fundraising calls before. Your synagogue needs a minyan but you are often late. A sick person down the block needs a visitor but you don't know what to say. What if you mess up? We're tired from our week and not on our A-game. How can we be helpful?

In Parshat Chukas, Moshe brings his B-game. He is tired and angry, and hits the rock instead of speaking to it. That wasn't Moshe's best moment. Yet for the community, it was everything they needed – the water sprang forth anyway and the people and animals could drink.

HaShem knows we are imperfect, but in return for sustenance and blessing HaShem only asks us to continue showing up. On an individual level, we should strive to increase our capacity and HaShem takes Moshe to task for that. On a communal level, however, the miracle – Water from a rock! – is still performed despite Moshe's imperfection.

We ought not let our fears of imperfection get in the way of our service to our communities. The B'nei Yisrael is made up of many, many imperfect individuals who show up to be of service consistently, even when they are not their best. In this time of exhaustion, let's make sure to take it easy on ourselves and take comfort in the knowledge that our B-Game is more than enough.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Rabbi Eliezer Weinbach, an experimental educator, is pursuing graduate level studies in Jewish education and in the environment.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2022/07/chukat/>

A Chukkat "Chai"ku

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

*The rock got a lash
From that bruise flowed thirst slaking
But drowned a prophet*

*Unfathomable
Like a bloody red cow-skin
Water will do that*

The people sighed deep

*But not deep like the ocean
Explore space. Not there.*

Shabbat Shalom.

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, 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 word ahava, meaning ‘love’ (its Hebrew letters have the same numerical value). The mixing up of the letters indicates that this is 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>

The Consolations of Mortality (Chukat 5778)

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

Chukat is about mortality. In it we read of the death of two of Israel's three great leaders in the wilderness, Miriam and Aaron, and the sentence of death decreed against Moses, the greatest of them all. These were devastating losses. To counter that sense of loss and bereavement, the Torah employs one of Judaism's great principles: The Holy One, blessed be He, creates the remedy before the disease.[1] Before any of the deaths are mentioned we read about the strange ritual of the red heifer, which purified people who had been in contact with death – the archetypal source of impurity. That ritual, often deemed incomprehensible, is in fact deeply symbolic.

It involves taking the most striking emblem of life – a heifer that is pure red, the colour of blood which is the source of life, and that has never been made to endure the burden of a yoke – and reducing it to ash. That is mortality, the fate of all that lives. We are, said Abraham, "mere dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). "Dust you are," said God to Adam, "and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). But the dust is dissolved into "living water," and from water comes new life.

Water is constantly changing. We never step into the same river twice, said Heraclitus. Yet the river maintains its course between the banks. The water changes but the river remains. So we as physical beings may one day be reduced to dust. But there are two consolations.

The first is that we are not just physical beings. God made the first human "from the dust of the earth"[2] but He breathed into him the breath of life. We may be mortal but there is within us something that is immortal. "The dust returns to the earth as it was but the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The second is that, even down here on earth, something of us lives on, as it did for Aaron in the form of his sons who carry the name of the priesthood to this day, as it did for Moses in the form of his disciples who studied and lived by his words as they do to this day, and as it did for Miriam in the lives of all those women who, by their courage, taught men the true meaning of faith.[3] For good or bad, our lives have an impact on other lives, and the ripples of our deeds spread ever outward across space and time. We are part of the undying river of life.

So we may be mortal, but that does not reduce our life to insignificance, as Tolstoy once thought it did,[4] for we are part of something larger than ourselves, characters in a story that began early in the history of civilisation and that will last as long as humankind.

It is in this context that we should understand one of the most troubling episodes in the Torah, Moses' angry outburst when the people called for water, for which he and Aaron were condemned to die in the wilderness without ever crossing into the Promised Land.[5] I have written about this passage many times elsewhere, and I do not want to focus on the details here. I want simply to note why the story of Moses hitting the rock appears here, in parshat Chukat, whose overarching theme is our existence as physical beings in a physical world, with its two potentially tragic consequences.

First, we are an unstable mix of reason and passion, reflection and emotion, so that sometimes grief and exhaustion can lead even the greatest to make mistakes, as it did in the case of Moses and Aaron after the death of their sister. Second, we are physical, therefore mortal. Therefore, for all of us, there are rivers we will not cross, promised lands we will not enter, futures we helped shape but will not live to see.

The Torah is sketching out the contours of a truly remarkable idea. Despite these two facets of our humanity – that we make mistakes and that we die – human existence is not tragic. Moses and Aaron made mistakes, but that did not stop them being among the greatest leaders who ever lived, whose impact is still palpable today in the prophetic and priestly dimensions of Jewish life. And the fact that Moses did not live to see his people cross the Jordan did not diminish his

eternal legacy as the man who turned a nation of slaves into a free people, bringing them to the very brink of the Promised Land.

I wonder if any other culture, creed or civilisation has done greater justice to the human condition than Judaism, with its insistence that we are human, not gods, and that we are, nonetheless, God's partners in the work of creation and the fulfilment of the covenant.

Almost every other culture has blurred the line between God and human beings. In the ancient world, rulers were usually thought of as gods, demigods, or chief intermediaries with the gods. Christianity and Islam know of infallible human beings, the son of God or the prophet of God. Modern atheists, by contrast, have tended to echo Nietzsche's question that, to justify our dethronement of God, "Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"[6]

In 1967, when I was just beginning my university studies, I listened to the BBC Reith Lectures, given that year by Edmond Leach, professor of anthropology at Cambridge, with their opening sentences, "Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity?"[7] I recall that as soon as I heard those words, I sensed that something was going wrong in Western civilisation. We are not gods, and bad things happened when people thought they were.

Meanwhile, paradoxically, the greater our powers, the lower our estimate of the human person. In his novel *Zadig*, Voltaire described humans as "insects devouring one another on a little atom of mud." The late Stephen Hawking stated that "the human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate size planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies." The philosopher John Gray declared that "human life has no more meaning than that of slime mould." [8] In his *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari reaches the conclusion that, "Looking back, humanity will turn out to be just a ripple within the cosmic data flow." [9]

These are the two options the Torah rejects: too high or too low an estimate of humankind. On the one hand, no man is a god. No one is infallible. There is no life without error and shortcoming. That is why it was so important to note, in the parsha that deals with mortality, Moses' sin. Likewise it was important to say at the outset of his mission that he had no special charismatic endowments. He was not a natural speaker who could sway crowds (Ex. 4:10). Equally the Torah emphasises at the end of his life that "No one knows his burial place," (Deut. 34:6) so that it could not become a place of pilgrimage. Moses was human, all-too-human, yet he was the greatest prophet who ever lived (Deut. 34:10).

On the other hand the idea that we are mere dust and nothing more – insects, scum, slime mould, a ripple in the cosmic data flow – must rank among the most foolish ever formulated by intelligent minds. No insect ever became a Voltaire. No chemical scum became a chemist. No ripple in the data flow wrote international bestsellers. Both errors – that we are gods or we are insects – are dangerous. Taken seriously they can justify almost any crime against humanity. Without a delicate balance between Divine eternity and human mortality, Divine forgiveness and human error, we can wreak much destruction – and our power to do so grows by the year.

Hence the life-changing idea of Chukat: we are dust of the earth but there is within us the breath of God. We fail, but we can still achieve greatness. We die, but the best part of us lives on. [Emphasis added]

The Hasidic master R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischke said we should each have two pockets. In one should be a note saying: "I am but dust and ashes." [10] In the other should be a note saying: "For my sake was the world created." [11] Life lives in the tension between our physical smallness and our spiritual greatness, the brevity of life and the eternity of the faith by which we live. Defeat, despair and a sense of tragedy are always premature. Life is short, but when we lift our eyes to heaven, we walk tall.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Megillah 13b; Midrash Sechel Tov, Shemot 3:1.

[2] Or as we might put it today: from the same source of life, written in the same genetic code, as everything else that lives.

[3] See the essay on 'Women and the Exodus,' in The Rabbi Sacks Haggadah, 117-121.

[4] See Tolstoy's parable of the traveller hiding in a well, in his Confessions; and his short story, 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich.'

See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1973.

[5] Num. 20:1-13.

[6] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125.

[7] Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World?*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

[8] I owe these quotes to Raymond Tallis, 'You chemical scum, you,' in his *Reflections of a Metaphysical Flaneur*, Acumen, 2013.

[9] Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus*, Harvill Secker, 2016, 395.

[10] Gen. 18:27.

[11] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

* 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.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chukat/consolations-mortality/>

What Happened to the Clouds of Glory?

By Yossi Ives * © Chabad 2022

Throughout the Israelites' long sojourn in the harsh desert, all their physical needs were miraculously supplied. Manna came down from heaven each morning, while water flowed from a rock. The Israelites were also surrounded by special protective clouds, which served a multitude of purposes, from clearing away dangerous pests, to sheltering them from the scorching desert sun, flattening the ground and guiding them on their way.

The Talmudic sages¹ teach that water was provided in the merit of Miriam the Prophetess, the older sister of Moses. They deduce this from the fact that immediately after the Torah informs us of Miriam's passing, it states, "The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron."² The people complained bitterly: "Why have you brought the congregation of the Land to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there?" This led to the infamous incident of Moses striking the rock, even though he had been instructed to speak to it to restore the water supply to the Israelites.³

Likewise, the rabbis taught that the "clouds of glory" were provided in the merit of Aaron, Moses' older brother. They derive this from the fact that the Torah⁴ informs us of an attack by one of the Canaanite kings immediately after we are told about Aaron's passing.⁵ As Rashi explains, "He heard that Aaron had died and the clouds of glory had departed. "This knowledge emboldened the king to launch an attack on the Israelites, as he surmised that they were now unprotected. Eventually, the Israelites successfully counterattacked and beat the Canaanites back. According to some traditions, the clouds were restored in the merit of Moses.⁶

Why No Backlash?

We read about a massive backlash when the water stopped upon Miriam's death, and we also are told how it was restored by Moses. In the case of the clouds disappearing upon Aaron's death, however, we do not hear of any protest, nor are we told in which way they returned. The clouds that accompanied the Israelites fulfilled indispensable functions that made their stay in the desert possible; how then could there have been not a single complaint about their absence?

Perhaps there were indeed no complaints, because by the time of Aaron's death the Israelites were on the border of the Promised Land and didn't need them anymore? This is clearly impossible, as the Israelites took several further journeys after Aaron's passing, including going backwards into the desert,⁷ and would have still required the services provided by the clouds – protecting them from the perils of the wild wastelands.

More than One Kind of Cloud

To shed light on this perplexing problem, the Rebbe offers insight into the role of the clouds, with attention to the minutest detail. Perusing the Midrashic texts and Rashi's commentary to the Torah, one will see that sometimes the term "clouds of glory" is used,⁸ while at other times it simply refers to "clouds."⁹ Why is this? Is there any difference between the two?

The Rebbe explains that according to Rashi and those Midrashic sources, there is indeed an important distinction. "Clouds of glory" refers to those clouds whose entire purpose was to honor the Israelites with a visible manifestation of the Divine Presence. They were, as their name implies, intended to bring glory to the Children of Israel. But when the term "clouds" is used alone, it refers to the many practical services they provided, such as shielding the Israelites from the harsh desert climate and protecting them from violent attacks. Those functions of the clouds were not for glory, but were key to their ability to survive in the wilderness.

What Happened When the Clouds Disappeared

Now we understand what happened when Aaron passed away: "the clouds of glory departed," and those honorific clouds indeed never came back, according to many. The other clouds – the ones that protected and assisted them in the desert – those never left, which is why there was no outcry or complaint about their absence upon Aaron's passing.

We now also understand what happened during the attack by the Canaanite king. As Rashi explained, "He heard that Aaron had died and the clouds of glory had departed, so he thought he had permission to wage war on the Israelites." Rashi does not say that the king judged that he was better able to wage war, but rather that he was permitted to do so. The utilitarian clouds were still in place, so the prospects of winning a war were no better, but he took the fact that the clouds of glory had departed as an indication that the Almighty was fine with him having a go at His people.

It is in part to commemorate those clouds of glory – that had no practical purpose, but were intended purely as a mark of honor and affection – that we observe the festival of Sukkot each year. Rashi explains that the verse "for in booths I had you dwell when I led you out of Egypt"¹⁰ refers to the clouds of glory.

The regular clouds were provided to ensure their survival, and thus G d was "obligated," as it were, to provide those, since He had led them into the danger zone in the first place. The additional clouds of glory were entirely extra and a symbol of unbounding Divine love.

In recognition of that special gesture, we observe a festival in which we enter a Sukkah which represents the embrace of our loving Creator and Protector.

The same applies to the relationships we have with one another: the mundane acts of kindness we do for each other are important, but they are separate from the acts of affection that have no practical benefit and are intended to convey our love. The practical acts of service are no substitute for overt acts of devotion, just as sentimental gestures are not a replacement for down-to-earth support.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 18, Parshat Chukat III.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Talmud Taanit 9a.
2. Numbers 21:2.
3. Because Moses hit the rock and spoke angrily, he was prevented from entering the Holy Land.
4. Numbers 22:1.
5. Numbers 20:29
6. Talmud Taanit 9a.

7. Numbers 21:5-7.

8. Tanchuma Beshalach 3, Behaalotecha 12; Tosefta Sota 4:1; Rashi to Leviticus 23:43; Numbers 20:29, 21:1, 26:15, 33:40; Deuteronomy 8:4, 10:6.

9. Mechilta Exodus 13:21; Sifri Numbers 10:34, Tanchuma Bamidbar 2; Rashi to Exodus 17:9, 19:4, Numbers 20:22, 25:4, 10:34.

10. Leviticus 23:43.

* Rabbi of Cong. Ahavas Yisrael, Pomona, N.Y.; also founder and Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5154284/jewish/What-Happened-to-the-Clouds-of-Glory.htm

Doing What Is Not Our Job

By Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

At G-d's direction, the Jewish people remained encamped at the southern border of the Land of Israel for 19 years after Korach staged his rebellion against Moses. They then wandered in the desert for another 19 years, making 17 stops along the way. At the end of these 38 years, they arrived at the border of the kingdom of Edom, to the south of the Land of Israel. On the 10th of Nisan 2487, Moses' sister Miriam died. The Jewish people's source of water — the miraculous well that had followed them in the desert — disappeared, for it had existed only in Miriam's merit. G-d subsequently restored it to the Jewish people in Moses' merit.

"The congregation had no water, so they assembled against Moses and Aaron" Numbers 20:2

Food nourishes the body, but the body needs water in order to absorb the nutrients in the food. Similarly, the "food" of the soul is the Torah and its "water" is the Torah's ability to reach and influence all facets of our personalities, all types of people, and all aspects of life.

When the Jewish people's existence was threatened in Egypt, Miriam was the one who ensured that there would be a new generation of Jews to carry on G-d's mission. Not only did she encourage the Jewish people to continue having children, she also saved their newborns from being killed, in defiance of Pharaoh's decree. On account of her efforts to ensure that the Torah would continue to "flow" into the next generation, the well existed in her merit.

With her passing, Moses had to assume her role. This teaches us that when other Jews are in physical or spiritual danger (thirsting either for actual water or for spiritual water — the Torah), we should come to their aid. If offering this type of assistance is not our forte, we should overlook this fact, as did Moses.

And when we selflessly help others, G-d in turn will help us with all our own needs.

* From Daily Wisdom

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Losing Miriam

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

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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 Tzipporah. He had done so because he needed to be in a state of readiness for Divine communication at any time. Miriam felt Tzipporah'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

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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.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“And he [Moses] said to them: “Listen now rebels” ... and he struck the rock twice.” (Numbers 20:10) Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav tells a tale of a king who was beside himself because his only son was behaving like a rooster: he divested himself of all of his clothes, romped about under the table, ate corn and fodder, and would only emit sounds of “cock-a-doodle-doo.” When all of his trusted doctors failed to find a cure, he sought in desperation the advice of a rabbi. The first thing the rabbi did was disrobe, get under the table, and introduce himself to the hapless prince as a fellow rooster. After several days of cock-a-doodle-dooing together, the rabbi began to eat real food. “You can be a rooster and still enjoy a scrambled egg and vegetables,” said the sage – and the prince joined him in the meal. And so, stage by stage, the rabbi brought the prince out from under the table and into the world of human discourse and relationships. But in order to effectuate the cure, the rabbi himself had to enter the quasi-animal world of the diseased prince.

But then why leave the hallowed halls of the beit midrash in the first place? In the laws of the red heifer, we saw how the kohen himself risks impurity by purifying the individual who became impure.

Why attempt to purify those who are defiled if you run the risk of becoming defiled yourself? Why does the Rabbi in the Rabbi Nahman story allow himself to become “roosterized” by consorting with the Prince-Rooster. Is he not worried that he will find acting like an animal to be more pleasant and certainly with fewer responsibilities than living the burdened life of a Prince?

The answer is indubitably clear: that’s what love of Israel is all about! The kohen, the Jewish leader, must love his people to such an extent that he is willing to sacrifice a portion of his own spirituality in order to bring those who have wandered far away closer to their religious roots. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter so defined mesirat nefesh, the commitment of one’s soul for Torah: it cannot mean giving up material opportunities for the sake of Torah, for that would be mesirat haguf (the commitment of one’s body); it must mean giving up a little bit of my portion in the World to Come so that my fellow Jew can have a portion as well.

And perhaps that is the responsibility of leadership as well. After all, it can be justifiably argued that if the religious leader had done a proper job, no Jew would ever become defiled!

What has this to do with the punishment of Moses for his having struck the rock twice, thereby demonstrating displaced anger against the nation which he in truth wanted to strike! God told him to speak to the rock but he struck the rock; he was expressing displaced anger at a thirsty and complaining Jewish people. He even lashed out at them, referring to them as “rebels,” criticizing not only their negative actions by ungratefully and unfaithfully kvetching for water but also denigrating their very personalities by classifying them as “rebels.” He had lost the ability to empathize with them, to “get under the table with them” and feel their discomfort – as he had done so effectively when they were slaves in Egypt and first began their desert experience. Perhaps we cannot blame him for having lost patience – considering all the ingratitude and rebellions he had suffered. But nevertheless he was sinning! In striking the rock (i.e. the Jewish people who were stiff-necked as a rock) he demonstrated that he no longer had the requisite love for his people which is after all the primary requirement for Jewish leadership.

The kohen, on the other hand, scion of Aaron who “loves all creatures and brings them close to Torah,” takes the life-giving water of eternal Torah and transforms the dead ashes of the red heifer into the life-giving purity of the

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religious ritual; the kohen, representative of God, affirms the eternity of Israel and the ability of every Jew to be purified from death to eternal life within the continuity of the traditions of his people. And his love for Israel is so great that he is willing to defile himself in order to bring redeeming purity to his fellow Jews who have become impure. And similarly the Rabbi in Rabbi Nachman’s story understood that only by empathizing and loving the Rooster-Prince would he have the possibility of weaning him away from his roosterizm and restoring him to the world of humanity.

The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

The Many Songs of Leadership

Everyone has his or her own voice. Some express it loudly and clearly; some just murmur or whisper. There are those who let their voices be heard only in their professional lives and are silent and withdrawn at home. Others use their voices only within their families and stifle their voices in the outside world.

Our voices can be expressed in a variety of ways: through speech, through the written word, and even by means of our postures and gestures. Our voices can also be expressed through song.

In a book he wrote for managers of organizations coping with the complex challenges of the 21st century work environment, Stephen Covey makes the following statement: “There is a deep, innate, almost inexpressible yearning within each one of us to find our voice in life.” That statement is the basis for his book, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, which is designed to help organizational leaders find their voices and inspire others to find theirs.

Each of the great leaders of the Jewish people, from biblical times down to the present, had his or her own distinctive voice. The voice of Abraham was heard throughout his world; the voice of Isaac was almost silent in comparison. Moses described his own voice as defective, yet he was capable of supreme eloquence. Joshua’s voice is never described as wanting in any way, yet we have few examples of his personal unique voice.

Some of our great leaders, including Moses, expressed their voices in song. We have the Song of the Sea in which the voice of Moses dominates; his sister Miriam responds to Moses’ song in her own voice; the Prophetess Deborah and King David are exemplary in their ability to use the medium of song to express their unique and distinctive voices.

All of the above are examples of how individual Jewish heroes and heroines found and expressed their voices. This week’s Torah portion, Parshat Chukat, provides an example of an entirely different kind of a voice: not the

voice of one person, but the voice of an entire group, indeed of an entire nation. It is the Song of the Well, of the Be'er: "...the well where the Lord said to Moses, 'Assemble the people that I may give them water.' Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well – sing to it –
The well which the chieftains dug,
Which the nobles of the people started
With the sceptre, and with their own staffs.
And from the wilderness to Mattanah,
and from Mattanah to Nahaliel,
and from Nahaliel to Bamoth..." (Numbers 21:16-19)

This is a much briefer song than the song that Moses led when the people of Israel miraculously crossed the Sea. But part of this passage too, at least in the synagogues with which I am familiar, is chanted melodically.

I have long been impressed by the fact that this week's Torah portion, in which the Song of the Well appears, describes a critical transition in the leadership of the Jewish people. From the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people essentially have had three leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. In this week's parsha, Miriam dies and is buried; Aaron too is "gathered unto his people" and is mourned; and Moses learns that his leadership role will come to an end sooner than he had thought, before the Jewish people enter the Promised Land.

This is indeed a story of transition, of the end of an era, of the passing of the mantle of leadership to a new generation.

No wonder then that the song sung in this week's parsha is so very different from the song sung by Moses at that triumphant moment near the beginning of his leadership career.

Our Sages tell us in the Talmudic tractate of Sotah that the Song of the Sea was sung by the people responsively. That is, Moses said the first phrase, which the people said after him. He proceeded then to the second phrase, and the people echoed him. Moses was an authoritative leader, and the people were obedient followers. Moses was the active composer of the song, the choirmaster as it were, and the people were but the choir.

In this week's Torah portion, two of the leaders pass from the scene, and Moses learns that his leadership authority is waning. The Song of the Well is an entirely different leadership song from the Song of the Sea. In this week's song, the entire people sing as one. It begins not "Then Moses sang this song," but rather "Then Israel sang this song." The leadership passes from one Divinely chosen charismatic leader to the people as a whole.

The people find their voice, and it is the voice of song. How beautifully this is expressed in the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni (Chukat Note

764): ...after 40 years, the people finally matured and began to sing a song on their own accord, saying, "Master of the Universe, it is now incumbent upon You to do miracles for us and for us to sing, as it is written: 'It has pleased the Lord to deliver us and that is why we sing our song all the days of our lives...'" (Isaiah 38:20)

Jewish history has known epochs in which there were clear leaders, gifted and often charismatic individuals who, by virtue of their wisdom or heroism, seemed ordained by the Almighty Himself to lead our people. But we have also known times, such as the present, when such prominent leaders are not apparent.

It is at times such as these that we all must assume leadership responsibilities. It is at times such as these that we cannot afford to humbly refrain from acting as leaders in our own families and communities. It is at times such as these that we must, each of us, find our own voices and sing the songs of leadership.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Power of One to Purify the Many

Parshas Chukas begins with the laws of Tumas Mes, where we learn that if a person comes in contact with a dead body (or is merely under the same roof as a dead body) he is given the status of a 'Tameh Mes' and the only way for him to become tahor (pure) is for him to be sprinkled with the water of the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) on day three and day seven of a seven-day procedure.

The pasuk reads, "And the pure one shall sprinkle on the impure one on the third day and on the seventh day, and he shall purify him on the seventh day; then he shall immerse his clothing and immerse his flesh in water and be pure in the evening. [Bamidbar 19:19]. There is an interesting passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) which certainly requires further exposition. Rav Yehoshua ben Kafrai said "My whole life I read this pasuk 'the pure one shall sprinkle on the impure one...' and I assumed that a single tahor individual needed to sprinkle the Parah Adumah water on a single impure individual." Rav Yehoshua ben Kafrai then says, "This was the case until I learned otherwise from 'Otzroseha shel Yavneh' (literally – the storehouse of Yavneh) that a single tahor individual can even sprinkle on many tameh individuals."

The question is, what does it mean he learned this law from the "Otzros of Yavneh"? What does the Talmud Yerushalmi mean by the term storehouse of Yavneh? Rav Meir Shapiro, the Lubliner Rav and the founder of the Daf Yomi concept, was also a powerful orator. He presents a homiletic exposition to this passage of the Talmud Yerushalmi.

What happened in Yavneh? At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai met Vespasian, the

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Roman General who later became Emperor of the Roman Empire. Vespasian granted Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai three wishes. One of the three things Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai asked for was "Yavneh and her Sages." Yavneh was a city on the Mediterranean Coast of Eretz Yisrael. It had a Yeshiva. Rav Yochanan pleaded that this Yeshiva be spared so that despite the great Destruction that was coming to the Temple and the Jewish population in Jerusalem and other parts of the country, he would have a few remaining Talmidei Chachomim who would preserve Torah and Judaism for future generations.

The Talmud (Gittin 56b) suggests that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai may have made a mistake. Perhaps one of his requests of Vespasian should have been to spare the Beis HaMikdash. Be that as it may, Rav Meir Shapiro suggests that the Yerushalmi, in referring to the "Otzros of Yavneh," was indeed referring to the lesson learned from the Yeshiva of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai in Yavneh!

The Torah that we learn here today, and the fact that there are still people who learn Torah throughout the Jewish world, is the result of the few Talmidei Chachomim left in Yavneh after the Churban HaBayis who literally saved the world of Torah. Had they been wiped out, Torah would have been forgotten.

So, what do we see from the "Otzros of Yavneh"? Rav Yehoshua ben Kafrai was saying, "I see from Yavneh the power of one individual. One person—and certainly a few good people—can make a difference, can save the world! I always thought that one tahor person can sprinkle on one other tameh person and have a one-on-one affect. But from Yavneh I see that one tahor person can affect hundreds of people."

We have seen in our lifetime individuals who have revolutionized the world. It is his homiletic insight, so we can cite him as an example. Consider Rav Meir Shapiro himself. It is mind-boggling to think of the zechus Rav Meir Shapiro has for coming up with Daf Yomi—now in their 14th cycle of daily Talmud study, completing Talmud Bavli once every seven-and-a-half years by synchronized study of a Daf a Day! Thousands and thousands of people worldwide learn Daf Yomi. Rav Meir Shapiro did not live 2,000 years ago or even 200 years ago. He lived in the 20th century. He came up with an idea that revolutionized the world. There are people like that.

There are others as well—Rav Aaron Kotler, the Vilna Gaon, the Ramban and the Rambam—people that revolutionized the Torah world. But even people like us can make a difference. One person can make a difference. For example—this is not a plug, but it comes to mind—The Ner Israel Rabbinical College, which many in my audience had the zechus to

attend, started in 1933 with four students. Those four boys came to a nothing of a Yeshiva—it hardly even existed. But because four people came, it came into existence. Those four people who ‘took the plunge’ in 1933 can take at least partial credit for all the thousands of people who have passed through the portals of Ner Israel in all the subsequent decades of its flourishing development. They made a difference. This is what the Gemara means when Rav Yehoshua ben Kafrai says, “This I learned from the ‘Otzros of Yavneh’.” This is why one pure person can effectively purify many tameh individuals.

The Ultimate Battle Between the Sechel and the Lev

The pasuk in this week’s Parsha says, “The Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelled in the south, heard that Israel had come by the route of the spies, and he warred against Israel and captured a captive from it.” [Bamidbar 21:1]. So, who is this? There is a very interesting Rashi here. He explains that this Canaanite nation who lived just south of the southern border of Eretz Yisrael who attacks Klal Yisrael is actually none other than our old nemesis Amalek, because it says about Amalek [Bamidbar 13:29] that they dwell in the land of the South.

If this nation is Amalek, what does our pasuk mean when it calls its leader “the Canaanite”? He is not a Canaanite but is an Amaleki? Rashi explains: They disguised their language to speak the Canaanite language (rather than the Amalekite language) in order to trick the Jews. The plan was to mislead Bnei Yisrael to pray to Hashem “to deliver this Canaanite nation into our hands” when in fact they were not Canaanites! Their strategy was to deflect the prayers of the Jews by having them pray for the wrong thing!

Rashi, however, notes that there was a major flaw in their “battle plan”. The Jews noticed that they were dressed like Amalekites, even though they were speaking the language of Canaan. The Jews therefore became suspicious and were unsure whether they were dealing with Canaan or with Amalek. That is why, Rashi continues, Bnei Yisrael offered a generic prayer without mentioning a specific nationality: “If You will deliver this nation into my hand...” [Bamidbar 21:2].

Let me ask a question: These Amalekites are so wise and so perceptive that they realize that if a Jew davens to the Ribono shel Olam, it is going to be effective. They are even so knowledgeable that they know if a Jew davens to Hashem and he utters the wrong Tefilla, it is not going to be effective. They know the Almighty listens to prayer and that it is effective and how precise it must be. Furthermore, they knew that the Jews already did battle with Amalek once (at the end of Parshas B’Shalach) and they knew the Jews realized Amalek was a fierce enemy. The Jews recognized that defeating Amalek would

require dedicated and focused prayer. Part of Amalek’s plan was to pretend they were only Canaanites. The Jews would think they were doing battle with a pushover nation, so their davening would not be as intense. Less intense davening will not be as effective.

One might ask: If Amalek knows all this, the power and effectiveness of prayer and the existence and omnipotence of Hashem, then why do they remain Amalek? Why do they persist in their evil ways? Why don’t they say, “Listen, Hashem Elokim Emes”? How can one remain an Amaleki if he knows all of this? Why not throw in the Amaleki towel and say “I give up. You are right” and convert to Judaism?

The answer is that their sechel (intellect) may have told them that, but whatever their tayvos (lusts) and lifestyle had been was not compatible with being a Jew or being a Shomer Mitzvos. I can see something as clear as day right in front of my hand, but there is a long distance from a person’s brain to his heart. They may have known it with their minds. The point could have been proven to them intellectually and rationally, but if it does not fit in with a person’s personal agenda, he may not make that final leap. He will twist and turn and rationalize and be in denial, but will refuse to honestly confront the truth.

This is not only the story with Amalek. This is the story with all of us. We know the Emes. We know that the Ribono shel Olam knows everything we do. We know what He expects of us. But from time to time, we do things that we should not be doing. Ay, we know the truth? We know that one day we will need to pay a price for this? But there is a big difference between the Sechel (intellect) and the Lev (heart).

We see another example of this in this week’s parsha. There is a big dispute among early authorities regarding the exact aveira (sin) of “Mei Meriva.” What did Moshe do wrong? Rashi and other commentaries learn that he hit the rock, when he should have spoken to it. The Rambam in Shmoneh Perakim offers a different explanation. He says the aveira was that Moshe Rabbeinu lost his temper. He said “Hear ye, you rebels.” [Bamidbar 20:10]. There must be fifteen different interpretations as to what the aveira was.

The Ramban here cites an explanation of Rabbeinu Chananel, which he endorses. He explains that their aveira was in verbalizing the question “Shall WE EXTRACT for you water from this rock?” implying that it was within their power, not that of the Almighty, to perform such a miracle. Moshe’s aveira was giving the nation an opening by which they might not fully believe in the powers of Hashem.

Let us ask the following question: Chazal say that all of Klal Yisrael, which numbered in the

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millions of people, all stood around the rock and saw the rock. But how could that be? It is impossible to fit two million people into a ten square foot area. Rashi explains that it was a miracle. “This is one of the places where a small area (miraculously) held a great number of people.” Furthermore, Chazal say that once this Rock opened up, all the rocks in the area began spouting water. Another miracle!

Thus, there could absolutely be no denying that they were witnessing miracles from Heaven. There was no way anyone could err and believe it was some kind of trick that Moshe was doing through sleight of hand. And yet, Chazal say that from the fact that Moshe used the expression “WE SHALL EXTRACT for you water” – people could rationalize and say “It is not from G-d, it is from Moshe Rabbeinu.”

This is yet another example of the phenomenon that something undeniable can be staring a person in the face, and yet, if the person wants to rationalize and wants to ‘make a mistake’ and deny, he can deny: “No! Moshe Rabbeinu had some kind of trick up his sleeve.” It is the same principle: Something can be as clear as day, but if for some reason psychologically we don’t want to believe and we don’t want to accept, we will find an excuse.

I once said over the following story, but it bears repeating. It is another classic example of this same idea: A story occurred with Rav Yechezkel (Chatzkel) Levenstein, the mashgiach of Yeshivas Mir in Europe, and later of Ponevezh in Eretz Yisrael. An irreligious cab driver who was driving Rav Chatzkel remarked that he had once witnessed an open miracle.

When secular Israelis complete their army service, they typically unwind by touring some exotic location. After his army service, this cab driver decided to tour a mountainous region in Africa with some of his army buddies. One night, they awoke to hear one of their friends screaming in terror. The young man was enveloped by a huge boa constrictor, which was squeezing the life out of him.

They had no idea how to free their friend, and they were afraid to do anything to the snake, lest they antagonize it and make it squeeze even harder. Facing what seemed to be the inevitable, one of the friends said, “I know that when Jews are about to die, they recite Shema. Maybe you should recite it now.”

As soon as the ex-soldier screamed, “Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad,” the snake unwound itself and slithered away into the darkness of night.

“That miracle changed my friend’s life,” the cab driver concluded. “He vowed to become a baal teshuvah, and he kept his word. He

traveled directly back to Israel and is now a thoroughly religious Jew."

Rav Chatzkel turned to the cab driver and asked, "U'mah itcha—and what about you?" "Me?" the driver responded in a quizzical tone. "The Rav doesn't understand. The snake wasn't wrapped around me; it was wrapped around my friend. "He had the snake around his neck – what does that have to do with me? Let him become frum. Why should I change my lifestyle? What do you want from me?"

Now, you might think that if someone witnesses such an event, it should have a personal impact on him. He should react. He should say "Look at this!" The answer is that if someone wants to deny, he can be staring at a miracle and still deny. A person can see two million people in a small area, a person can see water coming out of stones, a person can believe in the power of prayer like Amalek did – but if a person wants to continue living the life that he has been living, then he will continue to do so no matter what.

This is the ultimate battle between the Sechel and the Lev. Our job is to see to it that our Sechel overpowers our Lev.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages

Weakness – The Fatal Flaw

Our sidra this morning tells of one of the most painful episodes in biblical history, one which was seared into the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the incident of *mei meriva*, "the waters of contention" (Numbers 20:13). The Israelites, after the death of Miriam, complained about the lack of water. From a mere water shortage, they escalated their complaints to a general attack on Moses, expressing a preference for having remained in Egypt as comfortable slaves over being in the desert as starving and thirsty freemen.

Thereupon, the Lord told Moses and Aaron, "You shall address the rock [or, speak concerning the rock] before them, and it will give forth its waters" (v. 8). Moses and Aaron then turned to the Children of Israel and said, "Listen here, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Then Moses raised his hand with the staff in his hand he smote the rock twice and the water came out.

The punishment ordained for Moses and Aaron was severe: "Because you did not have sufficient faith to sanctify My Name before the Children of Israel, therefore you will not enter the Promised Land but will die on this side of the Jordan" (v. 12).

What was their sin? The biblical text is unclear, and many interpretations have proposed by commentators both ancient and modern. Rashi offers the most popular explanation: Moses was commanded to talk to the rock, and he hit it instead. However, Nahmanides is unhappy with this

interpretation because everything Moses did during his ministry was performed by the striking of the staff. Besides, as we indicated above, Moses and Aaron were not commanded to speak to the rock, but about it. Maimonides maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was their anger. They lost their temper when they said, "Listen here, you rebels." Nahmanides, however, criticizes this interpretation as well because, first, Moses was right in expressing his anger, and second, there are other occasions when Moses appeared to lose his temper and he was not reproached. Nahmanides therefore follows the interpretation of Rabbeinu Hananel and maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was to use the first person, "Shall we bring forth water," rather than, "Shall He (the Lord) bring forth water."

My own interpretation, which I respectfully submit to you, is an expansion and modification of that offered by Abarbanel and certain modern exegetes: The misdeed of Moses and Aaron was that of weakness. The first reaction of Moses and Aaron when they heard the rebellious plaints of the Children of Israel was not the immediate response of challenge, but of fear and retreat.

Moses and Aaron retreated from before the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and there they fell on their faces. When they should have stood up, they fell back.

More precisely, I believe we can pinpoint the sin of Moses in the second strike of the staff. Permit me to explain. Moses and Aaron started to assert themselves when they confronted the Children of Israel and said, "Listen here, you rebels." However, they kept themselves back. They restrained their response. Now psychologists, especially psychoanalysts, have taught us that inhibited aggression is usually directed against the self or against inanimate objects. If I am angry at someone and secretly wish to harm him I will stamp my foot or slap my thigh.

Now, the first time that Moses struck the rock was understandable. Everything he did, from splitting the Red Sea to bringing forth water, was performed with a strike by the staff. However, the second time he hit the rock, it was an act which expressed misplaced hostility, originally felt toward the Israelites, now redirected towards the rock.

Why was that wrong? What should he have done? Simply this: He should have expressed his anger directly to the Israelites, rather than the inanimate rock. Crudely put, he should have wielded the staff not on an innocent rock, but on the heads of this ungrateful and recalcitrant people who, after thirty-eight years in the desert, still proved that they were immature slaves, still whining, "Why did you take us out of Egypt?" One could expect this from a generation that was born in slavery and

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still primitive and immature – not from a generation born in freedom in the wild desert.

Moses and Aaron should not have fled, not have feared, not have conceded, not have compromised, not have taken it out hysterically on a rock. They should have encountered the Israelites with force and indignation.

In other words, Moses and Aaron were taught – and through them, we are taught – that weakness in a leader can be a fatal flaw.

Jewish leaders have always been commanded to be tender and loving. Moses and David are, in our tradition, the archetypes of gracious leadership. Both were taken from the sheepfold to become the shepherds of Israel. Just as a shepherd must learn to look after every stray lamb, to pick it up tenderly and hold it close to his breast, so must the leader of our people be a shepherd to human charges. But not always! There are times that strength and power and courage and resistance are called for in a leader. So, the first King of Israel, Saul, was deposed because he was too merciful, too compassionate, too soft, towards Amalek, where he should have been firm and strong. The Talmud (Ketubot 103b) tells us about the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was both the most eminent scholar of his generation and the nasi, the political leader of all of Israel. On his deathbed, his children came in to bid him farewell. Rabban Gamliel, his son, entered, and his father transmitted to him the orders of leadership, telling him how to conduct himself as his successor. And he said to him, "My son, conduct your presidency with strength." Lead from on high, with dignity and power and pride.

Leadership is not meant for diffident weaklings. A leader must often act against the masses. A leader need not necessarily be a "consensus president." He must be at the head of his people and sometimes demand of them, reproach them, rebuke them. That vox populi vox dei, that the voice of the people is the voice of God – is not a Jewish idea!

The Torah teaches us something of historic importance in recording the punishment meted out to Moses because of that second strike. Weakness is a fatal flaw in Jewish leadership. Sometimes you think you are being good when you are really doing evil. You think you are helping, and you are destroying. You submit to momentary compassion, and in the process you lose the Promised Land.

A Jewish leader must be gentle but must also be strong. He must be considerate but must know how to use power. Power, of course, can corrupt. But the attainment of a good life requires the benevolent use of power. Without it, we are in contempt of emuna (faith) and we have failed to perform kedushat Hashem (the sanctification of God's Name).

When we do use power benevolently, then it becomes a source of blessing. "Blessed are You, O Lord, ozer Yisrael bigvrura (who girds Israel with strength.)"

And blessed is Israel when it responds with its own strength.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish Values*

The Underlying Concepts of Mitzvot

The very first words of our Parsha "Zot Chukat Hatorah-This is the *Chok* of the Torah" refer to the unique Mitzvah-commandment of the Red Heifer. But these words are problematic. Assuming the word "Chok" signifies a Mitzvah-commandment that man cannot comprehend, then why does the Torah seem to tell us that this is the only Chok? And Rashi's explanation (Rashi commentary to Numbers 19:2) why this specific Mitzvah is called a Chok is similarly questionable.. He says that the non-Jews will make fun of the Jews for a such a strange Mitzvah. But by calling it a Chok, it will satisfy them. Why should that make a difference to a non-Jew? And for a Jew, if a Mitzvah, then it is a commandment from God that must be obeyed, no matter what the underlying reason. So, what is the difference to the Jew if a Mitzvah is called a Chok or not? There are many non-Chok Mitzvot that also seem incomprehensible to most Jews. Why are these not called Chok? Should a Jew ever try to investigate reasons for commandments at all, since once a reason is assigned to a Mitzvah, there is clear danger that some Jews will now claim that the Mitzvah is not applicable to them. Thus, we have to ask: what exactly is a Mitzvah? What is a Chok? And should Jews try to find the deeper reasons why they perform that which God commands?

The main reason for the performance of Mitzvot-commandments by Jews is not because they are good, moral, or noble deeds or actions, but rather, because they are commanded by the Almighty. These actions are the backbone of Judaism, one of the primary means by which a Jew relates to God. What is the ultimate purpose of performing these commandments given by God?

The Mishna describes the three pillars on which the world stands: Torah Learning, Worship of God, and Kind Deeds (Pirkei Avot 1:1-2). Each of these may be seen as a means by which finite man relates to the infinite God: by Torah learning, by animal sacrifice in Temple times and through prayer today, and by performing man-to-man positive actions-commandments. While the sources seem to say that although all three are legitimate paths to God, it is the performance of commandments that supersedes the other two paths. For example, the Talmud (Sukkah 49b) states that the act of giving Tzedaka (Jewish charity) is more important than the bringing of all the sacrifices. Especially today, after the Temple's destruction, when sacrifices are longer brought

for sin, the performance of Mitzvot has an added component of achieving atonement for sin, as alluded to in the Talmud (Berachot 55a). Maimonides stresses this idea when he states that the Jew should perform the commandment of giving charity immediately prior to prayer (Maimonides, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:15), so that the prayer should more readily be accepted because of the performance of a commandment.

When Torah learning and Mitzvot are in conflict and only one may be fulfilled, the performance of the Mitzvah takes precedence over the learning of Torah (Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:4). The Mishna (Pirkei Avot 1:17) informs us that the main goal in life should be the action, the performance of Mitzvot, and not the learning of Torah. It is true that Torah learning is the means that brings one to proper action—Mitzvot (Kiddushin 40b), the Jew's purpose in the world is the performance, not merely the learning. A person who only learns Torah, without the performance of Mitzvot, is compared to a person without a God (Avodah Zara 17b). Thus, of all the paths to God, the performance of Mitzvot is primary. This is reflected in the interpretation of the verse "This is my God, and I will beautify Him (Exodus 15:2)." How does the Jew beautify God? By performing Mitzvot in a beautiful manner, such as using a beautiful Shofar, Lulav, etc. (Shabbat 133b).

Belief vs. Action in Judaism - Like all religions, Judaism possesses some numerous beliefs (Maimonides, Thirteen Principles of Faith, Albo's book of basic Jewish beliefs, and others). However, unlike most other religions, the beliefs in Judaism take a secondary role to actions -- Mitzvot. Even the most basic belief -- the belief in God Himself -- takes a back seat to the performance of Mitzvot. The Jerusalem Talmud states (Jerusalem Talmud, Chagigah 6b) that while God desires both belief and performance of Mitzvot, He prefers if the Jewish people were to abandon Him, as long as they continued to observe the Torah. In most religions, the ultimate goal, the ultimate religious "high" achieved occurs when man is in the presence of God Almighty. In the Torah itself, however, Abraham excuses himself from the Divine Presence, after God came to visit him following his Brit Milah operation, in order to tend to his three guests whom Abraham thought (at the time) were Arab travelers (they were really angels). Thus, performing the Mitzvah of welcoming strangers to one's house was more important to Abraham than staying in the presence of God Himself. Abraham only rejoins God when these guests have left (Genesis 18:1-22). From this Biblical story, the Rabbis derive that in Judaism, the Mitzvah of welcoming guests is of greater importance even than being in the presence of God (Shevuot 35b).

A further demonstration that it is the performance of the Mitzvot that is the ultimate

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goal of the Jew can be seen from the tragic end of the greatest prophet in Jewish history, Moses. Despite his greatness, Moses was denied his ardent desire -- to enter the Land of Israel. Moses pleads with God to enter but is rejected. The Rabbis ask why it was so important for Moses to reach the Land. They answer that only in Israel could Moses perform more commandments -- those commandments indigenous to living in the Land (Sotah 14a). Thus, it is his desire to perform Mitzvot, and not merely his love for the Land of Israel, which caused Moses' great desire to enter Israel. A similar idea can be seen in relation to another great Jewish leader, Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was frequently compared to Moses in his pre-eminence and love of the people (Ketuvot 103b). When his students entered Rabbi Judah on his deathbed and saw that he was weeping, they asked him why he was crying. He answered that his greatest fear of dying was that he would no longer be able to perform Mitzvot (Ketuvot 103b).

The Purpose Of Mitzvot - Why does God want the Jews to perform all of the 613 commandments? On a certain level, we can never truly understand God's motives. There are numerous sources that tell us that, by definition, man cannot possibly understand God. Nevertheless, we can begin to understand certain motives of God through the Scriptures themselves that give us some clues. In addition, some the great commentaries of the past speak about certain "reasons" of God, and through their insight, we can gain an understanding as to the reasons for the performance of Mitzvot in general. The Torah states that the performance of Mitzvot will benefit each person (Deuteronomy 10:13). Though they may not understand the nature of this advantage and even how it works, Jews trust the Torah that they do profit in some way and these rituals are not frivolous. Like the written complex guide to an automobile, the driver may not understand why he or she is instructed to do certain maintenance features, but trusts that the creator of the car knew how to keep maintain it or make it better than the driver does. The Midrash (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 13:3) states that the purpose of the commandments is to purify the Jewish people, which is also reflected in the Mishna (Mishna Makkot 3:16). Just as the purification of any element involves extracting the harmful and extraneous matter to be left with the highest form of that element, Jews can, in a spiritual sense, look at the commandments in the same manner.

Through the commandments, Jews become better people, since the commandments help them eliminate spiritual imperfections in their personalities and behavior. Again, they may not understand how this works precisely. But they can readily comprehend that the person who is constantly doing good deeds (Mitzvot) for his fellow man will have to eventually become a good person, even if that is not his nature. In fact, even if a person did not believe

in God, yet still performed all of the commandments, this person would be an admired human being who was a good and giving person. This idea can be demonstrated by those who observe the details of the commandments to visit the sick (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:1-3), help the poor (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 247-259), return lost objects (Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 659-671) and the general emphasis (mentioned 36 times in the Torah [Bava Metzia 59b]) to assist the downtrodden such as stranger, orphan and widow.

A third possible purpose for the commandments may be simply to honor God. This is expressed in the Mishna (Avot 6:11) as the purpose of the Jew. It is also the manner in which the Jew beautifies God (Exodus 15:4) according to one opinion in the Talmud, as noted above. Finally, the function of the commandments today, in addition to all the other purposes, is to protect the individual from harm (Nachmanides, commentary on Deuteronomy 22:6) and to achieve atonement for the sins of each Jew (Berachot 55a).

Underlying Reasons For Commandments - There has been much debate as to whether or not there are individual reasons for each commandment. Even if there are reasons, many question if man should seek out these reasons to give the Mitzvot more personal and individual meaning. Clearly, the main reason to perform any commandment is simply because God commanded these actions. This is reflected in the verse in Leviticus (Leviticus 18:4) and in the name "commandment" itself. Even though many commentaries have given explanations and reasons for individual commandments, it is important to note, however, that each of these commentaries has also stressed that a reason alone cannot be the motivation for the performance. Rather, it is God's word and command in the Torah that compels the Jew to do the Mitzvot. The reasons offered are only to give man more meaning once he has decided to obey and practice God's commandments.

The Torah itself did not give individual explanations for commandments, precisely because man would then decide to practice each commandment depending on whether that person would identify with that particular reason. Thus, no justification was given in the Torah, in order to ensure that performance would not be tied to personal interpretations or meanings. The most famous example of this notion in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) records that King Solomon, the wisest of all men, attempted to determine the particular reasons why a king may not have too many wives and horses (Deuteronomy 17:16-17), and why Solomon determined that this commandment was inapplicable in his case. Of course, after violating these commandments, Solomon paid dearly and was punished, as even his superior powers of reasoning turned out to be mere rationalization. The Midrash (Midrash Shemot

Rabbah 6:1) records that, later on, King Solomon himself realized his error in trying to interpret the precise intention of the Torah. This Talmudic passage shows us that, if performance were left to our individual interpretation, each of us would rationalize that the reasons for many Mitzvot were inapplicable to us (i.e., we do not need a Shabbat today as a day of rest as we have Sunday for rest), when, in reality, the Mitzvot do apply and have meaning for all of us today (see chapter about "Shabbat" (vol. 4) for the "reasons" behind its observance today. In fact, all Mitzvot have so many different meanings on so many different levels, suited for different types and levels of Jews, and no one individual reason should be the justification to perform or not perform a particular Mitzvah. As people change and mature, the meaning and reasons they find in each Mitzvah also change.

And yet, for the people committed to practicing Mitzvot, finding a basis and rationale give the performance so much more meaning. That is why Maimonides stated that the practicing Jew should indeed search for the meaning of commandments (Maimonides, Hilchot Me-ilah 8:8). Maimonides strongly believed that each Mitzvah does indeed have a foundation, and it is man's goal to try to find meaning (as long as the performance is not tied to the meaning). For some Mitzvot, their intent seems more apparent than others, Saadia Gaon divided commandments into *Sichliot*, which are logical, and *Shimiyot*, which are not logical. Others explain the *Mishpatim* to be those commandments that are within human grasp while *Chukim* are beyond human comprehension. Maimonides claims that all the commandments can be understood, and man has the ability to grasp them, but the *Chukim* are more difficult to comprehend (Maimonides, Hilchot Temurah 4:13). Other commentaries do not agree with Maimonides' assessment. Nachmanides (Nachmanides on Leviticus 19:19 and Numbers 19:1), for example, believes that though the commandments do have reasons (they are not whims of God), but that man cannot possibly hope to understand God's intentions, as they are beyond human comprehension. Rashi (Rashi commentary Leviticus 18:4), following the Midrash says that says that reasons do not really exist for each Mitzvah. God simply wants us to obey these commandments.

* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com

Tanach Study Center Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

Chukat HaTorah - What does "Chukat HaTorah" mean? In this introductory phrase of Parshat Parah (see Bamidbar 19:2), the word "torah" is usually understood as 'the entire Chumash,' while "chok" is usually understood as a 'law that doesn't make sense' (or at least has no obvious reason).

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In the following shiur we suggest an alternate definition of the words "chok" and "torah" that will help us better understand the details of Parshat Parah.

Introduction - In our shiur on Parshat Tzav we concluded that the word "torah" (in Sefer Vayikra and Sefer Bamidbar) refers to a procedural law - i.e. a set of actions that must be taken to complete a certain process. For example, in Parshat Tzav, "zot torat ha'mincha..." (6:7-10) should be translated as, "this is the procedure for offering the korban mincha," for it details how the kohanim are to offer it. Similarly, "torah ha'chata" introduces the laws of how the "korban chata" is to be offered (see 6:18, 7:1).

We begin our shiur by identifying the specific procedures that are defined by the word "torah" in Parshat Parah. Afterward, we will suggest a definition for "chok" that will help us understand the precise meaning of the phrase "chukat hatorah."

[By the way, in case you are not familiar with the basic laws of "tum'at meyt," which are explained in Parshat Parah, here is a quick explanation. According to Jewish law, if a person touches (or is in the same room with) a dead body, he becomes "tamey" (spiritually unclean), and hence is not permitted to enter the Temple. To rid himself of this "tum'ah," a special procedure is required: the ashes of the "parah adumah" are mixed in a water solution and sprinkled upon the person who is "tamey" on the third and seventh day. At sunset of that seventh day, he becomes "tahor" and is then permitted to enter the Temple.]

Two Procedures and Lots of Chukim - In Parshat Parah we find two distinct procedures that would very neatly fall under our above definition of a torah.

1) Making the ashes ["efer"] by burning a red heifer ["parah"];

2) Sprinkling those ashes on a person who became "tamey."

[Before you continue, I suggest that you review chapter 19 and attempt to identify these two procedures.]

However, within the details of these two procedures we find several chukim. Before we continue, let's explain what a "chok" is.

The word "chok" describes a fixed law or statute. For example, in regard to "tum'at meyt": if a person touches a dead body, he becomes "tamey" for seven days. This is a "chok" [not a "torah"] for it is a 'halachik' consequence (see 19:11). It is a simple fact, and not a procedure to be carried out.

The word "chok" is even used in Chumash to describe statutes that are not mitzvot. For example, when Sefer Breishit describes Yosef's purchase of the land from the Egyptians, he cannot acquire the land belonging to the priests because: "... it is the chok of the priests by Pharaoh, that they eat their portion [chukam] that Pharaoh had given them..." (see Breishit 47:20-22)

[See also how Sefer Yirmiyahu refers to the laws of astronomy, i.e. the constant and unchanging cycles of the sun and moon around

the earth as "chukot shamayim v'aretz" (see 33:25).]

In a similar manner, Chumash considers the yearly celebration of Pesach and Chag HaMatzot as a "chok" (see Shmot 12:14). In fact, the celebration of all of the holidays in the yearly cycle in Parshat Emor are referred to as chukim. [See Vayikra 23:14,21,41.] The reason for this is simple, for a "chok" implies something constant that doesn't change - a statute.

[Note: Based on this definition, the reason for certain chukim may in fact be beyond our comprehension; however many other chukim can actually make a lot of sense. Therefore we find some "chukim" that are quite logical while others are not, but surely, an 'illogical law' is not the definition of a chok.]

With this background, let's read through Parshat Parah and attempt to identify what is a "torah" and what is a "chok." As we read, we will notice how the parsha divides into two, according to the two procedures that we mentioned above.

Procedure #1 and its Chukim - Recall that our first procedure [torah] defines how the "efer ha'parah" - the ashes - (which will later be used for sprinkling) are to be prepared.

Note how 19:2-6 describes the first stage of this torah:

19:2-3 To take a red heifer (one without a blemish) and give it to Elazar (the deputy high priest) who must slaughter it outside the camp.

19:4 To sprinkle the blood of the heifer seven times opposite the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed.

19:5-6 To burn the carcass of the heifer together with branches from both a hyssop and cedar tree, etc., until in turns into ashes.

Now that the 'ashes' have been prepared, the Torah informs us of a few special chukim that accompany this process:

19:7 The kohen who performs this procedure becomes "tamey" [that's a chok]; therefore he must wash his clothes and he remains "tamey" until the evening ["tum'at yom"].

19:8 The kohen who burns the animal becomes "tamey" [that's also a chok], and he must wash his clothes etc.

19:9 A clean person must collect the ashes and store them outside the camp. This is actually the final stage of the procedure [i.e. part of the torah].

19:10 This person who collects the ashes also becomes "tamey" [just like the other two]. That's yet another chok!

Therefore, we find that this specific procedure of making the "efer" is accompanied by several special chukim. (See Board #2.) Note how these chukim, even though not an integral part of the procedure, are a direct consequence, and therefore can be defined as "chukim" [statutes].

Note how this last pasuk explains why this procedure was necessary - for these ashes must be used for the chok of "tum'at meyt": "The person who collects the ashes must wash his clothes, and [these ashes] are to be [used] for Bnei Yisrael for a chukat olam - an everlasting

statute [which is the chok that] one who touches a dead body becomes 'tamey' for seven days. If he is sprinkled upon on the third and seventh day, he becomes 'tahor'; if not he remains 'tamey'... and should he enter the Mikdash, he is to be cut off from Israel." (see 19:10-13)

These psukim end the first section of Parshat Parah. Now that the "efer" is prepared, and we know why it is needed, we are ready for the second torah [procedure] - which explains the precise details of this 'sprinkling process.'

Procedure #2 and its Chukim - Let's take a look now at 19:14. Note how this pasuk (at first glance) seems to contradict our definition of a torah: "And this is the torah - a person who dies in a tent, everything in the tent becomes tamey..." (19:14)

Based on our above definitions of chok and torah, this law should be considered a "chok" and not a "torah!"

The answer is quite simple. The phrase "Zot HaTorah" in 19:14 is only introducing the procedure defined in 19:17-19. Let's explain.

All that we need to do for this pasuk to make sense is to add a "lamed" [which is implicit]; then 19:14-19 would be translated as follows:

"This is the torah for:

- a) the case when a person dies in a tent, then everything in the tent becomes 'tamey' (19:14);
- b) any open vessel in that tent (19:15), or
- c) any person who touched a dead body in the field or bone or grave (who also becomes 'tamey') (19:16);

Then: for any of these 'tamey' persons or objects, we must take from the 'efer' [the ashes of the heifer] and put it into a vessel with water (19:17) in order to perform the following procedure: a) take an 'eyzov' branch, dip it in the mixture, and then sprinkle it on (either) the tent, person, or object that became 'tamey' (19:18); b) repeat this procedure on the third and seventh day (19:19).

(See Board #3.) This second procedure, just like the first procedure, is also accompanied by certain consequential "chukim": a) he who sprinkles the water becomes "tamey" (19:21); b) one who touches this water also becomes "tamey" (19:22).

[In both of these chukim, those involved become "tamey" for one day, must wash their clothes, and then become "tahor" at sunset.] (See Board #4.)

Conclusion - Based on these definitions, we can suggest an explanation for the phrase "Chukat HaTorah" used in the opening pasuk of Parshat Parah. This parsha contains special chukim that relate to the torah (procedures) of "tahara" from "tum'at meyt," i.e. (1) making the ashes and (2) sprinkling the "mei chatat" - water with ashes.

Each of these two procedures have special "chukim" that accompany these procedures. The special chukim all have one common denominator: though one is performing a procedure [a torah] which makes the "tamey" become "tahor," he himself becomes "tamey" [a chok]. Chumash refers to this interesting 'statute' of this 'procedure' as "chukat ha'torah!"

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When the Temple stood, during the weeks before Pesach the people would prepare for the Korban Pesach by using the "efer parah adumah" to cleanse themselves from "tum'at meyt." This is one of the reasons that Parshat Parah is one of the four parshiot that we read on the shabbatot before Pesach. Today, even though these laws do not apply, the study of these laws can serve as a replacement.

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Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

For the Love of Torah

"This is the Torah (the teaching) regarding a man who dies in a tent..." (Chukas 19:14). Chazal (Brachos 63b) interpret this posuk homiletically to mean that words of Torah make a lasting impression only on one who figuratively "kills" himself in the tent of study. The Taz (Orach Chaim 46:1) explains that this refers to someone who exerts much effort and toil (ameilus) to understand the depths of Torah. At first glance, this statement of Chazal seems puzzling. Studying Torah with extraordinary ameilus is certainly praiseworthy. But why should investing effort to understand the Torah automatically lead to a better retention of the Torah that is studied?

The Mishna (Avos 6:1) states, "Reb Meir says that one who engages in the study of Torah for its own sake (lishma) merits many things." The first of these is that he is called a rei'ah ahuv (beloved friend) of Hashem and the Torah. What does it mean to be a "beloved friend"? Reb Chaim of Volozhin (Ruach Chaim, ibid) suggests that there are two types of friendships. Some friendships are formed out of selfish considerations. A person might want to benefit from another's wealth, services, or position of prominence, or he might simply want to feel the honor of being the friend of such a distinguished individual. Such a friendship is not deeply rooted and sincere; it is superficial and utilitarian, and will last only as long as it remains beneficial for the parties involved. About such a relationship Shlomo HaMelech warns, "Do not frequent your friend's home too often lest he become satiated with you and he will hate you" (Mishlei 25:17). When a friendship is pursued for the sake of convenience, there is always the concern that the other individual might feel that he is being taken advantage of, and the relationship might sour. Maintaining a healthy distance is key to preserving such a relationship.

But there is a second type of friendship, and that is one which is based on mutual respect and admiration. Such a relationship is enduring because it is motivated not by selfish concerns but by an appreciation of the character and the inherent qualities of the other person. Friends of this type enjoy each other's company and the more time they spend together the stronger the bonds between them become. This is what Reb Meir refers to as a "beloved friend". When someone appreciates the value of his friend and he cherishes their relationship for its own

sake, he becomes beloved in the eyes of his friend, and the friend will reciprocate that love in return.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin explains that this is why a chosson and kallah are referred to as reiyim ahuvim (beloved friends) because the ideal marriage relationship is one in which the husband and wife are not looking to advance their own interests, but rather are willing to sacrifice of themselves for the benefit of the other. Such a relationship which is based on mutual respect and selflessness will only strengthen over time and will make each person more beloved in the eyes of the other. Similarly, one who engages in Torah study not to receive honor or to make a living, but rather for the sake of the Torah itself is called a "beloved friend" of the Torah and of Hashem because through his learning he demonstrates his unconditional love for the Torah, and in return the Torah and Hashem love him as well.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning behind the statement of Chazal that words of Torah make a lasting impression only if one "kills" himself in studying them. The more effort a person invests in Torah study and the more he is willing to sacrifice in order to learn Torah, the more he demonstrates his love for the Torah, and that emotional bond which he develops with the Torah will cause him to remember the Torah that he studied. Moreover, when a person shows his love for the Torah, the Torah and Hashem reciprocate that love, and the individual is blessed with extra special powers of retention. As Chazal comment (Eiruvin 54a) on a later posuk in Parshas Chukas (21:18) "And a gift from the desert' - one who makes himself ownerless (hefker) like a desert...will remember his Torah." One who sacrifices his own needs and selflessly pursues the study of Torah receives an extra gift of Torah. He is blessed with additional siyata dishmaya (divine assistance), and that enables him to retain his Torah more easily.

Hard work and effort are necessary prerequisites to acquire any type of knowledge. But when it comes to the study of Torah these ingredients pay extra dividends.

Home Weekly Parsha CHUKAT 5782

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Torah reading of this week deals with a ritual in the Temple – that of the Red Heifer – which is characterized as being a commandment beyond the ken of human understanding and rational interpretation. It remains a primary example of certain commandments that, at their very core, are not easily interpreted or made relevant to human behavior, nor to moral understanding and judgment.

The Torah itself calls this commandment a *chok*, which must be obeyed without question or doubt, for it is beyond human comprehension and understanding to genuinely appreciate and value its essence and purpose. This is the reason the entire Torah reading of this week is called *Chukat* – the law and commandments of the Torah for which no explanation will be given.

If we review previous narrative portions of the Torah that we have read and studied over the past weeks, we can easily conclude that all the events that were described – the murmurings, rebellions, false reports and evil speech and the crimes against Moshe and Aaron also fit the category of being a *chok* – something irrational, inexplicable and beyond logical comprehension.

We all believe, somehow, that we live in a rational world, and that we can make rational decisions based upon knowledge, facts, experience, and history. However, the truth is that very few of our decisions are made rationally and are often based on other factors on a constant and recurring basis. Human behavior is almost by definition irrational and inexplicable. It is because of this truth that the Torah gives us laws and commandments that are rational and inexplicable, to match our human moods and decision-making processes.

We can easily understand that if it were not for the Torah itself guiding us through life, giving us daily support, guidance, and stability, certainly the national life of the Jewish people would be chaotic in the extreme. It is this chaos of irrational behavior which is universally present amongst all people in the world, which leads to the fall of empires and to catastrophic decisions brought about by irrational policies and a great deal of human arrogance.

It is noteworthy to see that in world history, almost all the major empires of the world collapsed and eventually fell because of internal pressures of the society rather than by actual external aggression. These pressures are caused by human nature, both emotionally and ideologically. Once the original basis and emphasis that brought about success and growth in the Empire dissipated, because of the irrational behavior of leaders of these empires, the collapse of those would not be long in coming.

I have always found it to be ironic that the most irrational of all creatures – human beings – have the temerity to criticize Jewish tradition as not being rational or easily explained in so-called “factual” terms. It is the purpose of the Torah to instruct us, guide us, and constrain us. It is the purpose of the Torah to counter human irrationality with a form of heavenly certainty that is beyond our understanding. History has proven this assertion correct.

Shabbat shalom

RABBI BEREL WEIN

**Anger Management
CHUKAT**

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

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.

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.

[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.”

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Chukat (Numbers 19:1-22:1)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel — “And Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage [kehal] before the rock; and said to them, “Listen now, rebels, from this rock shall we extract water for you?” And Moses lifted his hand, struck the rock twice with his staff, and abundant water emerged to give drink to the community [eidah].” (Numbers 20:10-11)

Moses entered the stage of Jewish history by heroically striking an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an Israelite slave (Exodus 2:11-12). In contrast, his unfortunate striking of a rock in this week’s Biblical portion of Chukat precipitated his exit from the stage of Jewish history. His first act of striking was done out of love for his people and outreach to his brethren, an act of courage and self-sacrifice that forced him to flee the house of Pharaoh.

The striking of the rock, however – which in reality was directed at the People of Israel, whom he called “rebels” – was an expression of deep frustration with a nation that had defied his teachings and fomented rebellion after rebellion to undermine his and God’s authority. What had happened to cause Moses to lash out at his beloved nation?

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap (1883-1951), a close disciple and confidant of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, describes in his multi-volume *Mei Marom* the change in Moses’ mindset towards the People of Israel by distinguishing between two descriptive nouns for them, which are usually taken for synonyms: kehal and eidah, assemblage and community.

A kehal (“assemblage”) consists of the many individuals who gather together, the separate and disparate persons who make up a crowd.

An eidah (“community”) is guided by a specific purpose, which serves to unite and connotes individuals united by their commitment to historic continuity from generation to generation. Indeed, the very term eidah comes from the same Hebrew root as witness (eid) and testimony (eidut). The continued survival of the nation of Israel despite exile and persecution in accordance with the Divine covenant serves as eloquent testimony to the reality and truth of God’s presence and of Israel’s mission: humanity perfected in a world redeemed.

With this background, let us take a fresh look at our Biblical portion. Immediately following Miriam’s death, the desert wells dry up and the Israelites assemble as a crowd of disparate rabble (vayikahalu) in complaint against Moses and Aaron. In response, God addresses Moses: “Take the staff, and you and Aaron assemble the community (hak’hel et ha’eidah). Speak to the rock in their presence and it will give forth its water. You will thereby bring forth water from the rock and allow the community (ha’eidah) and their beasts to drink” (*ibid.*, v.8).

Please take note that Moses is told by God to assemble the community (eidah). However, “Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage (kahal)

in front of the rock" (ibid., v.10)! They, the leaders, had lost the vision of Israel as an eidah, a witness-community!

What a literal reading is teaching us is that God wanted Moses to look at the motley crew of complainers and see that behind the façade of rabble were to be found witnesses ("eidim") of the Divine. Moses was thereby supposed to appreciate the great potential of this people: that standing before him were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and the parents of Yishai, David, and the righteous Messiah.

God expected Moses to see through the angry mob and inspiringly extract from deep within them the faith of their forebears and the glory of their descendants. But Moses, disappointed and disgruntled, personally devastated by their "ingratitude," can only see a congregation of kvetching individuals, a mass of fearful and immature freedmen dancing before a Golden Calf; a Datan and an Aviram who refused to even meet with him; a disparate crowd of people who allowed themselves to become paralyzed in fear before the Canaanites.

He had lost sight of the community of Israel and could only see the assemblage of Israel; he spoke to what was in front of him instead of to their potential, the great moments and the noble individuals who comprised historic Israel and forged the Israelites in front of him. And so, he became incapable of speaking with love; he could only strike out in anger. Given this attitude, Moses cannot continue to lead the nation towards the fulfillment of its historical destiny.

Many years ago, I had the unique pleasure and privilege of spending an unforgettable Sabbath with one of the great scholars of the 20th century, Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel z"l. I could not resist asking him how, despite the fact that he served as a rabbi of a congregation, he nevertheless found the time to be so prolific in Jewish scholarship, producing special editions of and commentaries on Rashi and Nahmanides, as well as responses to difficult Talmudic questions asked by Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

"I always had small congregations," he told me, "small in number and sometimes even small in soul. After a difficult board meeting with Mr. Goldberg and Mrs. Schwartz, I yearned for the company of profound minds and deep perspectives. Who could be greater antidotes to small-minded and mean-spirited individuals than Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger?"

Rabbi Chavel understood the secret; he had the capacity to look beyond the assemblage and see the community. He realized that, in the final analysis, his "small congregations" were inspired and spawned by Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger, by Moses and Aaron, by Abraham our Father and Sarah our Mother. This is the perspective with which we must, each of us, view our present-day Jewish communities, as well!

Shabbat Shalom!

Both parshiyos Balak (read this week in Eretz Yisrael) and Chukas (read in chutz la'aretz) discuss relationships with non-Jews, and therefore are appropriate parshiyos to discuss the mitzvah of tevilas keilim.

Must I Immerse a Candy Dish?

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question: A Sweet Saga

Avraham Sweet, the proprietor of Candy Andy, wants to know.

"I have a gift business in which I sell glass candy bowls filled with candies, fruits, and nuts. Must I toivel these dishes before I fill them?"

Introduction:

In Parshas Matos, the Torah teaches: Regarding the gold and the silver; the copper, the iron, the tin and the lead: any item that was used in fire needs to be placed in fire to become kosher, yet it must also be purified in mikveh water. In addition, that which was not used in fire must pass through water" (Bamidbar 31:22-23). From these verses we derive the mitzvah of tevilas keilim -- The mitzvah to immerse metal implements in a mikveh or spring prior to using them for food. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 75b) notes that this immersion is required even if the vessel has never been used. In other words, this mitzvah is unrelated to the requirement of koshering equipment that was used for non-kosher food or to the laws related to purifying implements that became tamei.

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 75b) further states that in addition to metal items intended for food use, we are also required to immerse glass dishes, because both metal and glass share a similarity -- they are repairable by melting and reconstructing, or, as we would say, they are recyclable. This renders them

different from vessels made of stone, bone, wood or earthenware, all of which cannot be repaired this way.

What types of dishes must be immersed?

The Gemara cites a highly instructive dialogue about the mitzvah of immersing vessels:

"Rav Nachman said in the name of Rabbah bar Avuha: 'One can derive from the verse that one must immerse even brand new items, because used vessels that were purged in fire are as kosher as those that are brand-new, and yet they require immersion.'

Rav Sheishes then asked him: 'If it is true that the mitzvah of immersing vessels is not because of kashrus concerns, maybe one is required to immerse even clothing shears?'

Rav Nachman responded: 'The Torah only mentions vessels that are used for meals (klei seudah)' [Avodah Zarah 75b].

Rav Sheishes suggested that if immersing utensils has nothing to do with kosherizing utensils used for non-kosher, perhaps this mitzvah applies to all paraphernalia -- even cameras, cellphones and clothing shears!

To this, Rav Nachman retorted that since the Torah mentions only implements used for a meal, the mitzvah of tevilas keilim applies only to utensils used for preparing and consuming food, not those intended for other purposes.

Klei seudah -- appliances used for meals

Rav Nachman did not require that all food preparation utensils be immersed, only klei seudah, items used for meals. Soon, we will see how this detail affects many of the halachos of tevilas keilim. But, what exactly are considered klei seudah, and how is this different from simply saying that all food preparation utensils must be immersed?

Klei sechorah -- "merchandise"

The halachic authorities note that a storekeeper is not required to immerse vessels he has for sale, since for him they are not utensils with which he intends to prepare food or eat. Later authorities coin a term "klei sechorah," utensils used as merchandise, ruling that these items do not require immersion until they are purchased by the end user (see Taz, Yoreh Deah 120:10). Furthermore, several halachic authorities contend that not only is the storekeeper not required to immerse the utensils prior to sale, if he immerses them, it is not valid, since there is, as yet, no requirement to immerse them (Shu"t Minchas Yitzchak 8:70). This is based on a comment of the Rama implying that tevilah performed before the obligation to immerse a utensil exists, such as while it is still owned by the non-Jew, does not fulfill the mitzvah, but must be repeated after the utensil becomes the property of a Jew (Rama 9). Thus, reciting a beracha on this too-early tevilah would be a beracha levatalah.

Based on this discussion, we can now address one of our above-mentioned questions:

"I have a gift business in which I sell candy bowls filled with candies, fruits, and nuts. Must I toivel these dishes before I fill them?"

This question is a modification of a situation in which I was once involved. We received a glass candy bowl as a gift from someone with a note that the proprietor had already toived the bowl. I called the owner of the business to inform him that, in my opinion, not only is he not required to toivel the dish, but I suspect that the tevilah does not help. My reasoning is that, although the proprietor fills the bowls with nuts and candies, from his perspective this is merchandise that he is selling. The dish therefore qualifies as klei sechorah that one need not immerse, and immersing them does not fulfill the mitzvah. As a result, not only is the proprietor not obligated to immerse the dishes, but doing so fulfills no mitzvah, and it is a beracha levatalah for him to recite a beracha on this tevilah. Including a note that the dish was toived is detrimental, since the recipient will assume that he has no requirement to toivel this dish, when the end-user is required to immerse it. For these reasons, I felt it incumbent on myself to bring this to the attention of the owner of the business.

The proprietor was very appreciative. He told me that, in truth, it was a big hassle for him to toivel the dishes, but he had been assuming that halacha required him to do so before he could fill them.

Shortly after writing these words, I received the following shaylah:

"I want to ask you whether one must toivel an item that is being given away as a present. When I studied the topic, I concluded that, even if I purchase a utensil that requires tevilah, but I am planning on giving it to someone, it does not have a chiyuv tevilah until it reaches the recipient's hands. Only then does it become kli seudah. This would also apply, for example, if someone gave a shalach manos bowl filled with candy, etc; the utensil wouldn't require tevilah until the person receives it. What do you think?"

To which I answered:

"It seems to me that since one is purchasing the item for someone's personal use, and not to sell, that it should have a chiyuv tevilah at this point. Only items meant to be merchandized are absolved from tevilah."

I received the following response:

"Who says that the recipient is going to use the utensil at his table? Indeed, I had the very same shaylah tonight. My wife took a small receptacle that was holding a

plant, filled it with nuts and dried fruit, and brought it to someone as a present. Who said that the recipient will use it afterwards for food? Maybe it will be a candleholder, a decorative piece, etc. It doesn't become kli seudah until she decides what she will use it for."

The point the correspondent is making is that it may indeed be that this item will never be a food utensil, and therefore never be required to be immersed. Only the end user determines whether the item is indeed a food utensil, and therefore until he decides what to do with it, there is no requirement to immerse it.

Conclusion

According to Rav Hirsch, metal vessels, which require mankind's mining, extracting and processing, represent man's mastery over the earth and its materials. Whereas vessels made of earthenware or wood only involve man shaping the world's materials to fit his needs, the manufacture of metal demonstrates man's creative abilities to utilize natural mineral resources to fashion matter into a usable form. Consuming food, on the other hand, serves man's most basic physical nature. Use of metal food vessels then represents the intellectual aspect of man serving his physical self, which, in a sense, is the opposite of why we were created, which is to use our physical self to assist our intellect to do Hashem's will. Specifically in this instance, the Torah requires that the items hereby produced be immersed in a mikveh before we use them to endow them with increased kedusha before they are put to food use. This demonstrates that although one may use one's intellect for physical purposes, when doing so one must first sanctify the item to focus on the spiritual.

Never Stop Trying to Avoid Conflict Moses' Super-Rational Attempt for Reconciliation

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Mutiny

The narrative is dramatic, tragic, and unmistakably Jewish. Four individuals -- Korach, Dathan, Abiram, and On son of Peles -- lead a mass mutiny against Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, and his brother Aaron, the High Priest.

"They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron," the portion of Korach records (1), "and said to them, 'It is too much for you! The entire community is holy, and G-d dwells among them, why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of G-d?'

Moses responds to Korach in brief and moving words. He attempts to persuade Korach, who happens to be his first cousin, that Aaron was appointed to his position by the instructions of G-d. Nepotism was not a factor.

"Then Moses sent word to summon Dathan and Abiram," the Torah records (1). "But they said, 'We won't come! Is it not enough that you [Moses] brought us out of [Egypt], a land flowing with milk and honey, just to kill us in the desert?! What right do you have to set yourselves above us? Even if you would gouge out our eyes, we shall not come!'

These are bold and vicious words. Clearly, Dathan and Abiram won't surrender. They are determined, together with Korach, to overthrow Moses and Aaron.

As usual in the wilderness, G-d intervenes. He decides to wipe out the rebels who are attempting to invalidate Moses as the leader of the Jewish people and the communicator of G-d's law. G-d instructs Moses to announce to the entire community, "Withdraw from the pavilion of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram." A tragic fate awaits them.

But before Moses moves to execute G-d's instruction, the Torah inserts an unexpected scene in the narrative:

"Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram."

Why? Didn't G-d instruct him to ensure that everybody withdraws from their dwellings? What exactly did Moses do when he approached them? It seems as if Moses himself is disobeying what he was told to do!

The text leaves the answer to our imagination, but the message is clear. Moses was attempting, one last time, to persuade Dathan and Abiram to terminate their crusade. He made one last attempt to save their lives. It was to no avail. They would not be moved.

The Talmud, commenting on this scene, states (2): "From here we learn that one should never keep up a quarrel."

Yet here is the simple question: Must we derive this noble injunction from this incident? Hasn't the Torah already stated explicitly (3), "You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall love your fellow as yourself!" Does this straightforward commandment not teach us already that we ought never to maintain a quarrel or perpetuate a dispute, but

must always attempt to eradicate strife? Why would the Talmudic sages feel compelled to derive this injunction from the particular ambiguous verse, "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram"?

A Profile of Quarrelers

To understand this, we must examine the profiles of these two quarrelers, Dathan and Abiram. The Torah reports four incidents about these two men, sufficient material to capture the nature of their relationship with Moses.

Incident number one, at the beginning of Exodus, takes us back some 70 years, to Moses' youth (4).

"Now it came to pass in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brothers and looked at their burdens. He saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. He turned this way and that way, and he saw that there was no person present; so he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were quarreling, and he said to the wicked one, 'Why are you going to strike your friend?' And the man retorted, 'Who made you a man, a prince, and a judge over us? Do you plan to slay me as you have slain the Egyptian?' Moses became frightened and said, 'Indeed, the matter has become known!'

Who were the two Hebrews quarreling with each other? The Talmud and the Midrash (5) deduce from the wording that they were Dathan and Abiram.

Incident number two occurs shortly after the Exodus when the heavenly Manna begins falling daily in the desert to nourish the wandering Jews (6):

"Moses said to them [the Jewish people], 'Let no one leave over any of it until morning.' But some men did not obey Moses and left over some of it until morning, and it bred worms and became putrid. Moses became angry with them."

Who were these men that betrayed Moses' instruction? The Midrash (7) deduces from the wording, yet again, that it was Dathan and Abiram.

Incident number three occurs one year later when the spies returned from the Holy Land and dissuaded their brethren from the motivation and willingness to conquer and settle the Land of Israel (8):

"The people wept that night. All the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the entire community said to them: 'If only we had died in the land of Egypt... Why is G-d bringing us to this Land to die by the sword?'

"And one man said to his brother, 'Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!'

Who exactly was this man who spoke these words to his brother? Here again, tradition teaches (9) that it was a conversation between Dathan and Abiram.

Finally, the fourth incident recorded above, tells the story of how Dathan and Abiram not only rejected Moses' plea that they come to see him but went so far as to call him a killer.

Professional Rabble-Rousers

These four incidents paint a fairly accurate picture of Dathan and Abiram's characters. They were not idealistic adversaries, disputing Moses for ideological reasons: the fact is that they quarreled between themselves too, independent of Moses. Nor were they driven by envy, seeking the power and prestige possessed by Moses: the fact is that they fought Moses long before he became a leader.

Dathan and Abiram, it appears, were rabble-rousers who would not miss an opportunity to fight Moses, even if they stood to gain nothing. They were forever determined to undermine Moses and his authority. They even had the audacity of suggesting that Moses was a killer and that he would poke their eyes out, as though he were a sadist. Dathan and Abiram, it seems, despised Moses because he was their opposite: he stood for everything they loathed.

It is thus astonishing that after all of these incidents, after an animosity that persisted for close to 70 years, and even after G-d instructed Moses to ensure that everybody departs from their midst, "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram" to try and assuage their ire against him. This makes little sense. One could imagine some Jews suggesting

to Moses that his behavior was humiliating and futile. "You know, Moses, that these guys loathe you. For seven decades they haven't missed an opportunity to campaign against you. Even as you invited them to discuss peace, they responded with nasty words. Moses! For the sake of your dignity and G-d's dignity, it is below you to approach them."

"Do not be kinder and wiser than G-d," they must have argued. "If G-d commanded you to stay away from them, just stay away." (10)

Boundless Dedication

Yet here we are allowed a glimpse into what made Moses the human being he was. Here we encounter the gigantic heart of Moses. His dedication, loyalty, and love to every single member of his people knew no bounds. Even as his fiercest and lifelong enemies were engaged in an intense battle against him, he would not give up on the chance of seeking peace with them and saving their lives.

Ultimately, it is this verse -- "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram" -- that demonstrates to us why the mutiny against Moses was so profoundly wrong. It was Moses' uncompromising identification with his people, no matter to what depths they might have fallen, that made him qualified to have all the power he had. Only a human being so selfless and humble can be trusted with so much power. Moses' extraordinary dedication to his people turned him into the authentic and quintessential Jewish leader.

Only Peace

Now we can understand the Talmudic comment that "From here we that learn that one should never keep up a quarrel."

The biblical instruction "You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall love your fellow as yourself" merely suggests that one should not foster animosity in one's heart; one must expose and deal with his or her grudges, and ultimately learn to love his fellow human being, since, on a deeper soul- level, we are children of one G-d (11).

But how about when you feel that somebody really has issues with you and is addicted to the hate? What about when you can justly assume that no matter what you will do, this person will never change? Why not just write him off and accept the quarrel as an immutable fact of life? Why not make peace with the state of war?

This is what Moses taught us at the moment when he "stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram." "Never keep up a quarrel." Despite the fact that he could have rightly assumed that his adversaries would not change their position, he did not allow any assumptions based on past experiences to stop him from his peace efforts. Moses knew that fighting and animosity among Jews was a malignant disease, and he would not give up the slightest opportunity to stop it!

In his Tanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi states (12): "Each and every soul of the house of Israel contains within it something of the quality of our teacher Moses." This means that we, too, are empowered to emulate Moses' example at least in some small fashion. To become comfortable with disunity and fragmentation is a tragedy. We must never cease to confront our arrogance or insecurity and strive for peace even with people we can easily write off.

To be sure, if someone is endangering someone's life, or causing damage, you have to create the proper boundaries and stop the abuse and evil behavior at all costs. Never allow your idealism to allow innocent people to suffer. But whatever we can do to help people repent, and whatever we can do to generate peace and love, even if it requires extreme humility and sacrifice, it is well worth it.

(This essay is based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe -- whose yartzeit is this Shabbos, 3 Tamuz -- Shabbas Parshas Korach 5740, June 14, 1980 (13)).

1) Numbers Chapter 16. 2) Talmud Sanhedrin p. 110a. 3) Leviticus 19:17-18. 4) Exodus 2: 11-14. 5) Talmud Nedarim 64b; Targum Yonasan and Rashi to Exodus ibid. 6) Exodus 16:19-20. 7) Midrash Rabah Shemos 1:29; 25:10 and Rashi to Exodus ibid. 8) Numbers 14: 1-4. 9) Rabanu Bechayei to Exodus 2:13. 10) Moses Himself would ultimately call them "wicked" (Numbers 16:26.) 11) See Tanya chapter 32. 12) Chapter 42. 13) Published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 28 pp. 98-103.

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

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Use Your Words

Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of Bnei Yisroel, therefore you will not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them" (20:12).

In this week's parsha, the Torah relates that after the death of Miriam the miraculous well that had provided water for Bnei Yisroel throughout their sojourns in the desert ran dry. The people complained about the lack of water and Hashem ordered Moshe to take his staff and speak to "the rock." However, rather (at least according to Rashi's interpretation) than speak to it, Moshe struck the rock with the staff. Although this act was effective in producing water, Hashem declared that they (both Moshe and Aharon) had sinned (ibid).

That is to say, they defied Hashem by hitting instead of speaking to the rock. The resulting punishment was calamitous to Moshe and Aharon; they were forbidden from entering the land of Israel. How is this an appropriate punishment for their sin?

The harsh condemnation for hitting a rock is also difficult to understand. While it is true that Hashem had asked them to speak to the rock, not to strike it, they aren't castigated for not following Hashem's directive; they are scolded for not "sanctifying" Hashem's name. How did their action contribute to this issue? It is certainly a tremendous miracle for water to emerge from a rock, even if Moshe brought it forth through a strike. Why isn't that considered a sufficient kiddush Hashem?

Chazal lists this incident as one of the ten times when Bnei Yisroel tested Hashem. But why are they blamed for being concerned about their lack of a water source in the desert? Additionally, in Sefer Shemos, prior to the creation of the well of Miriam, Moshe was commanded to strike a rock and water would flow for Bnei Yisroel. Why is he punished for doing the same here?

In Sefer Shemos, the people stumbled into the desert with no water and were actually thirsty. Hashem thus instructed Moshe to hit the rock to create a water source for them. In this parsha, they still had water (Chazal discuss the rivers of water between the different encampments in the desert), they merely lacked a continuing source for the water. They weren't thirsty; they were worried about their future as the source of their water had dried up.

Hashem then instructed Moshe to speak to the rock. The purpose of speaking to the rock was to teach the people that the land responds to the needs of Bnei Yisroel. By speaking to the rock, Moshe would have demonstrated that there is no need to force it to provide water, but rather that Hashem had created an entity that would respond to their needs.

The rock was meant to represent the attribute of Eretz Yisroel. Just as the rock was sensitive to their needs, they were to understand that Eretz Yisroel is unlike any other land. Eretz Yisroel has a symbiotic relationship with Bnei Yisroel – they take care of it and it takes care of them by responding to their every need. Because of this, Bnei Yisroel are later ousted from Eretz Yisroel for not keeping shemittah; they didn't keep their end of the bargain and the land literally vomited them out.

This is also why Moshe and Aharon are punished by being banished from Eretz Yisroel: they failed to show the greatness of Hashem and his care for them in creating a land that responds to their needs, not one that has to be forced to submit to their will.

Family Support

The entire congregation saw that Aharon had perished, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Israel (20:29).

This week's parsha records events that took place in the fortieth (and final) year of the Bnei Yisroel's desert sojourns. One of these unfortunate episodes is the death of Moshe Rabbeinu's brother – Aharon.

Chazal are puzzled by the Torah's curious comment that Aharon was mourned by the "entire House of Israel." Rashi (ad loc) explains that Aharon was mourned by even the women because Aharon's personality

is described as one who pursues peace – “he would instill a love between quarreling parties and between a man and his wife.”

The commentators (Mizrachi, Sifsei Chachamim) contrast the depiction of the mourning for Aharon to the mourning that took place when Moshe died: “Bnei Yisroel wept for Moshe [...]” (Devarim 34:8). Rashi (ad loc) explains that when Moshe died he was only mourned by the men, but when Aharon died he was mourned by both the men and the women. In other words, the women also felt the loss when Aharon died because Aharon contributed to their shalom bayis – maintaining a harmonious marriage.

Yet this disparity in the mourning is difficult to understand. The Gemara (Taanis 9a) explains that it was in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu that Bnei Yisroel received the miraculous manna bread for the forty years in the desert. Surely, the women could appreciate the benefit of the manna that Moshe Rabbeinu’s merit brought directly to their lives as well. Why is it that they felt the death of Aharon so much more acutely that they openly mourned for him?

There is a great lesson here, one that is either lost or simply ignored by many in today’s generation of Jews. The reason that they mourned Aharon was because he directly contributed to their shalom bayis, an ideal that they have a shared responsibility to maintain. In other words, real shalom bayis is only achieved when both the husband and wife take responsibility for the health of their relationship.

By contrast, the obligation of being a breadwinner falls solely on the shoulders of the husband. It is his responsibility to make sure that his family is provided for. The burden of supporting the family is a not a wife’s obligation. While many women work to help support their families, the key word is “help” – they are helping their husband meet his obligations.

Many young men feel entitled and expect their wives to work to support the family. However, this isn’t the Jewish view of marriage, and it should be obvious to every groom because the kesuvah (which is a unilaterally binding contract – only describing the obligations that the husband is accepting upon himself) outlines very clearly that he is the one responsible for supporting his wife; there is no quid pro quo.

Thus, when Moshe died the women weren’t as sensitive to feeling a personal loss that would cause them to grieve. The manna that came on behalf of Moshe was a kindness directly to the men of the family whose responsibility it was to support their household. On the other hand, Aharon’s death was a personal loss as it related to their shared responsibility of shalom bayis.

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For the week ending 2 July 2022 / 3 Tamuz 5782

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Chukat - A Divine Kiss

“This is the decree (chok) of the Torah...” (19:1)

It always amazes me that people professing to be atheists, when opening up their daily paper often go straight to the horoscope page. Up to a third of self-declared atheists in China believe in astrology. A quarter of Brazilian atheists believe in reincarnation, and a similar number of their Danish counterparts think some people have magical powers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, belief in séances, tarot, mesmerism, and other seemingly supernatural phenomena flourished, quite often independently of particular religious belief systems. One of the most rational minds of the time, or the creator of the most rational mind of the time, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, believed in fairies. The physicist Pierre Curie, a pioneer researcher into radioactivity, was “an atheist who had an enduring, somewhat scientific, interest in spiritualism.”

I think that the reason for all this may be that being an atheist requires an awful lot of faith. Faith that the world just ‘popped’ into existence; faith that the incredibly complex and wonderfully beautiful world that we live in just ‘evolved’ from some primordial slime in unspecified days of yore. Faith that love, courage, jealousy, avarice are all just chemical dances in our brains.

Instinctively, we know we come from somewhere and we are going somewhere. The soul intuits its own immortality in spite of the body’s determined arguments to the contrary.

“This is the decree (chok) of the Torah...”

There are three kinds of laws in the Torah: Mishpatim, Aidut, and Chukim. A Mishpat is a law like “You shall not murder.” It is a seemingly logical law that is shared by all the civilized world. An Aidut is a testimony of faith, like Shabbat whose observance testifies that Hashem created the world and everything in it in six days. A chok is a mitzvah that is ostensibly self-contradictory, like the purifying process of the ashes of the red heifer. Its ashes purify those who are contaminated and contaminate those who prepare those ashes. Why? Go figure?

A basic concept of Judaism is that man’s inability to understand Hashem’s wisdom shows only man’s limitations — and not Hashem’s. A chok is as self-contradicting as a soul inside a body. It is like a Divine kiss, only understood by the partners to its intimacy.

Sources: “*Atheists & Agnostics Also Frequently Believe in the Supernatural - a New Study Shows; “Religion,” June 13th, 2019;*

Tosefot to Talmud Bavli in Avoda Zara 35a

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Chukat: What the world’s cleverest person couldn’t understand

What was the one thing that the cleverest person on earth couldn’t understand?

According to our tradition, King Solomon, who was cleverer than anyone else, could not work out the logic behind the laws of the parah adumah, the red heifer, as presented to us in Parshat Chukat.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik beautifully describes the connection between Parshat Korach of the previous week followed by Parshat Chukat. According to our sages Korach challenged Moshe and Aharon claiming that the laws that they were presenting to the people in the name of Hashem just didn’t make any sense! For example, Korach said, “If you have a four cornered garment which is blue, why are we required to have a ‘p’til techeilet’, one single blue cord on the tzitzit to enable us to wear the garment? Or similarly, if you have a house that is full of holy books, why is it necessary to have a mezuzah at the entrance to that home?”

The saga of the Korach rebellion is followed immediately by the laws of the red heifer because the red heifer is a quintessential example of a law which defies logic. The Kohen would administer the ashes of the heifer to somebody who was impure, enabling that person now to be pure. However, because he was coming into contact with the ashes, the Kohen himself became impure.

How is it possible that these ashes could transform purity into impurity and impurity into purity all at the same time? I don’t understand it and I’m sure you also don’t, but that is the whole point. When we have a ‘chok’ – a law which comes from Hashem, Hashem knows best, and we don’t always have to know the answer.

The vast majority of the mitzvot of the Torah are rational and reasonable and make so much sense to us. But even in an instance where the cleverest person on earth cannot work out why a law is given, nonetheless, we should embrace it, and appreciate it, because it comes from Hashem who knows best. By performing these laws we will enhance our lives and will have added meaning and joy on every single day of our existence.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Chukat 5782 - Discovering Inner Goodness

This week’s parsha: Parashat Chukat begins with the para aduma – red heifer – law that details how, during the time the Temple stood, a person could purify himself. After this, we read the story of mei merivah – the

waters of contention, when Moses and Aaron hit the stone instead of speaking to it and, as a result, were punished with not being able to enter the Land of Israel. Aaron's death is described right afterwards

After we read of Aaron's death, the Torah describes the nation's reaction to the bad news:

The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days. (Numbers 20, 29)

The words "the entire house of Israel" emphasize that this was not something experienced by a specific group. The entire nation was swept up by grief and cried over Aaron's death.

The sages of the midrash noticed these words and explained the intensity of the grief with an explanation that can teach us all about leadership, love of others, and seeing the good.

What is said about Aaron is greater than what is said about Moses. For Moses, only the men cried. But for Aaron – both the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife and between a woman and her friend. And what would Aaron do? When two people quarreled Aharon went and sat down with one of them and said to him, "My son, know that your friend has said, 'I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aaron would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him, "Know that your friend is saying, 'Woe is to me! How shall I raise my eyes and look at my friend? I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aharon would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. When the two friends later met, they embraced and kissed each other. Such was Aaron's life. And his virtue. When he would hear that there was a quarrel between a man and his wife, he would not leave them until they made peace. Therefore, both men and women cried for Aaron. (Midrash Aggadah for Parashat Chukat)

This description of a leader, of a high priest, who hears of a quarrel between two friends and tries to make peace between them and restore the love and friendship that had been shaken is indeed an amazing and moving description. We all read such a description and think – I wish there were more people like that in the world. Our lives would all look different. There is so much suffering as a result of polarization, tension, quarrels. How much better our lives would be if there were more incredible people like Aaron who set themselves the goal of restoring peace between friends and within couples.

And yet, there is something odd in this story. What were Aaron's tactics when restoring peace? Let us read that part again: When two people quarreled, Aharon went and sat down with one of them and said to him, "My son, know that your friend has said, 'I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aaron would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him, "Know that your friend is saying, 'Woe is to me! How shall I raise my eyes and look at my friend? I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aharon would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Would Aaron lie to succeed in the sacred mission of restoring peace? It seems that he did. It is permissible to change the truth somewhat to bring about peace. But it seems it wasn't really a lie.

Aaron's motivation to restore peace stemmed from his great faith in people. Why do friends quarrel? Why is there tension between a couple? What is the reason for a social rift? Aaron believed that people are basically good-hearted. What leads them to quarrel are the external fears, suspicions, insults, and anger. But deep inside, people want peace. They want friendship and are prepared to invest in it. The imaginary story that Aaron would tell expressed the great truth he believed: People want to live in peace and to live well with others.

This is the secret that Aaron would reveal to people and to couples. He would reveal to them that the other, despite concerns and pain, is interested in peace. True, it is not easy, he needs help, but he really wants to live peacefully with you. This is the secret we all must learn. The person we're quarreling with isn't bad. Even if he's angry, afraid, or

even threatening, he is a good person. If we just believe in this goodness, it will reveal itself and change reality.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Balak: Eliminating Idolatry

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

After failing to curse the people of Israel, Balaam devised another plan to make trouble for the Jewish people. He advised using Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into worshipping Baal Peor. How was this idol worshipped? The word 'Peor' means to 'open up' or 'disclose.' According to the Talmud, the worshippers would bare their backsides and defecate in honor of the idol. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 64a) illustrates the repulsive nature of this particular idolatry with the following two stories:

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: "If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world." She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world. When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, "How is this one worshipped?"

They told her, "One eats greens and drinks strong drink, and then defecates before the idol."

The woman responded, "I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a [revolting] manner!"

Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired out a donkey to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, "Wait till I enter and come out again."

When she came out, he told her, "Now you wait for me until I go in and come out."

"But are you not a Jew [and do not worship idols]?" she asked.

"What does it concern you?" he replied. He then entered, [intending to insult the idol]. He uncovered himself before it and wiped himself on the idol's nose.

The acolytes praised him, saying, "No one has ever served this idol so consummately!"

Exposing the True Nature of Idolatry

What was the point of this most odious idolatrous practice?

In truth, Peor was not an aberrant form of idolatry. On the contrary, Peor was the epitome of idolatry! Other forms of idolatry are more aesthetic, but they just cover up the true ugliness of idolatry. The Golden Calf was the opposite extreme, a beautiful, elegant form of idol worship. But Peor, as its name indicates, exposes the true nature of idolatry. All other forms of idolatry are just branches of Peor, with their inner vileness concealed to various extents. The repulsive service of Peor contains the key for abolishing idolatry. When the prophet Elijah fought against the idolatry of Baal, he taunted the people: "If Baal is God, then follow him." The people, in fact, were already worshippers of Baal. What was Elijah telling them?

Elijah's point was that Baal is just a sanitized version of Peor. If Baal is God, then go all the way. You should worship the source of this form of worship — Peor. Elijah's exposure of Baal as just a cleaner version of Peor convinced the people. They were truly revolted by the scatological practices of Peor, and instinctively responded, "Hashem is God! Hashem is God!" (I Kings 18:39)

Historically, the uprooting of idolatry will take place in stages. The allure of Peor, the purest form of idolatry, was shattered after Moses rooted out those who worshipped Peor at Shittim. That purge gave strength to the men of the Great Assembly who subdued the temptation of idolatry in the time of Ezra (Sanhedrin 64a). The final eradication of idolatry's last vestiges will take place in the end of days, through the spiritual power of Moses, whose burial place faces Beit Peor. This obliteration will occur as idolatry's innate foulness is exposed to all.

Why is idolatry so intrinsically vile?

The source of idolatry's appeal is in fact a holy one — an impassioned yearning for closeness to God. Ignorance and moral turpitude, however, prevent this closeness, blocking the divine light from the soul. The overwhelming desire for divine closeness, despite one's moral failings,

leads to idol worship. Instead of correcting one's flaws, these spiritual yearnings are distorted into cravings for idolatry. The unholy alliance of spiritual yearnings together with immoral and decadent behavior produces the intrinsic foulness of idolatry. Instead of trying to elevate humanity and refine our desires, idolatry endeavors to debase our highest aspirations, lowering them to our coarsest physical aspects. This is the ultimate message of Peor's scatological practices.

True Victory over Idolatry

The Great Assembly in Ezra's time conquered the temptation of idolatry by generally diminishing spiritual yearnings in the world. They did not truly defeat idolatry; rather, they subdued its enticement. In the words of the Midrash, they cast the temptation of idolatry into a metal cauldron and sealed it with lead, "so that its call may not be heard." Thus we find that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) records a dream of Rav Ashi, the fifth century Talmudic sage. In his dream, Rav Ashi asked the idolatrous King Menasseh, "Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?" To which Menasseh replied, "Were you there, you would have lifted up the hems of your garment and sped after me."

The true cure for this perilous attraction, however, is through greatness of Torah. The highest goal of Torah is the appearance of inner light in the human soul, as divine wisdom is applied to all the spheres that the soul is capable of assimilating — be it in thought, emotion, desires, and character traits.

Even nowadays, poverty in Torah knowledge results in a weakness of spirit, similar to the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry. The world awaits redemption through greatness of Torah. Then idolatry will be truly defeated, and not merely subdued in a sealed metal cauldron.

(*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 271-273. Adapted from *Shemonah Kevatzim* VIII: 132; IV: 56)

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

פרק ב' בלאק תשפ"ב

וַיַּגֵּר מוֹאָב מִפְנֵי הָעָם מִאֵד כִּי רַב הָוא וַיַּקְרֵן מוֹאָב מִפְנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael. (22:3)

The Torah uses two terms to refer to *Klal Yisrael*: *Am*, people/nation, *Bnei Yisrael*, children of *Yisrael*. Moav was frightened of the nation due to their numbers, which imply a physical battle, a physical victory for the Jewish nation. Concerning the children of *Yisrael*, which is the term most often used to describe our People, Moav was disgusted. Fear means that one is afraid, but he still has hope for victory. A change of tactics might be necessary in order to quash the Jewish threat. Disgusted, the term which is used in a confrontation with the children of *Yisrael*, sounds more like resignation, despair, giving up without a fight. How do we understand this, and what is the Torah's message?

Horav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer, zl (Rav of Prague, pre-World War II) quotes David *Hamelech* (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:3), *Mipi olelim v'yonkim Yisadeta oze*, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucking's You have established strength." David asserts that our nation's strength, its ability to survive, is predicated on the Torah study of Jewish children. Their Torah is pure, untainted by sin. He cites *Midrash Eichah* (*Pesichta Rabbasi*, 2), which records the statement of Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, "There have never risen wise men among the non-Jewish nations like Bilaam and Avnimus *HaGardi*." (The latter was a Greek philosopher who was an acquaintance of Rabbi Meir.)

The nations of the world asked these two (Bilaam and Avnimus), "Will we be successful in engaging them (go to war against the Jews)?" They replied, "Go to their synagogues and study halls; if the children are vocally chirping in Torah study, you will not emerge victorious. If, however, you do not hear the sounds of Torah being studied, you will be successful against them. Thus, their Patriarch, Yaakov, assured them, 'Any time that the voice of Yaakov is chirping in the synagogues and study halls, there is no validity in Eisav's hands. (He

cannot vanquish them.) If the sound has been stilled, then Eisav's hands will rule."

Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam. Hence, the Torah writes that Balak was frightened of the Jews due to their numbers. Nonetheless, he did not despair; he was not yet miserable and disgusted. He would have to work harder, have better strategy. It was doable. When he saw that the *Bnei Yisrael*, the *children* of *Yisrael*, were devoted to their learning, however, he became outraged, repulsed by the reality that had set in. He would be unable to triumph over the Jews because their children were learning.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, observes that, throughout the Torah, we see that *nashim tzidkaniyos*, righteous women, did everything in their power to ensure that their children would be availed a strong, uncompromising Torah education, devoid of any negative influence. Sarah *Imeini* wanted Yishmael to be away from Yitzchak. Chana gave birth to Shmuel *HaNavi*, and she immediately dedicated him to spend his life in the Sanctuary. When Shimshon was born, his mother dedicated him to be a *nazir*. All these women conceived by miraculous intervention. They each understood that her son was a gift; thus, they each sought to ensure that the child grow up pious and a credit to his people. Sadly, so many of us take our children for granted. They are a gift — a miracle from Hashem.

The *Mashgiach* (*Kaminetz, Yerushalayim*) points out that in contradiction to the women cited above, the *Shunamis* that Elisha blessed, also gave birth miraculously. Instead of his being sanctified to Torah, however, he went out and worked in the fields. His life came to an untimely end, after which Elisha miraculously resurrected him. The *Navi* instructed the *Shunamis*, "Lift up your son!" (*Melachim* 4:36). He meant elevate him, sanctify him, teach him Torah and give him the opportunity to grow spiritually. She listened, and the boy ultimately grew up to be the *Navi Chavakuk*.

לא אוכל לעבור את פ' ל' אלקי לעשות קתנה או גדולה

I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great. (22:18)

In *Kuntres Divrei Sofrim* (24), Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, notes that Bilaam *ha'rashah* said that he would not transgress Hashem's word to him — Hashem's *tzivui*, command. He did not think that he could act in a manner counter-intuitive to Hashem's *ratzon*, will. He was acutely aware that Hashem did not want him to curse *Klal Yisrael*, but, if Hashem had not expressly said so, Bilaam could have gone along his merry way to carry out his evil intentions. The *pasuk* (22:22) relates that Hashem's anger flared because Bilaam was going to Balak. Why was Hashem angry? Did the Almighty not give Bilaam permission to go to Balak? Apparently, Bilaam knew that Hashem's *ratzon* was that he not curse the Jews. Going to Balak was an affront to Hashem. Bilaam did not care. If he did not receive a clear cut "no," as far as he was concerned, it was a "yes." What about Hashem's will? Did Hashem really want him to go? Clearly not, but this did not concern Bilaam.

This, explains Horav Moshe Shternbuch, *Shlita*, best characterizes Bilaam. He knew Hashem, but did not care. He only listened to what Hashem expressively told him, and, even then, only when he could not avoid complying. He served Hashem because he was compelled to do so. This is unlike *Klal Yisrael* who serve Hashem as a son serves his father. He wants to serve. He wants to carry out his father's will, so that he can make his father happy.

Rav Shternbuch cites the *Ramchal in Mesillas Yesharim* (18, *Middah HaChassidus*) who explains that a *chassid*, pious individual, seeks to make his Father in Heaven happy. His love for Hashem is such that he does not aim to absolve himself of his obligations to Him merely by complying with the obligatory minimum of a *mitzvah*. Like a good son, he seeks every opportunity to provide *nachas*, satisfaction, for his Father. Horav Matisyahu Solomon, *Shlita*, offers an example: If a father tells his son that the room is cold, an uncaring son will reply, "So, turn on the heat." A decent son will personally turn the heater on for his father. A loving son will immediately turn on the heater, bring his father a warm blanket or a sweater, and then offer him a hot drink — all out of

his love for his father, which impels him to do whatever will make his father feel well.

The term *chassid* in present-day vernacular is not as “generic” as that of *Ramchal*, who translates it as pious. The basic ideas of present-day (last two centuries) *chassidus*, however, do not digress from their focus on piety and closeness to Hashem. *Chassidic* thought stresses: joy; song and dance in *mitzvah* performance, and service to Hashem; the centrality of *davening* and all forms of prayer (*Tehillim*); the appreciation of every *Yid/amcha*, the simple, ordinary Jew who is not a scholar; attachment to a *Rebbe*; and being partial to one’s Jewish identity (connecting cumulatively with *Klal Yisrael*) as opposed to focusing on one’s selfhood. We are part of the larger family unit of *Am Yisrael*. To encapsulate *Chassidic* thought: *Chassidus* remains focused completely on Hashem (*Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl*). The *Baal HaTanya* would say (in speaking to Hashem), “I want not Your *Gan Eden*; I want not Your *Olam Habba*; I seek only to be attached to You.”

The *Manchester Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, zl*, was the consummate *eved Hashem*, servant of Hashem. His life was about performing *mitzvos*: elevating any given situation to determine which *mitzvos* were inherent in it. He would view helping a parent as the fulfillment of both *Kibbutz av v'eim* and *gemillas chassadim*. Indeed, he prefaced every *mitzvah* (even *d'Rabbanan*) with a verbal declaration of *Hineni muchan u'mezuman*, expressing his intent to carry out a *mitzvah*. He recognized no degrees or levels of importance in observance. Every *mitzvah* was a *tzivui*, command, from Hashem, and, as such, had supreme significance. Likewise, his devotion to absolute *emes* was his criterion for *mitzvah* observance. In his view, not to execute the *mitzvah* to its fullest with all the *halachic* minutiae indicated a lack of *emes*, spiritual integrity.

While the *Rosh Yeshivah* was very demanding concerning his *avodas HaKodesh*, sacred service; he neither imposed his personal *chumros*, stringencies, on others, nor caused his personal practices to be an inconvenience to others. An example of this sensitivity to others is the following vignette. The *Rosh Yeshivah* visited Bournemouth, England. During the time he spent there, a man offered to drive the *Rosh Yeshivah* to *shul* in the morning and pick him up at the conclusion of *davening*. Aware that this man had to be at work at a certain time and not wanting to take advantage of his kindness, the *Rosh Yeshivah* recited parts of *davening* only after he returned to his place of lodging.

He was once a guest in someone’s home and was served leben with his breakfast. He was meticulous not to eat anything which he felt was a delicacy. He adhered to a diet of necessities. He recited the appropriate *berachah acharonah*, after-meal blessing, then sat meditating for a moment before making a new blessing on the leben and partaking from it. He later explained that he did this in order not to hurt the feelings of the hostess who went out of her way to do everything just right for him. He added, “To eat *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, is also a *mitzvah*.”

When one serves Hashem as a son should serve his father, he jumps at every single opportunity that presents itself during which he is able to honor his father. Indeed, practices which we might push aside, even ignore, were for him activities of profound love for Hashem. I could fill pages concerning the various *mitzvos* he undertook and the manner in which he performed them. He did something about which we are complacent, and, in many instances, we ignore. What inspired me was his attitude towards kissing the *mezuzah*. Whenever entering a room, he would touch the *mezuzah* and pause long enough to concentrate on love of Hashem and His Oneness. He did this even when hurrying from room to room to answer the phone – pause, concentrate, kiss. How often do we complacently touch the *mezuzah*, give it a peck with our fingers and move on? When one cares – one stops to think what kissing the *mezuzah* represents. After all, Hashem is our Father.

ויאמר בלעם אל בליך... היכל ואכל דבר מאמנה הדבר אשר אלקם ישים בפי אתו אדבר
Bilaam said to Balak... “Am I empowered to say anything? Whatever words G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak.”
(22:38)

Bilaam is a lesson in stark contrasts. On the one hand, he personifies evil and depravity at their nadir. Arrogant, condescending, avaricious and profligate, he was the consummate symbol of unmitigated evil. Yet, this same person spoke to Hashem and was able to maintain a dialogue on subjects that were of the loftiest esoterical and spiritual nature. How do these two polar opposites exist in one person? *Horav Eliezer HaLevi Turk, Shlita*, quotes from *Horav Chunah Kletzki, zl*, a student of the *Radin Yeshivah*, who, in his old age, made his domicile in Lakewood. He related that there was a man in Radin who was strange. He did things his way, regardless of how others perceived him. Additionally, he thrived on garnering attention for himself. As a result, he taught his dog to understand *Yiddish!* Even those Jews who felt the “need” to raise a dog “conversed” with it in Polish – never *Yiddish*. But, as I prefaced above, this man was not the run-of-the-mill, ordinary member of the community. The children of the community would follow the dog, attempting to get its attention. They pulled on his tail, his ears. After all, a dog that understood *Yiddish* was a novelty for them, and, thus, an opportunity for some fun.

Even a dog loses its patience, and one day after numerous assaults by the fun-loving children, the intelligent dog lost it and bit one of the young boys. They were shocked. How could such a “refined” dog act so viciously? He was acting like a dog! *Rav Chunah* explained, “A dog remains a dog regardless of its ability to speak *Yiddish!* The same idea applies to serving Hashem.” Continued *Rav Chunah*, “One who is deficient in his *middos*, his character traits, leaves much to be desired, does not change until he expunges these deficiencies and cleanses himself of his ethical and moral impurities. He will remain the same lowlife as before – despite his exposure to G-dliness.

This was Bilaam’s life story. A man who personified every ethical and moral shortcoming – yet received prophecies from Hashem. His comfortable relationship with -- and access to -- the highest spiritual spheres, notwithstanding, Bilaam remained Bilaam – a dog remains a dog – even if he is taught to speak *Yiddish*. In fact, he employed his unique knowledge of what angers Hashem – moral depravity – to cause the Jews to sin with the Midyanite women. He knew that Hashem loves us for our moral chastity. He sought to undermine that relationship.

I think this is why Bilaam could not come to grips with *mussar*, rebuke, his donkey issued to him. Bilaam was acutely aware that his moral hypocrisy was so blatant that even his donkey understood what he was. This was too much for him to grapple with. Nothing shatters arrogance like the rebuke of a donkey.

מראש צדדים אראו וגביעות אשׁר

From its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. (23:9)

Bilaam was looking for every way to render *Klal Yisrael* a death blow. His power was in his tongue, his ability to deliver a curse that would be effective and lethal. He begins his litany by acknowledging that it is difficult to curse a nation whose origins are likened to craggy rocks (Patriarchs) and hills (Matriarchs). He intimated that when he looked back at the roots of the Jews, he saw them as firmly established as rocks and hills. The loyalty to their forebears is what distinguishes them and makes them that more difficult to curse. I would like to employ my writer’s license to embellish this idea and suggest a powerful lesson to be derived about the predominance of the Jew, specifically as a result of his ancestry.

Horav Yechiel Tzuker, Shlita, relates a story that took place in the winter of 2016. *Horav Avraham Altman, Shlita* (*Rosh Yeshivas Ateres Tzvi*), and his son, *Horav Eliyahu Meir*, take an annual trip to Argentina on behalf of their *yeshivah*. They spend a few weeks meeting members of the community, speaking in the various *shuls* and raising badly-needed funds for the *yeshivah*. It was *Shabbos* morning after *Musaf*, and *Rav Altman* had delivered a powerful speech that shook up the congregation. Everyone was impressed and complimented him. As he was leaving, he was approached by a middle-aged Jew who said that he, together with his partner, owned a large factory which produced trousers. He offered to invite the *Rav* and his distinguished son to visit the factory. He would make it worth their while. They visited the next day and, as the owner had promised, he gave them a check that made the

trip worth their while. Suddenly, in the midst of the conversation, the man broke down in bitter weeping. He explained that he had a partner who was dealing with a female client. One thing had led to another, and the relationship between him and the client had breached the parameters of pure business, and a not-so-platonic relationship ensued. He was now bent on marrying her. She was a gentile, and he was now prepared to turn his back on *Yahadus*, on the religion for which his ancestors had died. The man continued to weep.

Rav Altman asked to meet the partner. The man was a bit nervous to meet a *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael*, but his partner came out and graciously received the *Rosh Yeshivah*. *Rav Altman* said, “Your partner gave me a generous check from the business. I would like to thank you since it is a joint account. Perhaps we could all go out to lunch tomorrow before we fly back to the Holy Land.” The partners agreed to meet at a restaurant for lunch.

During lunch, *Rav Altman* interrupted the conversation twice to express his fascination with the partner. He said he did not know why, but something about his visage had impressed him. Clearly, receiving such compliments made the partner feel very good. It was not every day that he was complimented so much. “Tell me, are you married?” the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked. “No, not yet,” was his response. “I give you a blessing that this year should be the year that you find your *bashert*, Heavenly-designated spouse. Indeed, I will attend the wedding and dance with you!”

The partner was clueless that *Rav Altman* was aware that he was about to marry out of the faith. “What will I do?” he mused to himself. “The *Rosh Yeshivah* will dance with me in a church and the priest will be ‘mesader kiddushin,’ perform the service?” A few months passed, and the religious partner received a call from his partner. He was weeping bitterly, “I cannot go through with it! How can I, a distinguished Jew with whom the *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael* is fascinated, marry a gentile? I am breaking the engagement!” A few months passed, and he was engaged again – only this time to a *frum*, observant girl. What happened? How did someone who had fallen to such a nadir arise from the pits of spirituality and return to normative observance?

Rav Tzuker explains this with an incident recorded in *Midrash Eichah* (1:9). A wise man from Athens came to *Yerushalayim* and chanced upon a young *Yerushalmi* boy. The Athenian considered himself wise, but he failed to perceive the wisdom of young Jewish boys. He told the boy, “Here are some coins. Please purchase some cheese and eggs for me.” The boy returned with the cheese and eggs. The Athenian then asked the boy, “Can you tell me which brick of cheese came from a white goat and which came from a black goat?” The boy countered, “You are a grown man, so it is only proper for you to first show me which egg is the egg of a white chicken and which is from a black one.”

The *Tiferes Tzion* understands the exchange between the Athenian and the young boy as a metaphor for the Jewish People’s unique relationship with Hashem, Who favors us because of our Patriarchal ancestry. As a result, we, too, take immense pride in our illustrious lineage. This pride should be a cornerstone of our observance.

The Athenian asserted that ancestry had no enduring value, since progeny do not necessarily resemble their ancestors. He presented as proof positive that the Jews do not look any different than anyone else, regardless of their religion. This is the message he intimated when he asked the boy to identify the source of the cheeses. He alluded thereby that, just as two types of goats produce identical cheeses, it makes no difference whether one descends from righteous, virtuous individuals or average lineage.

The young boy opined to the Athenian, asking him to show which egg had come from a black hen and which had come from a white one. He implied that just because no external differences appeared between the two eggs, it does not mean that internally no differences existed. Indeed, place the eggs under a hen to incubate, and the chicks that emerge will have the color of its mother. Likewise, the Jewish People may externally appear to be similar to everyone else; when given

the opportunity, however, they will manifest a clear, abiding relationship with the *Avos*, Patriarchs. This is the same metamorphosis that took place with the partner. *Rav Altman* made him feel a sense of relief in knowing that they are, by virtue of being *Bnei Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov*, on a higher spiritual plateau. Come what may, we are not like them. The Jew is always welcomed back home, because he actually has never left.

Va’ani Tefillah

סָרוּ מִמֶּנִּי כָּל פְּעָלֵי אָוֹן – *Suru mimeni kol poalei aven. Depart from me, all evil doers.*

David Hamelech pleads with Hashem to remove him from those who seek him harm, who want nothing more than to see him fall. David suffered much in his life, pursued by enemies from all walks of life. He was beset with troubles. It is almost unreal that he had the ability to concentrate. His faith in Hashem was his anchor and served as his shield to protect him from adversity. His faith led to emotion-filled prayer, beseeching Hashem to grant him salvation, so that he could rise above the *tzaros*, troubles, to which he was subjected. David’s enemies were Hashem’s enemies, who did not want to see the *Bais Hamikdash* built. They knew that Shlomo was the heir designate who was to build the *Bais Hamikdash*. This could only occur if his father, David, would bestow this privilege on him. They sought to prevent this from happening.

Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, observes that under normal circumstances, the reservoir of tears ends. One does not cry forever, as he reconciles himself with his grief. When one sheds his tears *l’chvod Shomayim*, for the glory of Heaven, however, they are limitless.

Sponsored in loving memory of our dear mother, grandmother and great grandmother on her yahrzeit

Marta Hinda bat D’ Yisroel Chaiyai U’ah - נפ' י"ז תמ"ה תשע"ז

Mrs. Hindy Herskowitz - Avi Herskowitz and family

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Ohr Somayach Insights into Halacha

For the week ending 19 June 2021 / 9 Tamuz 5781

Forgotten Fast Days: Zos Chukas HaTorah

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

On Motzai Shabbos Korach 5774, our dear, close family friend, Reb Chaim Daskal a”h, was niftar, after a prolonged and painful battle with cancer R”L. Never one to complain, Reb Chaim M’Yerushalayim (as he was commonly known) still exuded Simchas Hachaim and gratitude to Hashem even in his weakened and pain-filled state, the last time this author had the zechus to see him, merely a week and a half prior to his untimely passing. In fact, his tza’ava, will, reflected this as well, including how he wanted his own levaya, kevura, and shiva to be held.

One of the maspidim (eulogizers) at the levaya (at 1:45 A.M.!), Elimelech Lepon, mentioned that Reb Chaim passed away only after Shabbos was over, averring that the Malach HaMavet could not take have taken him on a Shabbos. You see, with an open house and a multitude of guests weekly, Shabbos was truly Reb Chaim’s special day. In fact, Mr. Lepon revealed that it was exclusively due to the merit of Reb Chaim’s extraordinary and warm Shabbos hospitality that won him over to personally begin keeping Shabbos properly.

When my father, renowned Kashrus expert Rabbi Manish Spitz, heard the tragic news of the passing of his Yedid Nefesh of almost 40 years, he enigmatically exclaimed ‘Zos Chukas HaTorah’! His intent was that the week of Parashas Chukas is ‘mesugal l’puraniyos’, a time that has seen much hardship and tragedy for our nation. Therefore, it was fitting that only after Shabbos of Parashas Korach had ended and the week of Parashas Chukas officially began, that such an incredible man, in the prime of his life, passed away.

Yet, there is no mention in the Gemara of the week of Parashas Chukas being one of tragedy, nor is it mentioned by the Rambam, Tur, or Shulchan Aruch! Not even in the Siman where tragedies and proper days to fast are mentioned, Orach Chaim 580! In fact, most are wholly unfamiliar with anything specifically attributed to this week. Yet, the Magen Avraham, citing the Sefer HaTanya[1] (referring to Sefer Tanya Rabbasi; a far earlier source that the famous Kabbalistic work of the Shulchan Aruch Harav), tells of a terrible, albeit fascinating, historical tragedy.

Friday of Fire

The Magen Avraham prefaces his terrible tale by quoting certain writings[2] explaining that it is “worthwhile for every Jew to cry for the burning of the Torah”. He then proceeds to tell of a customary annual fast specifically for this

purpose, on Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas. On that day, in the year 1242, twenty wagonloads (however the original versions state 24 wagonloads)[3] filled with Gemaros and Talmudic literature (including many works of the Baalei Tosafos), were burned in Paris by agents of the Church and King Louis IX of France.

Talmud on Trial

The pretext to this mass burning was a public debate (later known as “The Disputation of Paris”) beginning in 1240 featuring Nicholas Donin, an apostate-Jew-turned-Franciscan-monk who petitioned Pope Gregory IX to prosecute the Talmud for 35 purported affronts to Christianity. The Pope ordered the banning and confiscation of all known manuscripts of the Talmud. King Louis IX, nicknamed “the monk king” due to his religious zeal, and later leader of the failed Seventh and Eighth Crusades, decided to put the Talmud ‘on trial,’ with Donin as the prosecutor.

Several of the most eminent rabbinical authorities in France were tasked to defend the Talmud: Rabbeinu Yechiel M’Paris, Rav Moshe M’Couchy (the SMa’G), Rav Shmuel M’Falaise, and Rav Yehuda M’Melun; the official verdict against them a foregone conclusion.[4] King Louis gleefully executed the “judgment” by publicly burning the 24 wagonloads of confiscated Talmudic literature on this “Friday of Fire.”[5]

The impact and importance of this loss was tremendous. Keep in mind that this occurred over 200 years before the printing press was invented, and each of these volumes was a priceless, handwritten manuscript.[6] In fact, this was considered such an enormous loss for Klal Yisrael, that the famed Maharam M’Rothenburg,[7] an eyewitness, composed an elegy for our loss, ‘Sha’ali Serufa Ba’Aish’, deemed so essential, that it is incorporated into the Kinos recited every Tisha B’Av (Kinah 41).[8]

I Had a Dream...

The great rabbis at the time, at a loss to understand the extent of the tragedy, inquired of Heaven by means of a dream (known as a she’elas chalom) to discover whether this terrible event had been so decreed by Hashem. The heavenly reply was a succinct three words ‘Da Gezeiras Oraysa’. This is the Aramaic translation (see Targum Onkelos) of the opening verses to Parashas Chukas, “Zos Chukas HaTorah, These are the decrees of the Torah” (Bamidbar Ch. 19:2). The Rabbanim understood from this cryptic reply that the burning of the Talmud was indeed Heavenly decreed. Moreover, they gleaned that it was due to the proximity of the Parasha that the tragedy transpired, and not the day of the month.[9]

Therefore, and as opposed to every other fast on the Jewish calendar, instead of a specific day established as a fast day, this one, designated a Taanis for Yechidim (fast for individuals), was set annually on the Erev Shabbos preceding Parshas Chukas. For those fasting, Asarah B’Teves would not be the only Taanis Tzibbur that practically occurs on a Friday.[10]

Retribution for the Rambam?

Rav Hillel of Verona, a talmid of Rabbeinu Yonah, and another eyewitness to these events, wrote a famous letter[11] in which he considered the burning of the Talmud as a clear sign of Divine anger and retribution for the burning of the works of the Rambam, in the exact same place in Paris not even forty days prior! After the Rambam’s passing (in 1204), many great scholars who did not agree with his philosophical observations in his ‘Moreh Nevuchim’ and ‘Sefer HaMada’ banned his sefarim, with a tremendous controversy erupting throughout the Torah world.[12] Eventually, a number of his detractors submitted copies of his work to the monks of the Dominican Order to determine whether the Rambam’s works contained heretical ideas.

The Dominican Friars, naturally, summarily concluded that the Rambam’s writings were not only false, but blasphemous. In 1234, in Montpellier, France, they publicly collected and burned all copies they found of ‘Moreh Nevuchim’ and ‘Sefer HaMada’. Similarly, in 1242, a fanatical mob burned many of the Rambam’s writings in Paris. Less than 40 days later, at the exact same site, the 24 wagonloads of the Talmud were burned, on Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas.[13] According to Rav Hillel’s letter, the famed Rabbeinu Yonah, one of the Rambam’s primary opponents, took the Talmud burning as a Divine sign, and publicly and vociferously denounced his former position and opposition against the Rambam’s writings and instead emphatically concluded “Moshe Emes V’Toras Emes, V’Kulanu Bada’in! - Moshe and his Torah are true (here referring to the Rambam), while we all are liars”.[14] He planned on traveling to the Rambam’s grave (in Teverya) and begging forgiveness. Some say this tragic incident was the catalyst of Rabbeinu Yonah’s writing what came to be known as his Magnum Opus, ‘Shaarei Teshuva’.

Further Grounds for Fasting

After discussing the burning of the Talmud, the Magen Avraham offers another reason for fasting. On this very day, Erev Shabbos Chukas, two entire cities of Jews were brutally decimated, as part of the Gezeiras Ta”ch V’Ta”t, the Cossack massacres led by Bogdan Chmielnitsky ym”sh[15] in 1648-1649, as recorded by the Shach.

Although most know of the Shach as one of the preeminent halachic authorities due to his extensive and authoritative commentary and rulings on the Shulchan

Aruch, yet, few know that he also wrote a sefer titled ‘Megillas Eifa’,[16] detailing the horrific and barbaric slaughter of tens of thousands (he puts the total at over one hundred thousand!) of Jews, and hundreds of entire communities during these terrifying years. Among his entries he relates (in graphic detail) how two cities were totally wiped out on this same day in the year 1648 (5408). Hence, the Magen Avraham avers, that it is proper to fast (Taanis Yachid) on Erev Shabbos Chukas, due to both of these tragedies happening on this same day in history.

20th of Sivan

However, that was not the first of the tragedies of Gezeiras Ta”ch V’Ta”t. That occurred on the 20th of Sivan, 1648 (5408), when the Cossacks attacked Nemirov (Nemyriv), in the Ukraine, and destroyed the Jewish community, numbering over 6,000. Several hundred Jews were drowned; other burned alive. The shuls were ransacked and destroyed, with even the Torah parchments desecrated and used as shoes. Since this horrifying catastrophe was unfortunately the first of many to come in the following years, the Shach, at the conclusion of his ‘Megillas Eifa’, declared a personal fast on the 20th of Sivan for himself and his descendants.[17] This was soon codified as public fast by the Vaad Arba Ha’Aratzos, the halachic and legislative body of all Lithuanian and Polish Jewry.[18] Indeed, the Magen Avraham concludes his passage that in many places in Poland, the custom is to fast on the 20th of Sivan for this reason. Additionally, the Shach, the Tosafos Yom Tov, and Rav Shabsi Sheftel Horowitz,[19] as well as several other Rabbanim of the time, composed specific Selichos to be recited on this day annually.

The First Blood Libel and Massacre

However, the 20th of Sivan was not chosen as a fast day exclusively due to the annihilation of the hundreds of Jewish communities during Gezeiras Ta”ch V’Ta”t. It actually held the ignominious distinction as being the date of one of the very first blood libels,[20] in Blois, France, almost 500 years prior, in 1171(4931)!

According to one of the Selichos recited on that day, ‘Emunei Shelumei Yisrael’, attributed to Hillel ben Yaakov, which lists the place and year of the tragedy, the King offered the 31 innocent Jewish prisoners (some listed by first name in the Selicha!), including several Gedolim and Baalei Tosafos, the chance to convert. When they refused, he ordered them burned alive! The martyrs recited Aleinu L’Shababayach in unison as the decree was being executed. Although, as detailed in the Selichah, as well as recorded by an eyewitness to the atrocities, Rabbi Efraim of Bonn in his ‘Sefer HaZechira’, which was later appended to Rabbi Yosef Hakohen HaRofei of Avignon’s sixteenth century ‘Emek HaBacha’, a chronicle of the terrible devastation of the Crusades (starting in 1096/4856; known as Gezeiras Tatn”u),[21] the martyrs’ bodies did not burn, still, this tragedy foreshadowed and portended future cataclysmic events for the Jewish people. In fact, this terrible libel was a major factor in the expulsion order of Jews from France a mere ten years later.

The great Rabbeinu Tam and the Rabbanim of the time instituted the 20th of Sivan as a fast day, even exclaiming that this fast is ‘akin to Yom Kippur’![22] The Selichos established for 20 Sivan, aside for the one mentioned previously which actually describes the horrendous pyre in Blois, were authored by the Gedolim of the previous generations regarding the destruction of many Jewish communities during the Crusades (known as Gezeiras Tatn”u; many Kinos of Tisha B’Av are recited in commemoration of these tragedies as well), including Rav Shlomo HaBavli,[23] Rabbeinu Gershom (Me’or Hagolah), and Rav Meir ben Rav Yitzchak, the author of Akdomus. Interestingly, several of the Selichos, especially the one titled “Elokim Al Dami L’Dami”, strongly reference and invoke the idea and essence of Korbanos in their theme; comparing the self-sacrifice of the Kedoshim of these decimated communities who gave up their lives Al Kiddush Hashem, to Korbanos offered in the Beis Hamikdash.

Re-Establishing the Fast

In fact, it is due to the dual tragedies that occurred on this day that the Shach declared the 20th of Sivan a fast day.[24] In other words, he didn’t actually set a new fast day; rather, he re-established the 20th of Sivan as a fast day, as it already had the distinction of a day that went ‘down in infamy’ almost 500 years previously. Therefore, it was only fitting to commemorate the unspeakable Cossack atrocities with a fast, on this very same day, the day that the first Jewish community was destroyed as part of Gezeiras Ta”ch V’Ta”t.

Chronicles of the disastrous occurrences of this day do exist and can still be found. Aside for the Shach’s ‘Megillas Eifa’, there is also Rav Nosson Nota of Hanover’s ‘Yavein Metzulah’, Rav Avraham ben Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi’s ‘Tzar Bas Rabbim’, Rav Gavriel ben Yehoshua of Shusberg’s ‘Pesach Teshuva’, and Rav Meir ben Shmuel of Sheburshen’s ‘Tzok Haftim’, all written by eyewitnesses to the carnage and wanton destruction.[25] [26]

Although nowadays it seems not widely commemorated or even known about,[27] nevertheless, the 20th of Sivan is still observed among several Chassidic communities, mostly of Hungarian origin. During the Holocaust, Hungarian Jewry was R”L decimated mainly over the span of the months of Iyar, Sivan, and Tamuz in 1944. Therefore, Rabbanim of Hungary re-established the

20th of Sivan as a fast day for Hungarian Jewry.^[28] Recent events have proven to us the timelessness of the dictum of 'Zos Chukas HaTorah' - where tragedies beyond our understanding happen to the Jewish people in exile. Our pain and tears over the years have driven home the point to us that throughout our long and protracted exile there have been no dearth of reasons to fast. May we soon welcome Moshiah, and have no further need for fast days.

The author wishes to thank Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz for his assistance in clarifying much of the historical content of this article.

For any questions, comments or for the full Machzeh Mekomos / sources, please email the author: ysptz@ohr.edu.

[1] Magen Avraham (O.C. 580, end 9), quoting the Sefer Tanya Rabasi (end 58, *Inyan Arba Tzomos* pg. 63b). This version of the tragic events is also later cited by the Elyya Rabba (ad loc. 4), Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 4), Mishna Berura (ad loc. 16), and Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 31). The Tanya Rabasi is an early halachic work written anonymously by a Rishon who was a colleague of the Shibolet Haleket and Maharam M'Rothenburg. Nowadays, it is generally attributed to Rav Yechiel ben Rav Yekusiel M'Mishpachas Ha'Avanim, of the Chachmei Rome (see the recent Mossad Rav Kook edition of the sefer). Interestingly, the Tanya Rabasi was merely quoting the Shibolet Haleket's account; ergo, it is unclear how slight variations crept into the Magen Avraham's retelling.

[2] The Oz V'Hadar Mishna Berura (ad loc. 16) references this to be referring to the teachings of the Arizal (Shaar HaKavannahos of Rav Chaim Vital, Drushei Tikkun Chatzos I and Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar Tikkun Chatzos Ch. 3).

[3] Indeed, the Biurei Maharsach 'h (on the Tanya Rabasi ad loc. 8) points out that there must have been a *ta'as* sofer in the Magen Avraham's writing, as in original he was quoting, it explicitly states 24 waggonloads and not 20.

[4] The full proceedings of this debate was recorded by one of the Rabbanim who defended the Talmud, Rabbeinu Yechiel ben Yosef, the Rosh Yeshiva in Paris and father-in-law of Rav Yitzchak M'Corbeil, author of the *SMa'K*, in a sefer titled 'Viknuach Rabbeinu Yechiel M'Paris.' For more background on this tragedy, see Artscroll's *Kinos* and *Tefillos* for *Tisha B'Av* (Introduction to Kinah 41).

[5] For his leading role in this pivotal event amid a lifetime of religious advancing the banner of Catholicism, Louis IX is the only French king to have been posthumously canonized as a "saint." [Hence, there are many cities named after him around the world, including one with a famous "Gateway Arch" in Misssouri.] The papal edict against the Talmud was overturned by Gregory IX's more tolerant successor, Pope Innocent IV in 1247. Misssouri's from his peers notwithstanding, Innocent IV wrote letters to King Louis IX effectively ordering that henceforth the Talmud should be censored rather than burned.

[6] See *Shu' Menachem Meishiv* (vol. 2, pg. 262, 62; part of the sefer *Tzitzyon L'Menachem*) who cites that approximately 12,000 individual volumes were burned!

[7] Aside for the Kinah he wrote, the Maharam referenced this great loss in his response (*Teshuvos Maharam M'Rothenburg* 250), citing the reaction of Rav Shmuel M'Falaize, one of the Rabbanim who unsuccessfully attempted to defend the Talmud from being burned. On a historical sidenote, the Maharam M'Rothenburg was niftar in captivity after being unjustly imprisoned for seven years in Ensisheim Fortress, in order to force the resident Jews to pay an exorbitant ransom to fill the king's (Rudolf I of Germany) depleted coffers. The Maharam refused to allow himself to be ransomed, knowing that it would set a dangerous precedent of rulers holding Rabbinim captive and forcing the unfortunate Jews to pay the price. Indeed, a short while after his passing, the king attempted to do the same for the Maharam's prized pupil, the Rosh, who only narrowly avoided capture, escaping to Spain. Tragically, the Maharam's body was only allowed to be buried fourteen years later, when a ransom was paid by Alexander ben Shlomo Wimpfen, who was subsequently laid to rest beside the Maharam, in the Jewish cemetery of Worms, Germany (also known as "Heiliger Sand"), nowadays commonly considered the oldest surviving Jewish cemetery in Europe.

[8] In an interesting side point, the Goren Dosh (*Shu' O.C. 41*) utilizes this tragedy as a reason to explain why nowadays *Yom Tov Sheini* is still observed. Unfortunately, throughout our long and bitter Golus we never know when a government might make a gezeira *ra ah* and all halachic literature lost. How then will we be able to properly calculate the months and years to know when are the correct days to observe? He explains that this was a fulfillment of the Gemara's warning (*Beitzah* 4b) to keep *Yom Tov Sheini* "Hizharu B'Minag Avesochem B'Yadeichem". "You should still be vigilant with the custom of your forefathers that has been handed down to you because there might be times when the local government will issue a decree and it will cause confusion!" For more on this topic see recent articles titled 'Rosh Hashana: The Universal Two Day Yom Tov (and Why Yom Kippur is Not)' and 'One Day or Two? What is the Chutzin in Eretz Yisrael to Do?'

[9] The Shibolet Haleket (263, *Ha'arugah HaTish'is*) is Seder Taanis, *Din Arba Tzomos*; whom other sources are ostensibly based on) cites this as well, albeit with slight variations. First of all, from his writing it seems that he was also an eyewitness. Second, he refers to it as 24 (and not 20) waggonloads filled with 'Sefrei Talmud, V'Halachos V'Hagados', similar to the Maharam M'Rothenburg's version. Third, according to his version, the heavenly response received was 'V'Da Gezeiras Oraysa'. And these are the decrees of the Torah'. Accordingly, the Rabbanim understood the response to mean that *Yom Vay* (the sixth day) of *Parshas Chukas* specifically was the gezeira. This 'vav' is understandably not present in our *Targum Onkelos* on the *pasus* of 'Zos Chukas HaTorah', as the pasuk does not state 'V'Zos'. As mentioned previously, this account is also the version in the original Tanya Rabasi, as he was citing the Shibolet Haleket. Other variations include the *Sefer HaTadir* (32, *Hilchos Taaniyos* pg. 233-234) who cites that 24 waggonloads were burned like the other Rishonim, but writes that the heavenly response was 'Da Gezeiras Oraysa' (without the 'vav') similar to the Magen Avraham's version, and the Korei HaDoros (pg. 23a-b s.v. ukaf) who writes that 21 waggonloads were burned, but places the date of the Talmud burning 62 years later, right before the Jews were actually expelled from France. Interestingly, the Maharam M'Rothenburg makes no mention of the *she'elashalon* in his Kinah dedicated to this tragedy. Neither does the Mishna Berura (*ibid.*), who summarized the reasons for the fast. However, in a different vein, in his recently published manuscript, Rav Chaim Paltiel, a Rishon and talmid chaver of the Maharam M'Rothenburg writes (*Perushim HaTorah L'Rabi Chaim Paltiel, Introduction to Parshas Chukas*, pg. 527; thanks are due to Rabbi Avrohom Goldstone of England for pointing out this source) that the minhag in France was to fast annually on the 6th of Tammuz, as that was the date that the Talmud was burned. And a siman for this is 'Zos Chukas HaTorah,' which the *Targum* is 'Da Gezeiras D'Oraysa,' meaning that on that date there was a gezeira *on*against the Torah. It seems that both the Maharam, as well as Rav Paltiel we're unaware of the *she'elashalon*, and Rav Paltiel understood that the fast to commemorate this tragedy was set as an actual date and not on the *Erev Shabbos* preceding *Parshas Chukas*. Since his manuscript was only first published some 30-odd years ago (5741), it is understandable why none of the Acharonim quoted his version of the events. For more on the topic of *She'elos Chalamos* in general, see Rabbi Eliezer Brodt's *Leket Eliezer* (pg. 59-63) and Rabbi Mordechai Zev Trenk's recent *Magic, Mysteries, and Mysticism: Illuminating Insights on Esoteric Torah Topics* (pg. 76-78 and 235-239).

[10] For more on this topic and why Asurah B'Teves is the only *Taanis Tzibbur* that can fall out on a Friday, as well as the halachos of a Friday fast, see article titled 'Fasting on Friday? – Asurah B'Teves: Not Your Ordinary Fast Day.'

[11] This letter is brought in *Chendah Genuzah* (pg. 18), as well as *Otzar HaGedolim* (vol. 7, pg. 105), and cited in *Torah L'Daas* (vol. 2, *Parshas Chukas* pg. 280-281) and *Kuntress Peninei Geivuros Akiva* (*Parshas Chukas* pg. 3). Perhaps somewhat apocryphal, but certainly evocative, Rav Hillel mentions that the ashes of the burn sefarim of the Rambam mixed together with the ashes of the burnt Talmud.

[12] These letters, back and forth between the great scholars of the time, have been collected as the third volume of *Kovetz Teshuvos HaRambam V'Igrosav*, titled 'Igros HaKinos'.

[13] For more on the historical aspects of this see Rabbi Avraham Meir Weiss's recent *Mishnas Chachamim* (pg. 265, footnote 50) and the *Artscroll Kinos* and *Tefillos* for *Tisha B'Av* (Introduction to Kinah 41).

[14] This is a paraphrase of the quote Chazal attribute to Korach after he was swallowed up by the earth at the conclusion of his ill-fated rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu. See *Gemara Baba Basra* (74a), *Midrash Rabba* (*Parshas Korach* Ch. 18, end 20), *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Parshas Korach* 11), and *Kli Yakar* (*Parshas Korach* Ch. 16, 34 s.v. nasi).

[15] A genocidal and bloodthirsty mass murderer who could have given Adolf Hitler *yun'sh* a run as most notorious Anti-Semitic in history. Chmielnitsky *yun'sh* is nevertheless still considered a national hero in Ukraine for being the father of Ukrainian nationalistic aspirations. The Cossacks' sheer brutality and scale of their atrocities was unsurpassed until the Nazis. According to noted historian Rabbi Berel Wein, the only reason why the Cossacks did not manage to kill as many Jews as did the Nazis *yun'sh*, was that there were no mechanized weapons to enable easy mass murder back in the 1600s. It was not due to lack of trying, R'.

[16] Although this author could not find this sefer among the works of the Shach, I was able to locate it annex to the back of *Rav Shlomo Ibn Varga's Shevet Yehuda*, a fascinating (and unfortunately horrifying) work detailing the trials and tribulations *Klal Yisrael* has gone through in different lands over the millennia of our prolonged exile. Although Rav Varga died over a hundred years prior to Gezeira *Ta'ch V'Ta'i*, the Shach's shocking account and vivid descriptions of the massacres were later included in this important work. Essential reading, *Tisha B'Av!*

[17] The Shach added an additional reason why he chose this date (also cited in *Shaarei Teshuva* - O.C. 580, end 9): 20 Sivan cannot fall out on a *Shabbos* in our calendar, ensuring and enabling fasters to be able to do so on that day every year. The Shach (as well as later the Yaavetz in his *Siddur Beis Yaakov* and as mentioned in the special aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' recited on that day for the *Harugei Kehillos T'ach V'Ta'i*: reprinted from an old manuscript that was printed in the Shach's lifetime) especially mourned the loss of the city's Chief Rabbi, Rav Yechiel Michel, a tremendous Talmid Chacham. Interestingly, a few short years earlier, the famed *Tosafos Yom Tov* *Yom Tov Lipman Heller*, served as the town's *Rav*.

[18] *Pinkas V'ad Arba Ha'Aratzos*; cited by the *Taz* (O.C. 566, 5; although he quotes it as the *Vaad Shulash Ha'Aratzos*) and *Shaarei Teshuva* (O.C. 580, end 9), as well as *Rav Nossen Nota* of Hanover's *Yavein Metzulah*, *Rav Avraham ben Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi's* *Tzar Bas Rabbin* (*Reshumos* vol. 3, pg. 279), and the *Tosafos Yom Tov* *Hakdama* to his *Selichos L'Kaf Sivan*. See also *Yad Shaul* (Y'D 228, end 136), *Das Torah* (O.C. 580, 4), *Siddur HaShlah*, *Siddur Bais Yaakov* (of the Yaavetz), *Siddur Derech Hachaim* (of the Chavas Daas). *Yossef V'Shoresh HaAvodah* (Shanah 9, Ch. 11) and the introduction to sefer 'Yesh Manchilin'. This fast is also mentioned by several other authorities including the *Magen Avraham* (*ibid.* and in O.C. 568, 10), *Elyya Rabba* (O.C. 566, 3), *Maadanei Yom Tov* (ad loc. 1; aside for the *Selichos* he wrote), *Pri Megadim* (ad loc. M.Z. 3), *Eshel Avraham* (*Butchatch*, O.C. 580; at length), *Mishna Berura* (*ibid.*), and *Kaf Hachaim* (*ibid.*).

[19] He was the son of the Shlah and Av Bais Din of Prague, as well as the author of *Vavei Ha'Amudim*. His *Selicha* was printed in the *Siddur HaShlah*. In the aftermath of these tragedies, the *Tosafos Yom Tov* (cited in the end of *Shaarei Efrayim*, *Hilchos Krias HaTorah*) also composed a famous *Tefillah* against talking in Shul.

[20] The ignominious distinction of very first blood libel seems to have occurred in 1144, Norwich, England, after a boy, William of Norwich, was found dead with stab wounds in the blood. Although his death was unsolved, the local community of Norwich attributed the boy's death to the Jews. William was shortly thereafter acclaimed as a saint in Norwich, with 'miracles' attributed to him, with a cult established in his name. However, in this case, the local authorities did not convict the Jews due to lack of proof and of legal jurisdiction. Although this sordid affair marked the first official 'Blood Libel', on the other hand, Blois in 1171 was the first recorded time and place such baseless accusations were actually acted upon, concluding with a gruesome massacre of the town's Jews, HY'D. Thanks are due to Stephen Posen for pointing out these details.

[21] For this reason alone, the *Taz* (O.C. 493, 2), although maintaining that one need only keep the restrictions of *Sefirah* only until *lag B'omer*, nonetheless, exhorts us to continue with the prohibition on weddings even after *lag B'omer* until shortly before *Shavuot* due to the horrific tragedies perpetrated by the Crusaders to many Ashkenazi communities during the second half of *Sefirah* (*Gezeiras Tzin* "u"). See previous article titled 'Switching Sefirah? – Understanding Your Minhag and its Ramifications'.

[22] In fact, according to this source, the tragic events in Blois distressed *Rabbeinu Tam* so much that he passed away a mere 14 days later, 4 *Tammuz* 1171 (4931). However, Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi (*Alpha Beta Tineysa D'Sh'muel Zeira* vol. 1, pg. 391) posits that this was not referring to the famous *Rabbeinu Tam* who was *Rashi*'s grandson, but rather his talmid, *Rav Yaakov of Orleans* who was called *Rabbeinu Tam* *Orleans*. He adds, citing that *Ohev Yisrael of Apt* (*end Parshas Mattos*) that although not mentioning the terrible pyre on that day, related an astounding drush that the 20th of *Sivan* is the beginning of *Yom Kippur*. He adds a Biblical allusion to this from *Parshas Ki Sisa* (*Shemos* Ch. 17:16): "Ki Yad al Keis Kah" - *Keis* (*Kaf-Samach*) stands for *Kaf* (*20*) *Sivan* and *Kah* (*Yud* - *He*) stands for *Yom Kippurim*.

[23] Rav Shlomo Habavli is referred to by the Rishonim with great veneration. For example, he is quoted by *Rashi* (*Parshas Terumah* Ch. 26:15 s.v. *v'asita*) and the *Rosh* (*Yoma* Ch. 8, 19). The *Maharshal* (*Shu'ut* *Maharshal* 29) writes that *Rabbeinu Gershon*, teacher of all Ashkenazi Jewry, learned *Torah* and received his *mesorah* from *Rav Shlomo HaBavli*.

[24] *Shach*, in the conclusion of his 'Megillas Eifja', also cited by the *Shaarei Teshuva* (O.C. 580, end 9) and *Kaf Hachaim* (ad loc. end 31). This double catastrophe on the same day as part of the cheshbon to renew the fast of the 20th of *Sivan* is also mentioned by the *Tosafos Yom Tov* in his *Hakdama* to his *Selichos L'Kaf Sivan*, and in *Rav Meir ben Shmuel Sheburschen's* 'Zok Haltim'.

[25] Be forewarned: Much of the content is quite graphic and gruesome in its explicitness. The Cossacks' sheer depravity, cruelty, brutality, and bloodlust, was simply unprecedented in scale and scope, R'.

[26] Many of these works were collected and reprinted together around a hundred years ago in 'Lekoras HaGezeiros al Yisrael' (vol. 4). Additionally, there are several contemporary sefarim that give a summary of the tragedies of Gezeira Tach V'Tat and the 20th of *Sivan*, including *Sefer HaTodah* (vol. 2, Chodesh *Sivan*, *Kaf Sivan*, pg. 357-360), and *Nitei Gavriel* (*Hilchos Shavuot, Chelek HaBirurin*, 6, pg. 282-299). Especially of interest is *Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff's* recent article titled 'The Twentieth of Sivan'.

[27] There are several theories raised to explain this. See *Yad Shaul* (Y'D 228, end 136), and the *Maharsham's* *Daas Torah* (O.C. 580, 4). One supposition is that the original decree from the *Vaad Arba'atros* to fast on the 20th of *Sivan* was only for a hundred years. Another theory is that the decree was only on *Jewry* who lived in those lands. In fact, the lashon of the *Magen Avraham* (O.C. 580, end 9), as well as the *Mishna Berura* (ad loc. 16), bears this out, as they only mention the fast as a 'minhag Poland'. Moreover, the *Tosafos Yom Tov* himself, in his *Hakdama* to his *Selichos L'Kaf Sivan*, writes that the fast was encumbent upon all throughout the *Arba'atros*, implying that it was never accepted in other outlying lands. Nowadays, there are not many Jewish kehilos left in Poland or Ukraine to uphold this. Indeed, *Rav Moshe Feinstein* (*Shu'ut* *Igros Moshe*, Y'D vol. 4, 57, 11 s.v. *lo*) and *Rav Yitzchak Isaac Halevi Herzog* (*Shu'ut* *Heichal Yitzchak* O.C. 61, 3) (and although disagreeing in psak about the main *inyan* in their respective responsa) both wrote that the *takana* to fast on the 20th of *Sivan* was only observed in those lands.

[28] *Nitei Gavriel* (*ibid.* pg. 297-299), citing the *Pinkas Minhagim* of *Keil Yereim* of Budapest from 5706/1946 and the *Mishnas Yaakov* (O.C. 580). For example, the *Bez* *minhag* is to be very *mapud* with reciting the *Selichos* of the 20th of *Sivan*, including the later additions of special aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' recited on that day for the *Harugei Kehillos T'ach V'Ta'i* (reprinted from an old manuscript that was printed in the Shach's lifetime) as well as a more recent, albeit unfortunately similar aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' for the *Kedoshim HaShoah* (*Ta'sh-Tash*).

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda, and l'chzus for Shira Yafa bas Rochel Miriam and her children for a yeshua tekef u'miyad!

This article is dedicated L'iluy Nishmasam shel R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi and Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrach H'yd.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda

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Rabbi Yissacher Frand

Parshas Chukas

Seeking Honest Advice is Key to Avoiding Monumental Mistakes
Using "We" Was Anything But a "Wee" Mistake

One of the major topics in Parshas Chukas is the incident of Mei Merivah. It begins with the death of Miriam: "And the Children of Israel, the entire congregation, came to Midbar Tzin in the first month, and the nation resided in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there." (Bamidbar 20:1) Chazal say that the miraculous "Well" (Be'er) which provided water for the Jewish people during their forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness was present in the merit of the righteous Miriam. When Miriam died, the Be'er ceased, the people didn't have water, and they complained to Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moshe's response to this request somehow contained within it an aveyra (sin), which—based on Moshe's high level of righteousness—triggered Divine Punishment that prevented him from going into Eretz Yisrael. The exact nature of the "Sin of Mei Merivah" is the subject of a tremendous dispute among the classic Chumash commentaries. The most widely-quoted interpretation is that Moshe Rabbeinu hit the Rock rather than speaking to it. There are a wide variety of other interpretations as well.

The Ramban, in his Chumash commentary, quotes an interpretation from Rabbeinu Chananel, one of the earliest commentaries, who says that Moshe's aveyra was that he said "...Do you think we will extract for you water from this Rock?" (Bamidbar 20:10). The aveyra was basically one word (or in Hebrew a single letter prefix) – "we". Rabbeinu Chananel says that Moshe's rhetorical question should have been "Do you think Hashem will extract for you water from this Rock?" By using the first-person plural, Moshe gave the impression that "we are going to be the water givers." This minor grammatical slip might cause the people to mistakenly think that Moshe and Aharon would be able to extract water from the Rock through their own wisdom. According to Rabbeinu Chananel, this carelessness, in this crucial theological matter, was the aveyra which caused Moshe and Aharon to die before reaching Eretz Yisrael. The pasuk alludes to this when writing "...Since you did not sanctify My Name in the midst of Bnei Yisrael" (Devorim 32:51). They could have made a kiddush Hashem by attributing the miracle to G-d, but they forfeited that opportunity by implying that they would be responsible for extracting the water from the Rock.

Rabbeinu Chananel's interpretation is quite shocking. Remember, this event took place forty years post the Exodus from Egypt. The Jewish people witnessed Moshe's leadership style for forty years, during which he always attributed their miraculous emergence from slavery and survival in the Wilderness to the direct intervention of the Ribono shel Olam. Not only that, even within this particular pasuk, the Torah begins by stating: "Moshe and Aharon gathered the Congregation in front of the Rock..." (Bamidbar 20:10). Rashi here notes that this is one of the places in Chumash where a small area miraculously held a huge number of people. There were a couple of million people, and Chazal say that everyone was right in front of the Rock. Obviously, such a thing is not physically possible under normal circumstances. There was no denying that this was a miracle, and that the Ribono shel Olam was 100% responsible for all that was transpiring at this moment.

If that is the case, how could it be that Moshe's use of the expression "Notzi lachem mayim" (we will extract water) would cause anyone to think that he was referring to his own skill and knowledge? No one would have thought that!

Rav Simcha Zissel Brody (the Head of the Chevron Yeshiva) says that we see from here that a person can always make a mistake, regardless of the circumstances. Something can be as clear as the nose on my face, but if I want to make a mistake, indeed, I can make a mistake. Someone who wants to deny the Almighty's intervention in his life, as obvious at that may be, can deny it. This is what the Navi says: "...for the ways of Hashem are straight, and the righteous will walk on them, and the sinners will stumble on them." (Hoshea 14:10). Hashem placed in creation something called "Bechira" (Freedom of Choice). A person always has the ability to make choices. He can make the right choice or

he can make a choice which is irrational, but the option to choose belongs to man. Moshe Rabbeinu, by using the word "Notzee" (We will bring forth), opened the door for them to this opportunity to think the wrong thing.

This can help explain an interesting Rashi. Rashi quotes the words in this very pasuk "...Hear ye, you rebellious ones..." (Shim'u nah ha'morim) and interprets the word "morim" to be "sarbonim" (stubborn ones), people who refuse. Then Rashi brings a second interpretation, based on Greek etymology: "Shotim" (Fools), those who are "morim es moreihem" (try to teach their own teachers).

It is not clear whether Rashi is offering three interpretations, or only two. Rashi mentions Sarbonim, shotim, and morim es moreihem. This could be three different interpretations. However, the Imrei Emes writes that there are only two interpretations here. "Morim es moreihem" is an elaboration of "Shotim". A person who does not listen to the advice and guidance of his teachers and elders, but rather tries to teach them a thing or two—such a person is a fool!

Since it is always possible for a person to make a mistake, how can he ever be sure that what he is doing is correct? The answer is "Asch lecha Rav" – Make for yourself a teacher (Avos 1:6). Everyone needs a Rebbe, a mentor, a guide—someone who can give him frank and honest advice and tell him, when necessary, "You are making a mistake here." The people Moshe gathered by the Rock did not fully accept upon themselves such a teacher. As a result, they were vulnerable to making such a colossal mistake as to think that it was Moshe and Aharon who were giving them the water.

לע"ג

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
בילא בת (אריה) ליבע ע"ה
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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 take 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 "girsas" in Torat Chaim's Ramban is "u'mikraot mfurashim HEYM" while Chavel's edition has: "u'mikraot mfurashim 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'aplilim" 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 Bamidbar 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 years 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'meraglim 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 KADEXH 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, KADEXH in 1:46 must be KADEXH 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 KADEXH in 1:46 must be KADEXH 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 Eilot & 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 KADEXH 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 KADEXH Midbar Tzin:

"And Moshe sent messengers from KADEXH 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 criterions mentioned above ("derek Yam Suf" and "as God commanded")- and KADEXH in 1:46 can still be KADEXH 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 KADEXH 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 KADEXH.

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

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'emanem 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 contain 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.]

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.]

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).

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.

"...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'dbar tem 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

COMMAND #5 - Give drink to the people and their animals.

(20:8)

MOSHE'S EXECUTION:

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 "chillul 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 pausk 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 have 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 takes 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 Chovav; 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'leydut" - [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 shoresh.]

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 - "matelyhu").

[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 shoresh 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 (Il 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 "kvivot ha'taaveh" Moshe himself claims that he can 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 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

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, Imei 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 "Imei 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.

Parshat Chukat

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Parashat Hukkat 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, malingeringers, 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 Cana'an 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'altem" 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 Efrayim 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'ilah," 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 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

Parshas Chukat: Revisiting Mei Merivah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. The Text: Bamidbar 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 – 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) – 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 – they only mention "u-mayim ayin lish'tot" (there is no water to drink) as an apparent afterthought – 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 "good, wide land" should have any of those resources?

In numerous essays, I've underscored that a successful reader of Tanakh must become "part of the story" – 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 – and we know that Moses will never enter the Land. We have to remember that none of the players know that until they do – either when it happens or when they are prophetically given that information.

The Israelites do not know where they are – 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 "flowing with milk and honey," they may have even heard about the famed seven species (although only adumbrated in Deut. 8:8) – but all that they've seen is grapes, figs and pomegranates – 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.

So...the Israelites must have thought they were in Israel – 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 – Joseph has a special location (cf. Gen. 48:22), but no one is buried "out there" (except for the entire generation that passed away in the desert and whose death was a fulfillment of a Divine decree). So...if Miriam died and was buried "there" ("sham"), we must have arrived at the Land!

We can now understand the catalyst for the crisis – the people believe that they've arrived – but the "beautiful land, flowing with milk and honey, boasting fantastic fruit" is nowhere to be seen. "And 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 – or that directed by God that he take – 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 "be 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 "unexpected" use of Elokim followed, in ch. 2 [v. 4 ff.] by Hashem Elokim indicates a change in "Divine Policy" vis-à-vis creation), presentation of laws or any other genre of Biblical literature, we train ourselves to notice what is "off" 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 "what'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 – 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 – 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 – but we are so accustomed to hearing the people's plaint to Moses (and Aaron): "Why have YOU brought the assembly of Hashem into this wilderness...And why have YOU made us to come up out of Egypt..." that we don't necessarily pick up on the incongruity of their complaint. Why aren't they angry at – or disappointed with – 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 desert...in 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 –

- 1) An elemental and existential need for water – as confirmed by v. 2
- 2) A disenchantment with the "Land" 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'khor Shor's comments [here](#)); what are we to make of the directive "ve-dibbar tem 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 ("bekiut") 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 "real" concordance; there are dozens of examples in the canon where the two are interchanged) and *read*, rather, "speak 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 "sin"

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

Instead, Moses used the device of a rhetorical question to make his point "ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim?" – but a rhetorical question will only work if the intended audience knows how to interpret it. When a teen's mother declares "Do you call this a clean room" – her son understands that she is calling it a mess – but if an immigrant has just moved in and she says the same thing – 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 "lo tavo'u" – you shall not come – rather "lo tavi'u" – 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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