

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

“G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'This is the ordinance (chukat) of the Torah which G-d has commanded, saying, 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring a completely red heifer, which has no blemish, and which has never had a yoke on it'" (Numbers 19:1-2).

Is it more important to devote oneself to personal, spiritual development or to work for the good of the nation? I believe that a good argument can be made that commitment to the nation takes priority over commitment to one's own spiritual needs. And one such source is a Midrash (Shmot Rabah, Chap. 2:80), which links two kinds of animal slaughterings (not by blood, but by a common word-"chukat").

The Midrash has in mind the paschal lamb sacrifice of Exodus and the paradoxical ritual of the red heifer, (purifying the defiled, but defiling all those involved in its preparation), discussed in this week's portion, Chukat, and quoted above. In regard to the paschal sacrifice, the same word, chukat, appears. "This is the ordinance (chukat) of the pesach, no stranger shall eat of it" (Exodus 12:43).

Any law in the Torah called 'chok' has no rational explanation. Essentially a 'chok' is different from those commandments which are universally understood as 'rational natural laws,' like prohibitions against stealing, killing, etc. Rational laws are the key to a society's survival, but a 'chok' is geared to the Jewish nation, religious ritual and is often mysterious, and beyond reason. When it comes to the 'chukim' of the paschal lamb and the red heifer, their interpretation by the Midrash, focuses on two distinct approaches to Jewish life and practice. Interpreting the verse, "May my heart be wholehearted with your statutes (Chukim) in order that I not be ashamed," (Psalms 119:80), the Midrash explains that this refers to the ordinance ('chok') of the paschal sacrifice and the ordinance ('chok') of the red heifer. Concerning the first we read, 'zot chukat hapesach,' (Ex. 12:43), and concerning the second we read 'zot chukat haTorah' (Num. 19:2). Once on a track of linking the two statutes (choks), the Midrash ponders which of the two is the greater and more important ordinance?

The analysis takes on the form of an analogy. If two identical women go out walking, how do we know

which of the two is greater? Explains the Midrash: if one of the women is accompanying the other, is following behind the other, the one who is in front is the greater figure. Paralleling the case of the identical women, the Midrash guides us back to the case of the identical 'chukim' and the original question. Which is greater, the paschal sacrifice or the red heifer? Obviously, it is the one which is accompanied by the other, the one which is leading the other; and although they appear to be similar in stature, the red heifer always accompanies the paschal lamb, following behind. Before we can eat from the paschal sacrifice we must first be purified, and it's the red heifer which provides the means of ritual purity, which must be activated before we are enabled to participate in the paschal sacrifice.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik, of blessed memory, my rebbe and mentor, takes this Midrashic conception a step further. The red heifer enables a person to participate in ritual ceremony-those commandments which link the individual with G-d. Thus the red heifer represents individual, spiritual purity.

On the other hand, the paschal sacrifice represents the national commitment of the Jewish people. The commandment to bring the 'pesach' was given just when we emerged as a nation, struggling to escape the claw of slavery. When the Torah commands the Jewish people to bring the paschal sacrifice, it tells us, in the very same verse, that a non-Jew is forbidden to eat of it. Any male who does not carry the indelible mark of being a Jew, circumcision, cannot join in. The entire character of the paschal sacrifice demonstrates how it's not for individuals, how it may not be eaten by an individual, but must rather be eaten within a familial and national context. And since every single Jew in the community of Israel was commanded to take part, this ritual united every Jew to his fellow Jew.

If the red heifer is about individual ritual and religious purity, and the paschal sacrifice is about national commitment, it becomes indubitably clear that when one's own spiritual development comes into conflict with a national issue, then our national commitment must come first; the national commitment is the purpose for the spiritual cleansing. The paschal sacrifice is the goal, the red heifer is the means. Indeed there is even a halacha which states that if the whole community is ritually impure, and if a red heifer can't be found, the people are permitted nevertheless to

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participate in the paschal sacrifice, symbolizing to the nation that our national unity and wellbeing transcends individual purity.

Consequently we see how one's own spiritual development is only a means to the communal experience of the nation. Klal Yisrael comes first. If we look at prayer, we see how its observance in Jewish practice teaches us something unique about our priorities. More often than not, prayer is an occasion when an individual trembles before G-d, an individual beseeches, an individual hopes. But for Jews, prayer is closely linked to a public moment. Individual prayer is consigned to a lower spiritual potential than when a group of at least ten, a minyan, pray together and that minyan is representative and symbolic of the Jewish nation. And, indeed, even when we pray alone, our prayer is always in plural, for the entire nation: "heal us, O G-d, so that we may be healed; see our affliction; restore Jerusalem to us..."

Alone, many of the most important prayers cannot be said. This doesn't mean that in Judaism an individual's self-realization is always sacrificed for the greater good of the whole. Rather, a dialectic and a tension exists between being a we-oriented people or an I-oriented people. At times, one must zealously, and even selfishly, prepare oneself for ultimate greater service to the Jewish community by shutting out the needs of the world, but the overriding goal of the individual must be to contribute to the needs of the nation so that we may indeed be a kingdom of priest-teachers to perfect the world. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**"B**ecause you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you (plural, referring to both Moshe and Aharon) will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them" (Bamidbar 20:12). Even though the Torah tells us what happened that led to Moshe and Aharon being punished, it doesn't tell us exactly what their sin was. Over the centuries there have been dozens of approaches suggested by the commentators trying to explain what they did wrong. One thing we do know, however, is that whatever their sin was, it led to a

lack of a "sanctification of G-d." Any suggestion must therefore include an explanation as to how their actions caused this. There are other "qualifications" that must be met as well, such as explaining the "lack of faith" on the part of Moshe and Aharon. Additionally, the sin must have been committed by both Moshe and Aharon, since both were punished for it, and there must be something that G-d commanded them to do that they didn't, since we are told that they "rebelled against His word" (20:24 and 27:14, see also Devarim 32:51).

Two of the most well known approaches are those of Rashi (Bamidbar 20:11-12) and the Rambam (Shemoneh Perakim 4). Rashi tells us that the problem was that G-d had asked them to "speak to the rock" that would provide water (20:8), but Moshe hit it instead (20:11). Although this is certainly "rebellious against G-d's word," it was only Moshe that hit the rock, not Aharon. And although Rashi insists that there is a big difference between the sanctification of G-d that would have been achieved had Moshe spoken to the rock instead of hitting it, since both are overt miracles, many commentators don't understand how this made a real difference. It is also difficult to understand how hitting the rock instead of speaking to it was a result of any deficiency in Moshe's belief. Had Moshe spoken to the rock (with nothing happening) before hitting it, we could then attribute his hitting it to not fully believing that speaking to it would work. But Rashi only tells us that Moshe hit the rock a second time because only a few drops came out the first time he hit it, not that he hit it because speaking to it didn't work.

The Rambam says that Moshe's mistake was getting angry at the nation, calling them "rebels" (20:10) even though they were legitimately thirsty. It is unfitting for someone so close to G-d to become angry, which gave the nation the impression that it was really G-d who was upset with them, when He (at least according to the Rambam) wasn't. This constituted a "chillul Hashem," making G-d seem less sanctified, an offense serious enough to prevent Moshe from entering the Promised Land. However, since it was only Moshe that called them "rebels," we still need an explanation as to what Aharon did wrong. And, as the Rambam points out, it would be difficult to say that they "rebelled against His word" if it were Moshe's emotions that were problematic, not his actions. How this constituted a "lack of faith" needs to be explained as well.

In short, neither of these approaches seems to meet all of the necessary qualifications. Nevertheless, if we combine the two (adjusting them slightly), we may be able to come up with an approach that does.

Moshe and Aharon had just buried their older sister, Miriam (20:1). They were mourning for her when an angry mob surrounded them because the well that had provided water for them throughout their journeys in the desert had dried up (20:2-5). Although their tone was uncalled for, having no water was a legitimate

problem that needed to be dealt with. However, rather than acknowledging this and reassuring them that they would try to resolve the issue (by speaking to G-d about it), they escaped to the Mishkan to get away from them (20:6, see Kli Yakar and Netziv), where they prayed to G-d for help. If we contrast G-d's response to them with what they actually did, the differences should point us in the right direction.

G-d told Moshe to "take the stick" (20:8), which he did (20:9), but this seems to be the only part of the instructions that were followed properly (which may be why the Torah points out that this was done "as he was commanded," implying that only this part was). Next, he was told that he and Aharon should "gather the assembly," and that both of them should "speak to the rock," after which it would "give its waters" (20:8). However, rather than gathering the "assembly" ("aidah"), we are told (20:10) that Moshe and Aharon "gathered the congregation" ("kahal"). What's the difference between an "assembly" and a "congregation?" The word "kahal" is the same word used for "gather," implying that it is a group comprised of individuals that are gathered together, while the word "aidah" (with the root letters of yud-ayin-daleth) means "pre-arranged." It is the same word used for meeting together ("va'ad") and "holiday" ("mo-aid"), which is a previously appointed time when people get together. In other words, an "aidah" is a group of people that share a common purpose, an entity unto itself, whereas a "kahal" is a conglomerate of individuals with varying agendas. G-d had told Moshe and Aharon to gather together the nation in order to solve a communal problem (having no water), but they called together all the individuals that comprised the nation, since they viewed them as individuals with personal complaints. This is consistent with our earlier observation that they tried to run away from the complainers rather than addressing the communal issue.

The next deviation we notice is that despite G-d telling both Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock, neither of them did. Although only Moshe hit the rock, that's only a difference in how each of them deviated from G-d's direct commandment. Is not speaking to the rock any less a deviation from the commandment to speak to it than hitting it is? Neither of them listened to G-d; one by keeping still and not talking and the other by letting his stick do the talking instead of his mouth. The bottom line, though, is that both "rebelled against G-d's word."

What does "speaking to the rock" mean? "You (plural) should say to it in My name, 'this is what G-d says: 'give forth your waters'" (Midrash Lekach Tov). The miracle well had provided water due to the merit of Miriam (Taanis 9a); once she passed away, it dried up. But G-d wanted it to return, in the merit of Moshe and Aharon (ibid), and therefore was commanding it-through Moshe and Aharon-to start flowing once again.

The message would be quite clear: Up until now it flowed because of Miriam's righteousness and it was Moshe and Aharon's righteousness that brought it back. It had to dry up in-between (temporarily) to show that it had been providing water because of Miriam, and it had to be Moshe and Aharon that told it that spoke to it to show that it was because of them that it returned. Instead, they turned it into another event in the series of the nation rebelling, with Moshe proving that he and G-d were right through his miraculous stick. The intended message was lost because of how Moshe and Aharon approached, and presented, the situation.

What went wrong? It all stemmed from their focusing on the tone of the nation's complaint rather than its substance. Had they acknowledged that it was a legitimate communal issue, they could have disregarded the inappropriate tone and dealt with the water shortage right away. They should have tried to calm everyone down, reassured them that G-d did not take them this far to have them die of thirst, and then asked Him how to proceed. Instead, in the midst of their mourning, they got upset with the "attack" on them and reacted to the perceived rebellion rather than the real water shortage. Addressing the tone rather than the issue indicated that they were not fully confident that the issue would be resolved, for if it were so obvious that being thirsty was only a temporary situation, they would have reassured them about it immediately and taken care of it.

We can now reconstruct what happened, and what Moshe and Aharon did wrong. Exhausted, both mentally and physically, from the burden of leading the nation and dealing with the loss of their sister, Moshe and Aharon view the angry mob as another rebellion rather than as a holy, thirsty, nation being forced to take note that it was in Miriam's merit that they had not been thirsty for all those decades in the dry desert. Their lack of complete confidence/faith (on their level) that G-d would take care of the nation's needs and remove their thirst (perhaps brought about by their perception of the "mob" as "rebels," and not worthy of being completely taken care of) lead to their being upset with them, and treating them as individuals complaining about their own personal problems rather than a nation expressing its legitimate need. G-d tries to point out their misperception, telling them to "gather the assembly," but they still gather the "congregation" instead. G-d tells them to speak to the rock, but they don't, with Moshe hitting the rock instead (an outgrowth of his being angry at them) and Aharon watching quietly (without speaking to the rock either). In the end, rather than setting an example of remaining calm despite a devastating personal loss, showing the nation that G-d will always provide for them, and that they all benefit from the righteous, Moshe and Aharon got upset, indicated a lack of confidence in G-d always providing for the nation, and obscured the message that the miraculous

well had been because of Miriam and was now because of them. And for that they were punished.

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#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**T**his week's parsha tells of the tragic end game of the generation of the desert. The great leader of Israel, Moshe, is told that he will suffer the same fate of not living to enter the Land of Israel as does his generation. The premier generation of Jewish history-dor deah, a generation of great knowledge and intelligence-is doomed never to see the promised land of Israel.

The greatest of all of the prophets and leaders of the Jewish people will accompany his generation to the grave without realizing his life's ambition of coming to the Land of Israel. Yet in the midst of this personal disappointment and national tragedy the Torah emphasizes for us the eternity of the Jewish people.

Yehoshua will continue the work and preserve the legacy of Moshe for the ages-and a new generation will arise that will enter the Land of Israel and settle in it. Whatever the previous generation was unable to accomplish, the next generation, even though less in knowledge and wisdom, will nevertheless achieve.

This next generation will not be psychologically burdened by the years of slavery in Egypt, it will not have worshipped the Golden Calf, it would not remember the complaints about food and water and the constant rebellions and dissatisfactions of their parents and grandparents with Moshe and G-d.

It will be faced with the stark choice of going forward and conquering the Land of Israel or remaining forever in a trackless and lethal desert. A generation that faces stark choices, almost no choices, usually is able to do the strong and correct thing and not delude itself that it will somehow survive permanently in a desert. The absence of Moshe will also, strangely enough, force such a hard choice to be made. As long as Moshe is alive, the Jewish people place all of their trust in him. Nothing to worry about, Moshe will save us from our enemies and even from G-d's justice. Living in the desert is not so bad as long as Moshe remains with us. The manna falls from heaven in his merit and he always delivers water to us-and even meat on demand-if we complain strongly enough.

Moshe's presence amongst the Jews turns unfortunately into a hindrance for their progress in maturation and self-reliant independence. Moshe's transgression in this week's parsha-hitting the rock to draw forth water instead of speaking to it-may appear to be minor in our eyes, unworthy of the severe punishment meted out to him for this act. But the overall picture, and the effect of Moshe on his people, points to the necessity for him to step down as leader.

There are interests that weigh heavily in favor of Moshe and his continuing leadership. But there is a far-seeing and general interest of the nation as a whole that somehow overcomes Moshe's own personal interest. This week's parsha relates the final judgment of Moshe as seen in this perspective, and allows us a greater insight into the Torah's lessons and policies.

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#### **RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG**

### **Between the Lines**

**O**ne of the primary topics discussed in this week's parsha is an unfortunate incident that begins with a lack of water in the Jewish camp (Numbers 20:2-12). The Jewish people gather around Moses and begin to argue with him, saying, "It would have been better to perish in a different way! Why did you bring us to the desert to die by thirst? Why did you take us out of Egypt?" Moses seeks counsel from G-d, who tells him to take his staff and speak to a rock, which will miraculously provide water for the Jewish people. Moses takes his staff and gathers the people around the rock, as G-d commanded.

Then he says to the Jewish people, "Listen, you rebellious ones, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" He strikes the rock with his staff and water comes pouring out. G-d thereupon tells Moses, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me, you will not bring this nation into the Land."

Commentators propose at least 15 (!) different interpretations of Moses's mistake in this passage. The Talmud (Eruvin 13b) teaches that "These and those are the words of the living G-d," meaning that a variety of authentic interpretations can coexist. Therefore, on some level, all 15 interpretations of Moses's error are correct. How can we understand this sudden decline on the part of Moses, our ultimate role model? How can the greatest prophet who ever lived have made so many mistakes in such a short period of time?

A passage later in the parsha (Numbers 20:23-24) may help resolve this problem. G-d speaks to Moses and Aaron by the border of the land of Edom, and tells them that it is time for Aaron to die. Rashi explains that we learn an important principle from the juxtaposition of these verses. The land of Edom belongs to the wicked descendants of Esav. When the Jewish people came close to this land (as the verse says, "by the border"), they were influenced by the wickedness there and their service of G-d became weaker. The people's weak Divine service then caused them to lose their righteous leader Aaron, whom they no longer deserved. This idea indicates that the leaders of a given generation are only as great as the people of

that generation. In one sense, our leaders lead us. In another sense, however, we lead them-by creating and influencing their behavior. Therefore, instead of blaming our leaders for lack of leadership, it might be wiser to examine ourselves and take personal responsibility for the lack of guidance we protest. If we improve ourselves, our leaders will improve as well.

This concept is also found elsewhere in the Torah. When the Jewish people begin worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses is atop Mount Sinai. G-d sees the situation and tells Moses, "Go, descend" (Exodus 32:7). The Talmud (Brachot 32a) wonders why the extra word "go" is necessary. Couldn't G-d have simply said, "Descend"? R' Elazar explains that G-d was implying to Moses, "Descend from your greatness." (The Hebrew word *lech*, "go," can also be read as *lecha*, "you.") "I only gave you greatness because of the people." Once again we see that the level of a leader is dependent on the level of the people.

This idea will finally help us resolve our initial issue. The problem with the lack of water was not that Moses made 15 simultaneous mistakes on his own. Rather, the Jewish people were guilty of all those errors, and they pulled Moses down to repeat those same mistakes! Fundamentally, Moses's behavior was a reflection of the people's spiritual level.

We can see this idea in G-d's response, where the word "you" is in the plural: "Since you [all] did not believe in Me to sanctify Me..." This plural form could be understood as a reference to the Jewish people, who failed to sanctify G-d on a daily basis and therefore no longer deserved to have Moses and Aaron bring them into the Land. Although the context of the verse makes it clear that the plural "you" refers to Moses and Aaron, the interpretation still holds, since Moses's mistake did not stem from his lack of greatness, but rather from the people's decline in spirituality.

In these confusing, chaotic, and troubling times, may we all be blessed to improve ourselves. By doing so, may we merit great and responsible leaders, showing us the way to true redemption. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & *aish.com*

### **RABBI BORUCH LEFF**

## **Kol Yaakov**

**T**he authorship of the Torah has one of two possibilities: either G-d wrote it, or a human being wrote it. Let's take for argument's sake the side that a human being wrote it. If so, we discover a very strange phenomenon.

This human being could not have been a Jew! Can we actually believe that a Jew would write such negative, detrimental, and destructive descriptions of his ancestors?

Listen to what the author of the Torah describes: That his patriarch, Jacob was a liar and tricked his father, Isaac; that the sons of Jacob

kidnapped and sold their brother Joseph into slavery; that the Jews of the Desert preferred slavery in Egypt rather than freedom; that the Jews are a stiff-necked people; that Moshe, the true prophet of G-d, complains to Him and does not want to be the leader of what he describes as such a rebellious nation; that the Jews of the Desert worshiped a golden calf; that they showed a lack of trust in G-d by believing the spies' evil reports concerning Israel.

The list goes on and on.

Included in this list is the event in Parshat Chukat (Vayikra 20:7-13) that tells the story of Moshe and Aharon's failure in hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, in order to draw water to quench the people's thirst. Moshe and Aharon are punished and not permitted to enter the Land of Israel.

Of course, the real meaning and interpretation of these difficult passages are explained by all the commentaries and they are not as negative as they seem. Sometimes the verses are simply misunderstood at the surface level and not meant negatively at all (as is the case with Jacob seeming to trick Isaac). But no Jew would ever risk the tarnishing of his ancestors' reputations even if only at the superficial level of understanding.

Why would a Jew write such terrible things about his ancestors? No other nation records an unfavorable history of their ancestors. One cannot read of a single defeat of Egypt in Egyptian history books. One must turn to the Assyrian texts to read of Egyptian failures, and vice versa. Even today, there are major distinctions between British and American history books in their accounts as to what happened in the American Revolutionary War. But somehow the fact that descendants generally look at their ancestors with reverence in their historical writings is not true when it comes to the Jews and the Torah.

So which human wrote the Torah? It could not have been a Jew! The only possibility then is that an anti-Semite wrote it! But then we are left perplexed as to how this anti-Semite could have persuaded the Jews to accept it!

To suggest that a human wrote the Torah is not a realistic possibility. If G-d wrote it, then we understand how the Jewish people accepted it. They knew what G-d writes is true and they trusted that He, at times, writes negative and critical descriptions only in order to teach important lessons. G-d, in writing such fact, does so to engage in constructive criticism.

This unique aspect of revealing negative-sounding ancestral history makes us stop and realize that G-d must have written the Torah. But there are other distinct facets described in the Torah that also lead to the conclusion of its Divine authorship.

The Torah makes prophecies that have come true. Now, there are many books that have made prophecies of the future such as Nostradamus, that

some claim to have been true. But a close examination of these prophecies reveals them to be ambiguous and it is virtually impossible to prove their accuracy. Any 'prophecy' that can only be understood after an event has already taken place cannot be accepted as prophecy.

True prophecy is clearly comprehended before an event takes place and then we can see for ourselves whether the prophecy came to fruition or not. We find exactly such prophecies in the Torah. These prophecies are impossible for a human being to have predicted.

The fate of the Jewish nation, if they are to abandon G-d, is specifically described in horrid detail (See Vayikra 26, Devarim 28:15-68, 29:17-28, 30:1-10, 31:16-21, much of Yeshaya and Yechezkel). Sure enough, all of the details have indeed occurred throughout history. The Torah writes that the Jews will be thrown out of their land, return, and then thrown out again. It then foretells that the Jews will come back to Israel much later. The Jews held on to their faith in the Torah's promises of their return to Israel for 2,000 years. And now in modern times, the Jews have come back. It is surely not coincidental that there have been no other nations who have not assimilated into their occupying or host nation after hundreds of years of exile and destruction. Moreover, not only did the Jews survive 2,000 years of exile, but they did so despite being scattered among various nations without a common language or culture.

This was all stated way in advance! The Torah, written over 3,000 years ago, teaches that the Jews will be dispersed to all the corners of the earth but would maintain their distinct identity. What human being would write such nonsense? How could he expect the Jews to accept it and live with faith in it?

But if G-d wrote it, it is obviously understandable. He can know that the Jews would never assimilate into the nations of the world. And if the Jews knew G-d wrote it by their witnessing G-d speak to them at Sinai, their faith in their eventual return to Israel is comprehended.

(There are more points to ponder concerning the veracity of the Torah's claim that it was written by G-d. See Kol Yaakov V'etchanan and Behar)

If one takes the time to stop and think about the unique aspects of the Torah, one is inevitably drawn to the conclusion that the Torah could not have been written by a human being. It must have been authored by G-d. © 2008 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion Moses is told that he would not enter Israel because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Immediately afterwards, Moses sends a delegation to Edom asking that the Jewish people be

allowed to go through his territory on their way to Israel. (Numbers 20:14)

Commenting on this juxtaposition the Midrash states: In the usual way, when a man is slighted by his business partner he wishes to have nothing to do with him; whereas Moses though he was punished on account of Israel did not rid himself of their burden, but sent messengers. (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:7)

Nehama Leibowitz reinforces this idea by noting that the text states that Moses sent the delegation to Edom from Kadesh. This fact is unnecessary. In the words of Leibowitz: Wherever no change of locale is recorded in the text it is presumed that the event described took place at the last mentioned place. Obviously, Nehama concludes, Kadesh is mentioned again to emphasize Moses' adherence to his mission of bringing the people to the land even after his rebuff in spite of the fact that he had been explicitly excluded from it.

An important lesson may be learned here. Leaders must be careful to subdue their ego. The cause is larger than the personal concerns of any one person. Although Moses is condemned to die in the desert he continues to help the Jews enter Israel by sending messengers to Edom.

Compare this to the haftorah, the prophetic portion read this week. Yiftah promises G-d that if he is victorious in war whatever he sees first upon his return will be offered to G-d. Alas, he returns victorious and sees his daughter.

Here the Midrash notes that Yiftah could have gone to Pinchas the High Priest to annul the vow. But Yiftah said, Should I, the head of tribes of Israel stoop to go to that civilian? Pinchas also did not go out of his way to go to Yiftah, proclaiming, Should I a High Priest lower myself and go to that boor. (Tanhuma)

Unlike Moses who was without ego, Yiftah and Pinchas were filled with it and it cost the life of that child.

A story is told of a Hassidic rabbi who carried two notes in his pocket. One stated the world was created for me. The second declared I am like the dust of the earth. The first statement does not resonate unless balanced by the latter. Indeed if ego is not kept tightly in check it can overwhelm or subtly subvert the endeavor to which one is dedicated. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

**MACHON ZOMET**

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

The passages about "Mei Meriva"-the water of controversy-with its punishment blocking Moshe and Aharon from going into Eretz Yisrael

(Bamidbar 20:1-13) and the description of Aharon's death (20:22-29) are separated by a passage involving the attempt by Bnei Yisrael to pass through the area of Edom (20:14-21). Why doesn't the death of Aharon appear right after the affair of Mei Meriva? The Torah implies that it was important for Aharon to die at "Hor Hahar," the double mountain, and that his death was therefore delayed until Bnei Yisrael reached that point. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the specific site of Aharon's death is emphasized over and over again in the short passage. "And the entire community of Bnei Yisrael came to Hor Hahar. And G-d said to Moshe and Aharon at Hor Hahar... Let Aharon be gathered to his people... Take Aharon and his son Elazar and bring them up Hor Hahar... and they climbed up Hor Hahar." And finally, "Aharon died on Hor Hahar." In other places where Aharon's death is mentioned in the Torah the site of Hor Hahar is repeatedly emphasized (see Bamidbar 33:37-39, Devarim 32:50). Why was it important for Aharon to die on Hor Hahar?

Evidently we are meant to understand that this fact creates a link between Aharon's death and the momentous events at Mount Sinai. There are in fact various similar elements in the two passages. First, these are the only two places in the Torah where Moshe's descent from a mountain is described. At Sinai, "And Moshe went down from the mountain to the nation" [Shemot 19:14], and then "Moshe turned and went down from the mountain, with the two tablets of testimony in his hands" [32:15]. In this week's Torah portion we read, "And Moshe and Elazar went down from the mountain" [Bamidbar 20:28]. At Sinai, we are told, "G-d will descend before the eyes of the entire nation on Mount Sinai" [Shemot 19:11], and in this week's portion it is written, "They climbed Hor Hahar before the eyes of the entire community" [Bamidbar 20:27]. The events of Mount Sinai took place "there at the top of the mountain" [Shemot 34:2; also 19:20; 24:17]. And Aharon's death also took place "there at the top of the mountain" [Bamidbar 20:28]. What is left for us now to determine is the significance of this link between the two events.

It would seem that this passage is centered not only on Aharon's death but also on the fact that Aharon was replaced by his son Elazar. The command to climb up the mountain was a double one: "Take Aharon and his son Elazar and bring them up Hor Hahar" [20:25]. Evidently this was the important factor in the eyes of the community? so that Bnei Yisrael would see the process of replacing Aharon by Elazar with their own eyes, as shown by the way Aharon removed his clothing and how Elazar put it on. At Mount Sinai, Moshe went down the mountain carrying the tablets, while Moshe descended from Hor Hahar with Elazar. This clearly showed that G-d had chosen Elazar, and it

was the first stage in the uninterrupted existence of the role of the High Priest.

**RABBI ADAM LEIBERMAN**

## A Life Lesson

In this week's Torah portion, G-d tells the Jewish people about a fascinating law they need to follow. The commandment is that if the Jewish people find a cow that's completely red in color, they should burn the cow and use the ashes for a purification process. G-d tells the Jews that all the people involved in doing this will become spiritually contaminated themselves, but the ashes that result from this burning are then collected and: "the ash of the cow... is for purification." (Numbers 19:9)

The law of the red heifer is considered to be a paradox. G-d said that anyone who's involved in the preparation of producing the ashes from the red cow-whether he is the one who slaughters it, burns it, or collects its ashes- becomes spiritually contaminated. However, the ashes themselves can then be used to purify someone. The very same ashes that made a Jew impure are the exact same ashes that are used to make someone pure. While on the surface this seems highly illogical, there is a powerful life-changing message for us to appreciate in this day and age.

We all engage in some sort of behavior that we want to change. Whether it's our unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, unproductive thoughts, destructive actions, or poor character traits-there are things we all do that we truly wish we didn't.

And we've all reached the point at some moment in our lives when one of these things gets out of hand. We just get fed up with what we're doing, a mental line gets crossed, and we know a serious change must take place. A newfound desire to take action occurs because we see clearly that this behavior is preventing us from living a happy life. Before the change, we first hit rock bottom in this specific area, and experienced a sense of "impurity".

But here's the thing. It was this impure behavior that got to a point where a change had to take place. Therefore, it's actually the negative behavior itself that causes you to change. Sometimes it's the negative association and impact of your poor behavior that serves as the catalyst for this change to take place.

So the very act that was so impure is now the very same act that allows you make a real change. The ashes of the red cow are impure-just like our poor choices are. But when the discontent or outright disgust of our past behavior becomes the strong impetus to finally take serious action, this negative behavior now becomes the pathway for a purification of your soul.

G-d doesn't want us to live a life of regret or to beat ourselves up for making the same poor choices over and over again. But G-d does want us to grow and change, and He's giving us an amazing insight on how

to do it in the most healthy way. And that's when you think about your negative behavior and you truly get fed up about it, instead of getting upset for your inability to change, use your frustration, pain, and discontent as the very reason to change.

By doing this, you will have elevated your past impure actions into one of purity. Always remember, G-d demands that we become great. And He's giving us an amazing vehicle to get there. © 2008 Rabbi A. Lieberman & aish.com

### RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

## Haftorah

**T**his week's haftorah sheds a ray of light on our dark and troublesome exile. The Book of Shoftim, is replete with experiences during which the Jewish people followed the foreign influences of their Canaanite neighbors. In response to this, Hashem's policy was to incite foreign nations into war with the Jewish people. The Jews would immediately recognize their wrongdoing and plead with Hashem for salvation. Subsequently, Hashem would send them a leader who would successfully defeat the enemy. One such experience was with the nation of Amon whom Hashem sent to awaken the Jewish people of the severity of their actions. Amon forced his way into the land and the Jewish people became petrified. They immediately turned to Hashem for assistance but He responded with severe words of reprimand. After absorbing this strong message the Jewish people began sincerely repenting and a new Jewish leader, Yiftach was inaugurated.

The haftorah portrays Yiftach as one far from perfection. Yiftach was not from accredited descent and was rejected by his family members for this. He left home and developed a following of undesirable individuals. But, now in their time of great distress The Jewish people summoned the family to approach Yiftach and appoint him their leader. After a most appropriate response Yiftach rose to the occasion and, acting as Israel's protector, delivered a powerful message to Amon. He stated unequivocally that it is Hashem Who defeats the major powers of the world and, with this he called upon Hashem to assist in this war. Hashem responded and Yiftach, armed with bold courage and strength, defeated the entire nation of Amon. Many have questioned the peculiarity of this victory. In fact, this is the first time in Jewish history that the Jews were led by an individual so inferior in spiritual and moral quality. If Hashem deemed it appropriate to perform a miracle on behalf of His people, couldn't He have chosen a more qualified person? In addition, why were the Jewish people so desperate that their only choice was a man of Yiftach's low stature?

An answer to this may be suggested through properly reflecting upon the general status of the Jewish nation at the time. As mentioned above, the

Jews of those times were seriously lax in their devotion to Hashem. Although by now they had begun a sincere return to Hashem much remained to be done in order to complete the process. Hashem's response to them is best depicted in the passage preceding our haftorah. "And Hashem's soul was disgusted over the plight of Israel." (10:16) Radak quotes Rambam who explains that Hashem's decision to save His people was based solely on their suffering. Hashem simply couldn't tolerate watching His people suffer any more. After all, how many more times could they be subjected to such suffering? Hashem therefore responded to their inklings of repentance and sent Yiftach to deliver them from the hands of Amon.

In light of the above we gain clear insight into the strange appointment of Yiftach. In reality, the Jewish people didn't deserve miracles or leaders of stature. Their total merit was nothing more than Hashem's unwillingness to watch their suffering. Hashem therefore chose Yiftach, the man who best reflected the timely status of the Jews, to be their leader. Open miracles and direct contact with Hashem were not in order at this point. Therefore a leader of Yiftach's stature was chosen for the task. A victory was experienced but the Divine dimensions of it were totally concealed. Yiftach, like the Jewish people, did not deserve miracles, yet a heavenly response was appropriate. Once Yiftach and the Jews turned to Hashem with sincerity Amon was defeated and peace was restored to the Jewish people.

This experience is paralleled in this week's parsha. After the passing of The High Priest, Aaron, the Jewish people became fearful of the inhabitants of Canaan and began heading back towards Egypt. After the tribe of Levi forced the issue the Jewish people regained their courage and returned to their path towards Eretz Yisroel. However, their diversion gave rise to disgust and exhaustion and concern over their extended stay in the desert. They subsequently staged a serious complaint against Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu with the claim that they would never reach the land of Israel. Hashem immediately responded and released poisonous snakes which killed large numbers of the nation. After realizing their wrongdoings they pleaded with Moshe Rabbeinu who interceded on their behalf and successfully calmed Hashem's wrath.

Reflecting upon this, Chazal (see Bamidbar Rabba 19:24) explain that Hashem remained angry at the Jews long after they were healed his blow. Apparently, this complaint left a serious stain on the Jewish character and diminished their contact with Hashem. Yet, as we continue reading the parsha we discover that Hashem continued to assist His people and miraculously defeated the Emorites. In fact, mountains were even levelled to crush all the Emorites who were waiting inside their caves to ambush the Jews. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org