

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d said to Moshe and to Aharon, 'because you did not have faith in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them'" (Bamidbar 20:12). Although the Torah never tells us explicitly what Moshe and Aharon did wrong, the commentators suggest numerous possibilities. Nevertheless, there is one standard approach, that of Rashi (20:11-12), which is based on numerous Midrashim (e.g. Midrash Yelamdeinu, quoted by Yalkut Shimoni, Midrash Agada and Midrash Lekach Tov): Moshe was commanded to "speak" to the rock, but he hit it instead.

Questions on this explanation abound, questions strong enough that many commentators felt the need to offer more innovative explanations (i.e. ground-breaking when they were first suggested, even if all these years later they seem "old hat"). Some of the questions asked are more difficult than others; let's take a closer look at what led so many commentators to abandon the "standard" approach and try one of their own. It should be noted that many commentators work with the basic idea that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Chizkuni, Sefornu) and try to address many of these issues; by no means should the fact that so many propose alternative approaches indicate that the "standard" has changed.

The most obvious question asked is why, if the whole point was to speak to the rock and not hit it, did G-d command Moshe (20:8) to "take the stick" with him? Doesn't the necessity to bring his stick indicate that hitting the rock is either what G-d wanted, or that it was at least an option? Additionally, if the problem that resulted from Moshe's sin was G-d's name not being sanctified (20:8), the implication is that had Moshe spoken to the rock instead of hitting it, the desired sanctification would have occurred. Since rocks are inanimate objects, water coming out of them after being hit is just as great a miracle as water coming out after being spoken to. How was there such a difference in the level of sanctification because Moshe hit the rock rather than speaking to it? Another major issue that needs to be addressed is how Aharon gets blamed for Moshe's actions. Both Moshe and Aharon are punished by not being allowed to lead the nation into the Promised Land

(20:12), and Aharon's death (i.e. not being allowed to enter the land) is directly attributed to his "rebelliousness against G-d's word" (20:24). If the sin was hitting the rock instead of talking to it, why is Aharon culpable for something that only Moshe did?

Which stick did Moshe "take" with him? He hit the rock with "his stick" (20:11), so that must have been the stick he took, the one he followed G-d's command by taking (20:9), right? However, Moshe wasn't told to take "his stick," but "the stick" (20:8), i.e. the "known stick," the one that was placed in the Mishkan next to the Aron (ark) that held the "Ten Commandments" (17:25), the stick that was "before G-d" (20:9, compare with 17:22-24). As the Rashbam (20:8-10) and Chizkuni (20:8) point out, G-d wanted Moshe to take this stick, the one that blossomed, flowered, and produced almonds, "to show, through it, their difficult rebelliousness, as it says (17:25), [it was kept next to the Aron in the Mishkan] 'for safeguarding as a sign for those who are rebellious.'" G-d didn't ask Moshe to "take the stick" to hit the rock; it was needed to address "the rebels."

Although we now know why G-d commanded Moshe to take the stick, we have a different issue to deal with instead. The "stick" proved that Aharon and his sons were chosen by G-d to be the Kohanim (see Rashi on 17:25) and/or that the Tribe of Levi was chosen to serve in place of the first-born (see Ramban). This "rebellion" (if we are to use such a harsh term) was about the conditions in the desert (not enough water), not about who was given the role of serving in the Mishkan. Yes, they asked Moshe and Aharon why they "brought the nation into this desert to die" (20:4), and even why they brought them out of Egypt (20:5), questioning whether this was really G-d's idea or Moshe and Aharon's. And it can be suggested that just as "the stick" proved that Moshe didn't choose Aharon, or the Tribe of Levi, himself, but was only relaying G-d's commandments, it could, by extension, be a "hint" that Moshe didn't make the travel plans himself, but was following G-d's orders. Nevertheless, just showing the nation "the stick" doesn't really address the aspect they were "rebellious" about; the only real way to address it was to provide them with the water they so desperately needed (which G-d did). Why then did G-d command Moshe to "prove" that Aharon was really chosen to be Kohain and/or the Tribe of Levi to replace the first-born, if that wasn't what the commotion was about?

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"When Miriam died, they did not eulogize her and did not bury her [publicly]; Rather, Moshe [was] at the head and Aharon at the foot, and they went and buried her" (Yalkut Shimoni 787). Wait a second! How could Aharon, the Kohain Gadol, have been Miriam's pallbearer if even a "regular" Kohain can't become "tamay" (ritually impure) for a married sister? Tosfos (Kesubos 103b) discusses whether a Kohain would have been allowed to be involved in the burial of Rebbe HaKadosh, and based on this, the Panim Yafos suggests that if there are righteous people whose corpses are not "tamay," there would be no problem with Aharon being involved in Miriam's burial. After all, the Talmud (Bava Basra 17a) tells us that Miriam was one of only six people that didn't succumb to the "Malach Ha'muves" (angel of death); her death came through "G-d's kiss" (as it were), so she would certainly qualify. R' Eli Steinberg (Minchas Eliyahu) takes it a step further, quoting the Ramban (19:2) who says explicitly that those who die via "heshika" (G-d's kiss) are not "tamay" since it is the "bite of the snake" (the Malach Ha'muves) that causes the "tumah." Therefore, Miriam's body was not "tamay," and Aharon was allowed to help bury her.

Okay, so now we know that there was no problem with Aharon burying Miriam. But did everyone else know this? What did they think when they heard that Miriam had died and only Moshe and Aharon buried her? They must have wondered how Aharon, the Kohain Gadol, could become "tamay." When they had no water, and wondered how G-d could lead them to a place where they would die of thirst, the old doubts started to return. Maybe it wasn't G-d that made Aharon and his sons Kohanim, so there was no issue of his burying Miriam. And maybe G-d didn't tell Moshe to take the nation out of Egypt and bring them into the desert. The two issues merged together, and G-d was going to deal with each one of them. First He commanded Moshe to take out "the stick," the one that was "before G-d," to remind them of the "stick test" that was done 37 years earlier that proved that Aharon was divinely chosen for the Kehuna. Once that was done, all He had to do was provide water, and everyone would know that it was G-d who brought them into the desert.

Did Moshe know this? Did he realize that once the issue of Aharon being chosen Kohain was gone, the "rebellion" against his leadership would also dissipate?

Or, did he think that the only "rebellion" the "stick" was meant to neutralize was the one against Aharon? Based on his telling the congregation, "listen up, rebels" before getting the water to start pouring out of the rock, we can assume that Moshe thought that a "rebellion" was still going on, even after having shown them "the stick."

G-d had told Moshe and Aharon to "gather the assembly" (20:8). However, rather than gathering the "assembly" ("aidah"), we are told (20:10) that they "gathered the congregation" ("kahal"). The Ba'al HaTurim says that "kahal" refers to the entire congregation, while "aidah" refers to the leadership. If the "rebellion" had not been taken care of when "the stick" was brought out, it would be necessary for everybody to see the miracle of the water-producing rock. If, however, the only issue that needed to be resolved was the lack of water, there would be no need for everyone to witness the miracle, only a representative leadership - just as only the leadership witnessed the first time Moshe got water from the rock, shortly after they left Egypt (see Shemos 17:5-6). Moshe and Aharon gathering the "kahal" rather than the "aidah" is another indication that they thought that their leadership was still in question, thus necessitating everyone's presence when the water comes out of the rock. Alternatively, 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-dalek) 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.

G-d tried to give Moshe another hint that he and Aharon didn't need to "prove" that their leadership had divine approval, by telling them that after the "rock gives forth its waters," i.e. on its own after being spoken to, the end result will still be that "you will [have been] the one that brought out water for them from the rock, and you will [have been] the one to give them and their animals to drink" (Bamidbar 20:8). Moshe didn't have to directly address the validity of his and Aharon's leadership; once the nation's needs were met, they would no longer have reason to doubt whether traveling through the desert was his idea or G-d's.

Unfortunately, Moshe and Aharon didn't get the message. They gathered the "kahal," not the "aidah." Moshe called them "rebels." Then came the big moment, the time to actually bring water out of the rock. Moshe and Aharon speak to the rock, but nothing happens. If the only issue is getting water, it makes little

difference if it comes out immediately, as long as it comes out. However, if there's a "rebellion" to deal with, this is devastating. Feeling the need to prove themselves, Moshe and Aharon decide to go to plan "B," hitting the rock the way Moshe did 38 years earlier. But that doesn't work either. It's as if G-d is giving them a chance to reconsider their decision to hit the rock, and go back to talking to it. Instead, they decide to hit the rock a second time (20:11). By now, if water doesn't come out, it would be embarrassing, and people really might start to question their leadership again, so G-d brings out "lots of water" despite the rock being hit rather than spoken to.

Midrash Lekach Tov understands "speaking to the rock" to be, "you (plural) should say to it in My name, 'this is what G-d says: 'give forth your waters. '" Rashi seems to be following this approach (based on his quoting Midrash Agada), as the "sanctification" that would have occurred had Moshe spoken to the rock was the nation saying, "if this rock, which doesn't speak, can't hear, and doesn't have any financial needs, fulfills G-d's word, how much more so should we (fulfill G-d's word)." All hitting the rock proved was that Moshe and Aharon's leadership was legitimate. Speaking to the rock, besides validating their leadership, would have inspired the nation, and they might not have had similar complaints the next time they had to face the desert's harsh conditions (21:4-5). (See Sefornu for his explanation as to how hitting the rock was a "category two" miracle while speaking to the rock would have been a "category three" miracle, and what that means.)

Aharon was an integral part of the decision to hit the rock, rather than trying again to speak to it, and together with Moshe had concluded that there was still a rebellion to deal with, not just a communal need. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

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. (Tanchuma)

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 Hasidic 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. © 2010 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.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This 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 haftarah. "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.

We learn from both of these incidents the extent of Hashem's concern and feeling for His people. Although there was much room for improvement, Hashem did not forsake His people. True, they did not deserve His assistance, however, when they sincerely turned to Him a favorable response was forthcoming. In a similar manner we realize how much improvement our generation needs. Yet, as in all times, we may rightfully look to Hashem for our salvation. Hashem's total concern for His people will forever exist irrespective of how truly deserving we are of it. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**T**his is the inscribed statute [hok] of the Torah which the Lord has commanded saying 'Speak to the Children of Israel and they shall take for you a red heifer...'” (Numbers, 19:1,2).

The strange and mystical nature of the ritual of the Red Heifer is a hok, one of the commandments we follow not because they are rational, logical or moral, but only because they are Divinely commanded. The very notion of the priest purifying an individual who has been defiled by contact with a dead body by sprinkling the ashes of a red heifer mixed with spring waters upon him seems irrational. The ritual is even paradoxical because those priests involved in preparing this mixture are themselves defiled by it. How can a substance with the capacity to purify the defiled simultaneously defile those who are pure?

The Red Heifer ritual described in the first half of this week's portion is not simply one more hok among all the other hukim of the Torah. Rather it is the

archetype of all the Torah's hukim. This is indicated by the words which introduce it, "zot hukat haTorah"- "This is the decree of the Torah," conveying a lesson far beyond the specific ritual of purification. Indeed, were the ritual of the Red Heifer limited to its function as a ritual of purification, it would belong in the Book of Vayikra (Leviticus), with the Biblical portions that concentrate on impurities and purification. Why then does the Torah place it in the Book of Bamidbar (Numbers), right after the rebellion of Korah and immediately before the transgression of Moses at the rock? Perhaps this positioning of the law serves as an introduction to - and explanation for - Moses' sin of striking of the rock, which prevents him from entering the Promised Land.

The portion of Hukat is read near the time of the passing (yahrzeit) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the greatest Jewish leader of the 20th Century. Since there is always a connection between the portion of the week and the timing of the death of great Jewish leaders, the Red Heifer ritual provides a fascinating insight and commentary on the life of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

The people of Israel is eternal, and the Torah of Israel is eternal; G-d is identified with both the nation and its Torah. When G-d threatens to destroy Israel for forsaking the Torah and worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses chooses to 'break' the Torah Tablets and preserve the nation. His action is a direct commentary on the question: which is more important, the Nation of Israel, or the Torah of Israel?

The Kohen-priest is our teacher and guardian, our religious inspiration and guide; his special garb reflects his unique vocation (Exodus, 28: 12-38). On the one hand, the shoulder strap of his apron (ephod) and the breast plate (hoshen mishpat) worn next to his heart bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, demonstrating his love and responsibility for the nation. On the other hand, inscribed on the head-plate placed on his forehead, seat of the mind, are the words, "...sacred unto the Lord," expressing his commitment to the intellectual study, understanding and propagation of Torah. Clearly, both the nation and the Torah are essential. But which is foremost?

For nearly three hundred years, Eastern European Jews had two models of religious leadership; the Lithuanian Rosh Yeshiva and the Hassidic Rebbe. The former devoted most of his attention to the priestly head-plate (tzitz), the intellectual pursuit of Torah, while the latter dedicated most of his attention to the priestly breastplate and shoulder strap, the pastoral concerns of the flock.

I'd like to suggest that the priestly role of sprinkling the Red Heifer's ashes indicates the correct approach in determining priorities. The Torah teaches that the very mixture which purifies those defiled defile the Kohen-Priest performing the purification. But is this really paradoxical? If my friend falls into a mud-

pile, will I not become sullied and muddied in the process of helping him out? Built into the very enterprise of purifying the defiled is the idea that the purifier himself must be touched by some of the impurity!

This is precisely why the Kohen must bless the nation "out of love"; when the Kohen-leader truly loves every Jew, he assumes a new level of responsibility. In his desire to rescue a fellow Jew from contact with spiritual death, he willingly sacrifices some of his own comforts and even some of his spirituality (mesirat nefesh). A loving leader must be ready to leave the ivory-tower kollel bet midrash and make his way to the furthest and darkest hinterlands to infuse them with the light of spirituality. In effect, this is what G-d tells Moses at the time of the Golden Calf: "Get down from the supernal heights of Mount Sinai and go down to the errant Jews worshipping the Golden Calf; the only reason I bestowed greatness upon you, Moses, was for the sake of the nation Israel; if your nation is sinning, what need have I of you?" (B.T. Berakhot, 32a)

In the beginning of his ministry, Moses was completely committed to his people. When he killed the Egyptian taskmaster to defend an Israelite slave; he sacrificed his position as a prince in Pharaoh's empire and risked his own life. However, the endless carping, ingratitude and insurrections of the Israelites finally wears him down, so that eventually, he calls the Israelites "rebels," striking the rock instead of speaking to it, which we understand to be an act of displaced anger against his stiff-necked nation.

Here lies the connection between the two parts of our Biblical portion, the ritual of the Red Heifer and Moses' sin and punishment. Once a leader loses even the smallest amount of his capacity to love his people, even if his feelings are justified by the shabby and derelict way they have treated him, he can no longer continue to lead them.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe was a great and profound scholar, but he devoted the lion's share of his time and energies to the nation. The style of Lithuanian religious leadership could not survive the holocaust. Hassidut in general, and Habad in particular, did survive and, amazingly enough, are stronger today than they were before Hitler's devastating destruction. The timeless and constant message of Habad is love; the empowerment of love, the divinity of love, and the eternity of love: "Be among the disciples of Aaron, love humanity, and with that love, you will bring everyone close to Torah" (Ethics of the Fathers, 1: 12).

In the final analysis, the preservation of the eternal Torah requires a people strong enough and determined enough to devote their lives to it. And so the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson ztz"l raised an army of emissaries (shluchim) whose love and commitment to our nation is so great that they readily leave batei-midrash, their families and communities for the farthest recesses of

the globe to bring Jews back to their Parent-in-Heaven.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

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The parsha of Chukat emphasizes to us the inscrutable nature of our relationship to the Creator. G-d is not human in any form or understandable manner. Therefore G-d always remains beyond our reach and logic. This is emphasized to us in the commandment that appears at the beginning of the parsha concerning the parah adumah-the red cow-and its attendant details and requirements.

The rabbis have already warned us that this is the ultimate "choik"-the law of G-d that is beyond all human comprehension. It is the ultimate "just do it" area of Jewish life and ritual. And, though any human reasoning will not fathom the commandment of parah adumah-the red cow-itself, I think that there is an appreciation of an insight into why there should be such unfathomable laws and commandments in the Torah altogether.

A famous actor/comedian once said only semi-facetiously that "any club that would have me as a member is a club that I do not wish to belong to." Well, in a much more exalted fashion, Judaism states that any G-d who is completely understandable to me-a human being with all of the limitations inherent is so being-cannot really be my G-d.

It demeans the Jewish concept of the Creator of such a complex universe to state that such a Creator must be understandable to us. The prophet already stated this principle succinctly when he said that G-d's message to us is that, "My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are My ways your ways." The commandment of parah adumah-the red cow-drives that point home to all who study Torah.

If any human being was entitled to enter the Land of Israel and realize one's life's ambition, it was certainly our leader and teacher Moshe. And, yet, we see again in this week's parsha that this goal is denied to him. All of the commentators to the Torah attempt to deal with the problem of "why"

To our human logic, the punishment does not really fit the transgression.

Moshe's exclusion from entering the Land of Israel has been debated over many millennia in the works of rabbinic scholarship. After all of the explanations and reasons and theories that have been advanced over the ages the question "why" still looms large. It is the second great "choik"-an event and decree beyond our understanding-that dominates the Torah narrative of this week's parsha.

We bow our heads in acceptance of Heavenly decrees in our personal and national life as well. The great Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (Halperin) of Kotzk pithily summed up the matter as follows: "For

the believer, there are no questions; for the skeptic and agnostic there are no answers."

Sooner or later in life we are blindsided by events over which we have no control or understanding. Even the wisest and most brilliant amongst us are left wondering as to "how" and "why." That is our fate as humans in dealing with the Creator and His ways and thoughts, so to speak. And that is the powerful and practical lesson of this week's parsha. ©2010 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI DANIEL LIFSHITZ

Weekly Dvar

The latter portion of Parshat Chukat discusses Jews' victory over the Amorite king Sichon, whose capital city was Cheshbon. The Torah tells us that Cheshbon was originally a Moabite city, but that it had been captured by Sichon along with a large portion of other Moabite territory. There is a famous midrash on this passage based on the fact that the word "moshlim" can also mean "ruler" and the name "Cheshbon" also means "accounting." The midrash says "Those who are rulers (moshlim) over their evil inclination would say 'Come and take an accounting (Cheshbon)-take an accounting of your deeds; think about what you gain from good deeds and what you lose as a result of bad deeds.'" Very often, a midrash is not merely a homiletical tangent, but has a close connection with some aspect of the text. What is the connection between Sichon's conquest of Moab and the battle against the evil inclination?

R' Yonatan Eibenschutz (cited in Talelei Orot) provides a beautiful explanation. Cheshbon was a city on the border between the land of the Amorites and the land of the Moabites. It was not a particularly important city, and therefore the king of Moab did not focus resources on its defense. As a result, Sichon was able to conquer it. This was a fatal error by Moab, for once Sichon had established this beachhead, he was easily able to capture a much larger swath of Moabite territory. This is a metaphor for the battle against the evil inclination, which often tempts a person to violate a small mitzvah, since such an infraction is easier to rationalize than something more serious. Once a person gives in on something small, his defenses have been breached and each subsequent conquest becomes much easier for the evil inclination. By the same token, each victory over temptation, no matter how small, gives an individual a huge advantage in his future battles. Thus, the moshlim teach us "Come to Cheshbon"-do not repeat the mistake that the king of Moab made in his defense of Cheshbon; hold the frontline against the evil inclination even in those skirmishes that seem insignificant because the

consequences of a defeat or victory will be dramatic.
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RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

He brought down the wrath of Heaven on Egypt until Pharaoh agreed to let the Jewish people go. He led them out to freedom. He parted the sea and led them through. He brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. He guided them through the desert for forty years. But at the last moment, when they stood poised on the threshold of the Promised Land, his leadership came to an end. Moses passed away without stepping a foot into the Promised Land.

Why wasn't Moses granted the privilege of entering the Promised Land to which he had labored so diligently to bring the people?

We find the answer in this week's Torah portion. After Miriam died, the miraculous well from which the people had slaked their thirst in the desert vanished, and they were left without water. They maligned Moses for taking them from the gardens of Egypt into an arid wasteland. Hashem told Moses to assemble the people and speak to the rock, which would then give forth water. Moses called the people together. "Listen, you rebels," he declared angrily. "Can water come out of this rock?" Then he struck the rock with his staff and water flowed. But Moses had erred. Instead of speaking to the rock, he had struck it. And for this, Hashem decreed that Moses would not enter the Promised Land.

Let us now look for a moment at the Torah reading of Devarim, where Moses is reviewing the events of the previous forty years in his parting words to the Jewish people. He reminds them of how the people had responded to the slanders spread by the spies upon their return from the land of Canaan, and how Hashem had decreed that the entire generation would die in the desert and only their children would enter the Promised Land. "Hashem was also infuriated with me because of you," Moses concluded, "saying, 'You too will not arrive there.'" It would seem, therefore, that Moses was barred from entering the Promised Land because of the sin of the spies, not because of the sin of striking the rock. How do we account for this apparent contradiction?

The commentators explain that Moses had originally been exempt from the decree barring the Jewish people from entering the Promised Land because of the sins of the spies. As a leader of the Jewish people, he was in a class by himself. He was not integrated into the body of the common people. He was not driven by their motivations or influenced by their social currents. Although he was always sensitive to their needs, his thoughts, convictions and motivations were never controlled by the ebb and flow of public

opinion. Therefore, since he was not really one of them, he did not have to share the unfortunate fate of the people when they erred and sinned.

But at the incident of the rock, Moses lost his imperviousness to public opinion. No longer aloof and remote in his decision making, he flared at the Jewish people. "Listen, you rebels!" he cried in anger. He allowed the people to get to him, and as a result, he struck the rock instead of speaking to it, in disobedience of Hashem's command. Therefore, he no longer deserved to be considered in a class by himself, and he shared the fate of the people who were barred from the Promised land because of the sin of the spies.

A man once asked a great sage for his opinion of some popular political leaders.

"They are like dogs," he replied.

The man was puzzled. "Like dogs? Why?"

"Very simple," said the great sage. "When a man walks down the street with his dog, the dog always runs ahead, yapping excitedly. But when he gets to the corner, he doesn't know which way to turn. So he stands and waits for his master to catch up. Once his master chooses the new direction, the dogs is off and running once again. These leaders you mentioned have no opinions or convictions of their own. They sniff the air to discover in which direction the wind is blowing, and then they are off and running. Some leaders!"

In our own lives, we are called upon to act as leaders, whether in the broader community, our immediate circles or simply in our own families for our children. Everything we do sets an example for others and influences them at least to some extent. But in order to be true leaders, we must have the courage and integrity to follow our own convictions. We must have the fortitude to live spiritually rather than cave in to the pressure of the fashionable materialistic trends. Despite the decadence of our society, or perhaps because of it, there is a latent thirst for spirituality among the people around us. If we live by our convictions, we can have a part in bringing that thirst into the open and literally change the world. © 2010 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Regarding the Cohen (the priest) who administers the purification process with the ashes of the Red Heifer, the Torah writes: "And the priest is impure until the evening."

Rabbi Yitzchok of Vorki taught that the essence of the Parah Aduma, Red Cow (that is, the whole procedure of purifying those who were spiritually impure) is the concept of "Love your neighbor."

His grandson, Rabbi Mendel of Vorki explained that this is because the Cohen (who was involved in the purification process) becomes impure himself through the process which purifies the person who came to him.

When someone forfeits in order to help someone else, that is the ultimate in love for one's fellow human being.

A person who is not willing to make any sacrifices for other people will always find reasons why it is too difficult for him to do acts of kindness for others. To help others takes time, energy and money. However, when someone truly loves another person, he feels pleasure in all the sacrifices that he makes for him. The greater your love for someone, the more sacrifices you are willing to make. Therefore, the test of your level of love for your fellow human being is the amount of sacrifices you are willing to make. A person who is not willing to make any sacrifices shows that he lacks love for others. *based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2010 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Bar-on Dasberg; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

The description of the events in the desert makes a huge "leap" from the second year after the Exodus from Egypt to the fortieth year. Thirty-eight years have passed, a new generation has been born, but the Torah does not relate to this at all.

It seems likely that the main occupation of Bnei Yisrael during this time was to take care of those who died in the desert. "And your children will wander in the desert for forty years, and they will carry your iniquity, until your bodies reach their end in the desert" [Bamidbar 14:33]. The Torah describes this period in a sensitive way by including the laws of contact with the dead between the events of the second and the fortieth years in the desert.

Which Staff did Moshe Use to Strike the Rock?

There were two special staffs in the desert: The staff that Moshe used to perform the miracles in Egypt, and Aharon's staff, which blossomed overnight and was stored away as a miraculous sign in the Holy of Holies. The first staff is an expression of the power of G-d, while the second one shows the faith that G-d has in the leaders of the people. The Almighty commanded Moshe to take the second staff, as is written, "And Moshe took the staff from in front of G-d" [Bamidbar 20:9], in order to remind the people that Moshe and Aharon had the full support of G-d. Moshe modified the purpose of the staff, changing it from a reminder of the past to a tool for performing a miracle.

There are different names for the staff: Match, shott, and shevet. These signify different roles played by leaders. Among the leaders themselves, there are some in whom we believe because of their actions, while the power of others stems from the One who sent them. (Source: Rabbi Yisrael Rosenberg, on the Birkat Moshe website)

The Ability for Rejuvenation

With respect to the serpent that Moshe made in the desert, we are told that Chizkiyahu "ground up the copper serpent... because up until those days some of Bnei Yisrael still used to burn incense before it" [Melachim II 18:4]. But two kings who preceded Chizkiyahu had already destroyed the idols in the area of Yehuda, and the Talmud therefore asks, "Can it be that Assa came and did not destroy it, and that Yehoshafat came and did not destroy it? Didn't Assa and Yehoshafat destroy all the idols in the world?" [Chulin 6b]. The answer is, "His ancestors left him a realm in which he could accomplish something." And the Talmud learns a lesson from this fact: "The same is true for me, my ancestors have left me an area for accomplishment. This teaches us that if a Torah scholar declares an item of halacha he should not be contradicted."

RADAK gives two answers to the question about the serpent. One is that "Assa and Yehoshafat didn't destroy it... because during their reign they did not find that the people worshipped it and brought sacrifices to it. They therefore left it as a reminder of the miracle with which it was involved.

But as for Chizkiyahu... in the days of his father the people worshipped the serpent." The second answer indicates an element of doubt. "Even though the good people remembered the miracle that was performed using it, he decided that it would be better to destroy it and let the miracle be forgotten than to have the people follow it by mistake either then or in the future."

It seems to me that the Talmud and the RADAK give essentially the same answer. Our ancestors leave us room for our own accomplishments because reality and our understanding change with time. The time may come when we must even slaughter sacred cows or grind up miraculous copper serpents.



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