

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

This week's piece is being written in memory of my brother-in-law, Mordecai Eis, z"l, who was niftar this past Shabbos. (That doesn't mean he would approve of what I'll write; as a matter of fact I'm fairly certain that my brother, l'havdil bein chayim l'chayim, will not.) At the levaya, one of my nephews mentioned that every year when it came to Parashas Chukas his father would say that just because we can't understand the mitzvah of Para Aduma doesn't mean it has no reason. Rather, everything G-d commanded has a very good reason behind it, it's just that some of them, such as Para Aduma, are beyond our ability to fully comprehend. (A subsequent maspid added that the Kli Yakar says this explicitly.) This is usually taken to indicate that we don't do the mitzvos because we agree with them, but because G-d commanded us to do them (as evidenced by our also fulfilling mitzvos that we don't understand). And this is certainly true. But it also indicates, or could indicate, that we are doing them because we trust G-d, and that His commandments are worth fulfilling even if we don't understand how.

Whether the benefit is simply solidifying our commitment to G-d by doing things merely because He commanded us to, or there is a specific benefit for each difficult-to-understand mitzvah that we just don't understand (at least not yet; we must keep trying to understand them in order to enhance both our observance of the mitzvah and our understanding of and appreciation for G-d), fulfilling mitzvos because G-d commanded them without understanding their specific benefit means either serving Him just because He said so, or serving Him because, based on other mitzvos (et al) that we think we understand, G-d's track record is strong enough that we can take His word for it, and trust that there is a good reason behind this one too. We don't always understand how a treatment plan a doctor prescribes will help us medically, or why our investment counselor recommends one course of action over another, but if we trust that they know what they're doing and have a stronger knowledge base than

This issue of Toras Aish  
is dedicated in memory of  
Mordechai Eis, z"l

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים

we do, we will follow their advice nonetheless. Similarly, we don't need to fully understand the reasoning behind every religious activity we do if we trust the Source telling us to do it.

Knowing that ultimately it is to our benefit to fulfill every mitzvah, whether we understand it or not, doesn't necessarily mean that they are being done for selfish reasons. Just as knowing that there is reward and punishment for our actions is necessary but doesn't preclude doing them (or avoiding the "no-nos") for the right reason, it is important to know that everything G-d does and commands us to do makes sense without such knowledge dictating that we are doing them for the wrong reasons.

Trusting G-d, and therefore following Him "blindly," i.e. doing things we wouldn't have otherwise considered doing, is not the same as "blind trust." The latter, often referred to as "emunah P'shuta" (blind faith), isn't based on assessing the different possibilities and concluding which religious system is most likely true. Rather, there is a starting point of faith (usually based on how the person was raised), with that faith either never being tested by considering any other option or it being adopted in order to avoid doing any heavy thinking about it. It is the person's default religious setting (a setting that can be adopted even if the person wasn't born into it, for various reasons other than it making the most objective sense). On the other hand, trusting G-d because of His track record (i.e. other commandments or the flow of history), and/or because it makes more sense for there to be a Higher Power with a Higher and Greater Intellect, often called "emunah al y'day chakirah" (faith through reason), is achieved through careful consideration of various possibilities. Throughout history there has been a long discussion about which one is preferable.

When we are young, it is clearly advantageous to be taught to have "blind faith," as the young mind can not always grasp the concepts needed to make an informed decision. We therefore do not teach our children about all the religious options and why we think ours is best, but try to give them a foundation in our faith that will help them make an informed decision when they are older and better equipped to grapple with things. One of the major disadvantages of continually searching for religious truth is that it expends valuable time and resources that could be spent growing within the specific faith system,

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resources that would not be well spent on such a search at that age anyway. Although intolerance often accompanies thinking that there is only one real possibility, when the ability to think three (or four) dimensionally (hopefully) develops, an understanding as to why others may have made different choices usually develops along with it.

As we get older, things that used to appear as black and white start to become shades of gray. For years I have contended that gray is nothing more than tiny black dots and tiny white dots that only look gray because of inability to "zoom in" closely enough to see the individual dots, with it being our responsibility to learn how to distinguish between them. Nevertheless, until we gain that ability (and each "gray area" demands a specific expertise to be able to make such distinctions), things that were assumed are no longer certain, and we must choose between embracing the challenge of reexamining the faith of our youth or embracing the faith of our youth and ignoring the challenges. There are several possible reasons to embrace the challenge, including having the desire to know and understand the truth or having the desire to be able to rationalize a weakening commitment to the faith. With the advent of the internet, both desires have become much easier to pursue. The exact same challenges are sometimes presented as questions designed to spur a conversation that will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the issues, and sometimes presented as questions (or statements) designed to erode religious commitment. Some have resorted to a minimalist perspective in order to avoid having to become engaged in these challenges, while others are working through these challenges, either privately or publicly. The more confident one is in the belief system, the more likely it is that a sincere attempt to resolve any difficulties will be made.

While some are content to remain confident in their own belief system, choosing to spend their time and energy focusing on spiritual growth within that system, others recognize that members of many other, mutually exclusive, belief systems are just as confident in their own faith. This realization often leads to comparing (what we know about) other belief systems with ours in order to justify the confidence we have in

our own despite others having the same confidence in theirs. (Atheism qualifies a belief system too.) If this comparison is just a superficial one, done to rationalize our "blind faith," it is of little value. In any case, once we have gone beyond "I just believe" to "I believe because," we have left the realm of "blind faith." The only question is how much time and effort we are willing to commit to finding a solid rational basis for our faith. The Torah itself instructs us to compare our belief system with others (D'varim 4:6-8 and 32-34); it would be difficult to suggest that we are only supposed to do so half-heartedly. However, if more time and effort is spent understanding why we should commit to a Torah lifestyle, less is left to delve into the nuances and beauty of that lifestyle. There must be a balance between how much time is devoted to each, although very often understanding the underpinnings of our religion will greatly enhance our observance of it.

The Or HaChayim and the Kli Yakar discuss why the Torah says "zos chukas haTorah," "this is the difficult-to-understand law of the Torah," rather than "zos chukas hatumah" or "zos chukas haparah," which would refer more specifically to the laws of spiritual impurity. Any sincere search for truth must be accompanied by a realization that we are limited beings, and cannot expect to understand everything. This was the upshot of Sefer Iyov, that only G-d has full and ultimate knowledge. Not being able to fully answer every challenge should not erode our trust in the religious system, especially if a sincere search leads to the conclusion (to be subsequently revisited, time and time again) that it is the most reasonable approach to life, how it started, and how to live it.

We place our trust in G-d regarding mitzvos we don't understand; the same can be said regarding theological challenges. "Zos chukas haTorah," this applies to the entire Torah. We can fully commit to G-d and His Torah even if we don't have all the answers (yet; I know several people who lived with their questions for years, and were eventually able to resolve them). As long as we make a sincere effort to find the truth, we can be confident that G-d will help us do so.

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**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

"**T**he entire House of Israel wept over Aaron" (Numbers 20:29) Why was Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lived and who sacrificed a principedom in Egypt to take the Hebrews out of Egypt, denied entry into the land of Israel? Was it because he struck the rock with his staff rather than having spoken to it? But it was G-d, after all, who commanded him to "take the staff, gather together the witness-congregation, and speak to the rock" (Numbers 20:8)! And previously, shortly after the splitting of the Reed Sea, but before the Revelation at

Sinai, G-d had commanded him to strike the rock with his staff to bring forth water for the nation (Ex. 17:5). Apparently, striking the rock could not have been such a heinous crime.

I believe that the key to our understanding of the incident of the rock lies in a curious contrast between Moses and Aaron hinted at in our Biblical text, which highlights the profound tragedy - as well as the exalted majesty - within the unique persona of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher.

Our Biblical portion of Chukat also records the death of Aaron the High Priest: "And Aaron died there at the top of the mountain... and the entire house of Israel wept over Aaron for thirty days" (Numbers 20:28-29). At the conclusion of the Pentateuch and amidst great praise, the text teaches regarding Moses' passing: "and the children of Israel wept over Moses at the plains of Moab for thirty days" (Deuteronomy 34:8), - with Rashi commenting (ad loc) "the children of Israel refers to the males, but regarding Aaron it was written 'the entire house of Israel wept, which includes the females; this was because Aaron pursued peace between neighbors and between husbands and wives.'" Apparently, Aaron was a more popular religious leader than was Moses.

The Bible also hints at the reason for this. You will remember that in the beginning of the Book of Exodus, after the occurrence of the burning bush, whenever G-d proposes that Moses assume leadership over Israel, the prophet is reluctant to do so. "I am not a man of words..., I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exodus 4:10 - "Kevad Peh, Kevad Lashon"), he demurs, usually understood to mean that he stutters and stammers. Indeed, a bit later on the Bible reports that the people do not listen to Moses "because of impatience and hard work" (ibid. 6:9) - usually interpreted to mean that the enslaved and persecuted Hebrews were so embroiled in their toil and suffering that they lacked the patience and vision to hear Moses' goal, to even dream of freedom and independence.

Rav Levi ben Gershon, philosopher and Biblical commentary (Languedoc, France 1288-1344), takes the text differently: the Hebrews do not listen to Moses because of his impatience and hard work (avodah - divine service). Moses was a prophet, a master in jurisprudence, a philosopher-theologian; he had spent sixty years in Midian - 'far from the madding crowds' - attempting to come close to G-d, and he was continually developing his intellectual and spiritual powers so that his "active intellect" (seikhel ha'po'el) could "kiss" G-d's active intellect, so that he could divine G-d's will and communicate G-d's Torah to the Israelites. (Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed 2: 32, 45).

Moses recognized his own prophetic potential in the realm of the intellectual and spiritual; he craved and gloried in his fellowship with the Divine. But he also

realized that to be a leader of the people you must be a superb shepherd of your flock, you must get into the details of their daily lives, and you must be involved in the often petty arguments between neighbors-picayune problems between husband and wives. This requires the patience of "small-talk" and human camaraderie, whereas Moses could reach the level of communicating G-d's Torah only because his soul constantly yearned for "heavy-talk", G-d-talk. Moses knew he would not have the patience to "win over the nation" to his side by drinking l'chaim with them and dancing at their weddings.

Hence G-d suggests to Moses that Aaron "be his spokesman to the people, that (Aaron) be his mouth" (for small talk) - Ex. 4:15). Hence Moses succeeded in communicating a Divine Torah for the generations, but failed in convincing the Hebrews to conquer Israel in his generation.

For, you see, the contrast between Moses the man of G-d and the necessity for a person of the people become only greater with every passing year in the desert. After all, in the beginning everyone felt only gratitude to the individual who removed their pain of enslavement. But unfortunately, such gratitude barely survives the first dearth of water. And so when Korah rebels, not one Hebrew stands up for Moses, and when the prophet asks to meet "in his office" with Datan and Aviram, they refuse to come!

So when the Hebrews again kvetch for water, G-d tells Moses to take his staff of leadership not to strike in punishment the hard, stiff-necked rock which symbolized ungrateful Israel, but rather to speak to the Hebrews with words of love and the empowerment of the leniency and softness of the Oral Law which will and must emerge from them as they continue to mature, as they partner with G-d in completing both His Torah and His World (Rabbenu Tzadok).

But alas, the ungrateful nation has worn Moses down; he can only strike them (the rock) in frustration and refer to them as rebels. And since Moses can no longer love and empower Israel with loving words of the Oral Law, Moses' leadership must end in the desert. ©2014 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**M**oshe is finally done in by the requests of the Jewish people in the desert – this time again for their water supply. In his exasperation about their constant litany of complaints and grumbings, he transgresses over G-d's commandment to speak to the rock and instead he strikes the rock with his staff. His punishment for this act is swift and dramatic. He will not step into the Land of Israel but only be able to glimpse it from afar.

There are many questions and difficulties raised regarding the narrative of this incident in the

Torah. Firstly, complaints about the lack of water are certainly legitimate complaints. Human beings cannot survive without water and now that the miraculous well of Miriam disappeared with her passing, the pressing need for a replacement water supply was obvious.

So, why does Moshe become so angry with them and describe them as a rebellious mob? And another perhaps greater and more difficult question is why this sin is the one that seals Moshe's fate? Does the punishment really seem to be commensurate with the crime? All of the commentators to Torah over the ages have dealt with these two questions and have advanced a wide variety of insights and explanations regarding the issues raised. It is apparent that the Torah somehow wished these issues to be further explored and studied and therefore it left its own description of the matter somewhat vague and mysterious – hiding in the narrative more than it was willing to reveal.

Maimonides and other scholars throughout the ages see the events of this week's parsha as the concluding part of a continuing and cumulative pattern of behavior, both on the part of the people of Israel in the desert and of Moshe as well. Moshe realizes, as do the people, that they require water to sustain them. But this request and the manner that it is presented to Moshe is part of their long- running, nagging behavior pattern in the desert.

For the Jewish people, there is still a vestige of resentment against G-d for redeeming them from Egypt. There they had water in abundance, and it was natural not miraculous water. Miraculous water binds them to a commitment to G-d and His Torah – a commitment that a portion of the people is always attempting to wriggle out from.

With their seemingly reasonable request for water, Moshe senses all of this background music. They really want to opt out of the entire mission of Sinai, which results in Moshe's extreme display of displeasure. And Moshe's anger again undoes him. There is an entire literature of rabbinic study about the moments and causes of Moshe's anger that appear throughout the Torah.

For Moshe, the greatest of all human beings, it is agreed that this is his one failing. And, therefore, Moshe unwittingly becomes the model and example of the dangers involved in falling into the pit of emotional anger. The incidents of his anger – past and present - were now cumulatively judged by Heaven and the punishment is not for this one incident alone. Anger is a character trait to be avoided at almost all cost. ©2014 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the great mysteries of the Torah. Arriving at Kadesh the people find themselves without water. They complain to Moses and Aaron. The two leaders go to the Tent of Meeting and there they are told by G-d to take the staff and speak to the rock, and water will emerge.

Moses' subsequent behaviour is extraordinary. He takes the staff. He and Aaron gather the people. Then Moses says: "Listen now, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?" Then "Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff" (Num. 20:10-11).

This was the behaviour that cost Moses and Aaron their chance of leading the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land. "Because you did not have enough faith in Me to sanctify me in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I have given them" (ibid., v. 12).

The commentators disagree as to which aspect of Moses' behaviour was wrong: His anger? His act of striking the rock instead of speaking to it? The implication that it was he and Aaron, not G-d, who were bringing water from the rock? I argued in an earlier Covenant and Conversation that Moses neither sinned nor was punished. He merely acted as he had done almost forty years earlier when G-d told him to hit the rock (Ex. 17:6), and thereby showed that though he was the right leader for the people who had been slaves in Egypt, he was not the leader for their children who were born in freedom and would conquer the land.

This time, though, I want to pose a different question. Why then? Why did Moses fail this particular test? After all, he had been in a similar situation twice before. After emerging from the Red Sea the people had travelled for three days without finding water. Then they found some but it was bitter and they complained. G-d showed Moses how to make the water sweet (Ex. 15:22-26).

Arriving at Rephidim, again they found no water and complained. Despairing, Moses said to G-d, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." G-d patiently instructs Moses as to what to do, and water flows from the rock. (Ex. 17:1-7).

So Moses had successfully overcome two similar challenges in the past. Why on this third occasion did he lose emotional control? What was different?

The answer is stated explicitly in the text, but in so understated a way that we may fail to grasp its significance. Here it is:

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. (Num. 20:1)

Immediately after this we read: "Now there was

no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron." A famous Talmudic passage (Ta'anit 9a) explains that it was in Miriam's merit that the Israelites had a well of water that miraculously accompanied them through their desert journeys. When Miriam died, the water ceased. This interpretation reads the sequence of events simply and supernaturally. Miriam died. Then there was no water. From this, you can infer that until then there was water because Miriam was alive. It was a miracle in her merit.

However there is another way of reading the passage, naturally and psychologically. The connection between Miriam's death and the events that followed had less to do with a miraculous well and more to do with Moses' response to the complaints of the Israelites.

This was the first trial he had to face as leader of the people without the presence of his sister. Let us recall who Miriam was, for Moses. She was his elder sister, his oldest sibling. She had watched over his fate as he floated down the Nile in a pitched basket. She had the presence of mind, and the audacity, to speak to Pharaoh's daughter and arrange for the child to be nursed by an Israelite woman, that is, by Moses' own mother Yocheved. Without Miriam, Moses would have grown up not knowing who he was and to which people he belonged.

Miriam is a background presence throughout much of the narrative. We see her leading the women in song at the Red Sea, so it is clear that she, like Aaron, had a leadership role. We gain a sense of how much she meant to Moses when, in an obscure passage, she and Aaron "began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite" (Num. 12:1). We do not know exactly what the issue was, but we do know that Miriam was smitten with leprosy. Aaron turns helplessly to Moses and asks him to intervene on her behalf, which he does with simple eloquence in the shortest prayer on record -- five Hebrew words -- "Please, G-d, heal her now." Moses still cares deeply for her, despite her negative talk.

It is only in this week's parsha that we begin to get a full sense of her influence, and this only by implication. For the first time Moses faces a challenge without her, and for the first time Moses loses emotional control in the presence of the people. This is one of the effects of bereavement, and those who have suffered it often say that the loss of a sibling is harder to bear than the loss of a parent. The loss of a parent is part of the natural order of life. The loss of a sibling can be less expected and more profoundly disorienting. And Miriam was no ordinary sibling. Moses owed her his entire relationship with his natural family, as well as his identity as one of the children of Israel.

It is a cliché to say that leadership is a lonely undertaking. But at the same time no leader can truly

survive on his or her own. Yitro told Moses this many years earlier. Seeing him leading the people alone he said, "You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone" (Ex. 18:18). A leader needs three kinds of support: (1) allies who will fight alongside him, (2) troops or a team to whom he can delegate, and (3) a soul-mate or soul-mates to whom he can confide his doubts and fears, who will listen without an agenda other than being a supportive presence, and who will give him the courage, confidence and sheer resilience to carry on.

Having known through personal friendship many leaders in many fields, I can say with certainty that it is false to suppose that people in positions of high leadership have thick skins. Most of those I have known have not. They are often intensely vulnerable. They can suffer deeply from doubt and uncertainty. They know that a leader must often make a choice between two evils, and you never know in advance how a decision will work out. Leaders can be hurt by criticism and the betrayal of people they once considered friends. Because they are leaders, they rarely show any signs of vulnerability in public. They have to project a certainty and confidence they do not feel. But Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, the Harvard leadership experts, are right to say, "The hard truth is that it is not possible to experience the rewards and joy of leadership without experiencing the pain as well." (Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2002, 227)

Leaders need confidants, people who "will tell you what you do not want to hear and cannot hear from anyone else, people in whom you can confide without having your revelations spill back into the work arena." A confidant cares about you more than about the issues. He or she lifts you when you are low, and gently brings you back to reality when you are in danger of self-congratulation or complacency. Heifetz and Linsky write, "Almost every person we know with difficult experiences of leadership has relied on a confidant to help them get through." (Ibid., 200)

Maimonides in his Commentary to the Mishnah (Avot 1:6) counts this as one of the four kinds of friendship. He calls it the "friendship of trust" [chaver habitachon] and describes it as having someone in whom "you have absolute trust and with whom you are completely open and unguarded," hiding neither the good news nor the bad, knowing that the other person will neither take advantage of the confidences shared, nor share them with others.

A careful reading of this famous episode in the context of Moses' early life suggests that Miriam was Moses' "trusted friend," his confidante, the source of his emotional stability, and that when she was no longer there, he could no longer cope with crisis as he had

done until then.

Those who are a source of strength to others need their own source of strength. The Torah is explicit in telling us how often for Moses that source of strength was G-d himself. But even Moses needed a human friend, and it seems, by implication, that this was Miriam. A leader in her own right she was also one of her brother's sources of strength.

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### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Crime and Punishment**

**C**rime and Punishment. In a corporeal world, the correlation of a jail sentence to a crime does not symbolize a cogent philosophical message. Of course, it may tell us that crime does not pay. Unfortunately, that comprehensive message does not differentiate between one who steals to sustain his family, and the greedy scam-artist who bilks widows out of their life's savings. The two felons may sit only a few cells apart from each other, with an arsonist or barroom brawler separating them, but the crimes that sent them to their dismal abodes are so very different in intent.

Divine justice does better. Every aveirah generates a punishment specifically designed to send a distinct Heavenly message to the afflicted. Of course, it may take an otherwise perspicacious mind to correlate what life is handing to him and how it relates to his mortal misdeeds. We do not always relate events that occur to the acts we have perpetrated. Sometimes it is too much for us to bear, and sometimes our ideas may lead us to wrongful conclusions, harming both our psyche and morale.

But when the Torah teaches us about crime and punishment we are more fortunate. The lessons of our past are now devoid of the guilt-ridden, depressive response we may have currently; rather they are moral springboard from which to bound to greater heights. And thus, when the Torah tells us of a clear crime and an immediate response, we have to transpose the relationship between the two to attain another moral lesson.

The people spoke against G-d and Moshe -- "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this wilderness, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food [Manna]?" G-d sent the fiery serpents against the people and they bit the people. A large multitude of Israel died. The people came to Moshe and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against Hashem and against you! Pray to Hashem that He remove from us the serpent" (Numbers,21:5-7). The people complained about their fare, and were punished with snakes. If Divine retribution is corollary to the crime, how do snakes correspond to kvetching?

Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma. "Hashem

said as it were -- let the serpent which was punished for slanderous statements come and exact punishment from those who utter slander; Let the serpent to which all kinds of food have one taste [that of earth; cf (Gen:3:14) and (Yoma: 75a)] come and exact punishment from these ingrates to whom one thing (the manna) had the taste of many different dainties.

What was the slander of the snake? Didn't he just convince Chava to take a bite of the fruit? What connection is there with the Manna? The old Jewish yarn has a Bubby (grandmother) taking her grandchild, little Irving, to the beach toward the end of spring. There is hardly anyone around as the child, dressed in a spring suit, plays innocently on the shore. Suddenly a wave breaks and sweeps him into the vast ocean. The grandmother, who cannot swim, yells toward the deserted beach, "Someone! Please save my Irving! Please! Anybody!"

Out of nowhere, a man charges forward, dives into the ocean and swims valiantly toward the helpless child. Moments later he is holding the gasping child aloft, while his weeping grandmother dashes toward them. She whisks the child from the man, and looks over the child making sure he is still in one piece.

Then she turns to the man, nods her head slightly and parts her otherwise pursed lips. "He was wearing a hat."

In Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden, life was blissful. Adam and Chava had all they could have wanted, except for one type of fruit -- The Eitz Hada'as, The Fruit of Knowledge. It was the snake that taught his human cohort, the concept of total self-indulgence, rendering them powerless to say, "No!"

The desert dwellers did not fare much differently. Their celestial fare adapted to almost any flavor in the world. Water flowed freely from the rock. But they were not content. They wanted more. The unfulfilled flavors that the Manna refused to replicate were on their minds. They felt that Manna was only a mere simulacrum of the luscious cuisine that they desired. Their craving for everything, manifested itself in punishment through the animal that has his most favored fare, anytime anywhere -- the snake. To a snake, all dust is desirous!

When the Jewish nation were both led and fed, through a hostile environment, yet complained that their miraculous bread is insubstantial, then the only correlation, powerful enough to make them mend their thoughtless ways was the bite of the very being who gains no enjoyment from what he bites, while having all he desires.

Our goal in life is to revel in the blessing, rejoice in all the good that we have, despite the shortcomings of a limited world, and the trivial amenities we may lack. One must learn to appreciate his head, even if he is missing his hat. ©2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

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.

The Israelites were to bring a red heifer without blemish and on which no yoke had been laid. This heifer was to be taken outside the holy encampment and slaughtered before the eyes of the High Priest, in

sight of the Holy of Holies but far from it, where the Mount of Olives cemetery is now located. The cow was then completely burned - its hide, flesh, blood and even dung - with the kohen (priest) casting cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet thread into the flames (Numbers 19:1-6).

I suggest that the cow represents the Jewish nation, the "mother" of all nations, which nourishes the world with the milk of human kindness, compassionate righteousness and moral justice, the open-house hospitality taught by Abraham and Sarah. The cow is red because red is the color of blood, and blood is the life/soul of humanity. Without the moral teachings of Israel, without the seven Noahide Laws and the Ten Commandments, the free world would cease to exist, and humanity would dissolve in a blast of nuclear explosions.

"Israel" was to be taken outside - beyond the encampment of moral, human beings - to the bestial world of Auschwitz and Treblinka, where six million innocent men and women, totally pure children and babies, people who had not known any enslavement before, would be slaughtered by fire; human lives and human dreams were charred black in a hell devised by human demons, human remains going up in the smokestacks of Satan's funeral pyre.

There were no exceptions, no reprieves for those doomed to die only because they were Jews: The Jews' proud, straight and tall cedar trees - communal leaders such as rabbis, judges and philanthropists - were taken along with the lowly, poverty-stricken Jews, akin to the hyssop plant. And yes, within this fiery mix was also the scarlet color of sin, for there were sinning Jews as well.

What heinous crime had been committed by the "cow" to make it deserving of such a fate? Perhaps it was no sin at all, perhaps it was merely the price exacted from the messengers of the good, the teachers of compassionate righteousness and social justice, the upholders of individual human dignity and freedom by the evil powers of fascism, fanatic jihad and totalitarian enslavement. Do not our sages teach that from Sinai itself descended the sin'a - hatred against the people of the ethical way? But then our biblical text does call this "red cow" a "sin offering," albeit for an inadvertent transgression. After all, were we not intended to be "a blessing to the families of the earth," to teach future generations compassionate righteousness and moral justice, to be a light unto the nations? Is it not biblically sound to suggest that we are the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, bearing the sins of the world because we did not fulfill our mission as a "sacred nation and a kingdom of priests/teachers"? And a sin offering brings atonement and forgiveness.

Hence the pure person - and only G-d is a truly pure "person" - will gather the ashes of the cow, mix them with the living waters which symbolize our sacred

Torah and, by means of His agent the kohen, sprinkle the mixture on the hapless individual who has become impure by contact with death.

Only G-d can save a mortal from death. ©2012 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 YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

## Be'eros

**"W**hoever touches the dead body of any human being shall become tameh for seven days.

He shall purify himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and he shall become tahor." Be'er Mayim Chaim: "We understand that the Torah incorporates many different readings in a single verse. It is plausible that our verse alludes to the process of teshuvah."

The reason for this ought to be apparent. When a person sins, the aveirah that he bears results in a kind of death, until he purges himself of it. Chazal make this explicit: "Evildoers are considered dead even while they are still physically alive." (Berachos 18B) At its spiritual core, death is not simply the absence of life, but is a kelipah named "death." This kelipah -- a spiritual structure seemingly devoid of any significant spiritual content -- truly lacks real vitality, which is a function of spiritual worth and value. Possessing none of its own, this kelipah exists only through its flimsiest connection to ruchniyus, which is a consequence of Hashem's presence on some level inhering in everything without exception. (Without that connection, it could not exist.)

Chazal teach that every aveirah accompanies the one who committed it, staying with him on the way to the Day of Judgment. Specifically, the aveirah persists in the form of a kelipah that does not simply fall away. The chronic evildoer is laden with these kelipos through the legion of sins he has performed. He is coated and encrusted with so many of these death-

kelipos that he can be considered dead himself. The consequences of this are two-fold. He becomes captive to the kelipos that surround him, and subservient to them. His life is therefore no longer his own. Moreover, he damages the way the spiritual worlds interact with our lower world. The kelipos that surround him are receptive to any spiritual nourishment. In effect, they draw away the Divine ohr sent to this world for positive purposes, and divert it to strengthen their negative existence.

Realizing how he has become mired in sin, and the calamitous effect this has had on him, body and soul, a would-be penitent has two chief options.

The first is Torah study, purely for the sake of Hashem, without any admixture of lesser intentions. When a person attaches himself to Torah, he has in effect attached himself to HKBH Himself. If the attachment is strong enough, he wrests himself away from the dominion of the kelipos, and enters into His domain.

The second is the full observance of Shabbos, in all its detail. Chazal testify (Shabbos 118b) that one who fully observes Shabbos is forgiven even for overt idolatry. The supernal kedushah of Shabbos that is made available from on high is so powerful that kelipos simply cannot attach themselves to it.

The reciprocal relationship between the ohr of Shabbos and the kelipos underlies our definition of prohibited melachah on Shabbos. All of those melachos are sourced in kelipos. Before Adam sinned, the earth produced its bounty without human effort. As a consequence of the first sin, the earth and its inhabitants were cursed with 39 curses.

Each curse is related to a melachah. When the future tikkun comes about, the land of Israel will once again produce cakes and wool garments, (Shabbos 30b) i.e. without the assistance of human labor. The 39 melachos will have become irrelevant.

In this vein, we can reexamine our pesukim: "Whoever touches the dead body of any human being," i.e. when a person has sinned, and therefore made strong contact with the death-kelipos, "He shall become tameh for seven days." The seven are the seven lower sefiros, the sefiros of activity. All of them become not only defiled, but become conduits carrying Hashem's ohr to dark places. "He shall purify himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day." He can rid himself of his ghastly burden through the mitzvos of three and seven, i.e. the study of what the gemara (Shabbos 88a) calls a Torah of threes, and the observance of the laws of the seventh day. If he follows this formula, then "He shall become tahor." (Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar 19:11) ©2014 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org



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