

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**here are some, say the Talmud, who acquire their world in an hour and others who lose it in an hour.

No example of the latter is more arresting and bewildering than the famous episode in this week's parsha. The people have asked for water. G-d tells Moses to take a staff and speak to the rock and water will appear. This then follows: He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.'

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

This year, though, looking at the ethics of the Bible, it seems more appropriate to look at a different explanation, the one given by Maimonides in *Shemoneh Perakim*, the "Eight Chapters" that form the preface to his commentary to the Mishnah, tractate *Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers.

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

with sufficient training, we could overcome our destructive emotions and reconfigure our affective life.

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

That, says Maimonides, is why Moses was punished: because he lost his temper with the people when he said, "Listen, you rebels." To be sure, there were other occasions on which he lost his temper – or at least looked as if he had. His reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf, which included smashing the tablets, was hardly eirenic or relaxed. But that case was different. The Israelites had committed a sin. G-d himself was threatening to destroy the people. Moses had to act decisively and with sufficient force to restore order to a people wildly out of control.

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

In addition, says Maimonides, by losing his temper Moses failed to respect the people and might have demoralized them. Knowing that Moses was G-d's emissary, the people might have concluded that if Moses was angry with them, so too was G-d. Yet they had done no more than ask for water. Giving the people the impression that G-d was angry with them was a failure to sanctify G-d's name. Thus one moment's anger was sufficient to deprive Moses of the reward surely most precious to him, of seeing the culmination of his work by leading the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land.

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

<sup>1</sup> The term was introduced by Peter Salovey and John Mayer, subsequently popularized by Daniel Goleman.

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language to describe it.

"The life of those who can't control their anger is not a life," they said (Pesachim 113b). Resh Lakish said, "When a person becomes angry, if he is a sage his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him" (Pesachim 66b). Maimonides said that when someone becomes angry it is as if he has become an idolater (Hilkhos Deot 2: 3).

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

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

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

The classic role model of patience in the face of provocation was Hillel. The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) says that two people once made a wager with each other, saying, "He who makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz." One said, "I will go and provoke him." It was Erev Shabbat and Hillel was washing his hair. The man stood by the door of his house and called, "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" Hillel robed himself and came out, saying, "My son, what do you seek?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son," replied Hillel. He said,

"Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?" "My son, you ask a good question," said Hillel. "The reason is that they have no skilled midwives."

The man left, paused, then returned, crying out, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?" Again, Hillel robed and came out, saying, "My son, what do you seek?" "I have another question." "Ask, my son." "Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans bleared?" Hillel replied, "My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in sandy places."

He left, waited, then came back a third time, calling, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?" Again, Hillel robed and came out, saying, "My son, what do you seek?" "I have another question." "Ask, my son." "Why are the feet of Africans wide?" "My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in watery marshes."

"I have many questions to ask," said the man, "but I am worried that you might become angry." Hillel then robed himself and sat and said, "Ask all the questions you have to ask." "Are you the Hillel who is called the nasi [leader, prince] of Israel?" "Yes," said Hillel. "In that case, said the man, may there not be many like you in Israel." "Why so, my son?" he asked. "Because I have just lost four hundred zuz because of you!" "Be careful of your moods," said Hillel. "You may lose four hundred zuz and yet another four hundred zuz through Hillel, yet Hillel will not lose his temper."

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

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

The verdict of Judaism is simple: Either we defeat anger or anger will defeat us. ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**T**his is the statute of the Torah which the Lord has commanded saying, 'Speak to the Children of Israel and they shall take for you a red heifer...'" (Num. 19:2) The mystical ritual of the red heifer is a hok, a commandment we follow not because it is rational, logical or moral, but because it is Divinely ordained. The very notion of the priest purifying an individual who has been defiled by contact with a dead body, through the process of sprinkling him or her with

the ashes of a red heifer mixed with spring waters, seems irrational.

The ritual is even paradoxical because those priests involved in preparing this mixture are in fact themselves defiled by the process. How can a substance with the capacity to purify the defiled simultaneously defile those who are pure? Were the ritual of the red heifer limited to its function of purification, it would belong in the book of Leviticus (Vayikra), alongside the biblical portions about impurities and purification. Why does the Torah place it in the book of Numbers (Bamidbar), right after the rebellion of Korah and immediately before the transgression of Moses at the rock? Moreover, the portion of Hukat is read near the *yahrzeit* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the greatest Jewish leader of the 20th Century. The red heifer ritual provides a fascinating commentary on his life (as well as on the policy of Ohr Torah Stone to send rabbis and educators to far-flung communities, isolated from vibrant Jewish life and education). The kohen-priest is our teacher and guardian, our religious inspiration and guide; his special garb reflects his unique vocation (Ex. 28:4-42).

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. And inscribed on the head-plate placed on his forehead (which is the seat of the mind), are the words, "sacred unto the Lord," expressing his commitment to teaching Torah and sacred living in accordance with G-d's commandments. Clearly, love and commitment to nation combined with intellectual propagation of Torah are the twin building blocks of the kohen-teacher's vocation. How are these ideals related to the mystery of the red heifer? For nearly 300 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 his flock.

I'd like to suggest that the paradox of the red heifer ritual—the fact that it is the very mixture which purifies those who are defiled while defiling the people involved in the act of purifying—will serve to bring together the kohen's love for his people with his commitment to teach them. After all, if my friend falls into a mud-pile, will I not naturally become sullied and muddied myself in the process of lifting him out? Built into the very enterprise of purifying the defiled is the fact that the purifier himself must be touched by some of the impurity! This is why the kohen must always bless the nation "out of love"; and bring his love for his people to his vocation of teaching them Torah. When

the kohen-leader truly loves every Jew, he assumes a new level of responsibility. In his desire to rescue fellow Jews from contact with spiritual death, he must willingly sacrifice some of his own comforts and even some of his spirituality.

A loving leader must be ready to leave the religious comfort of *yeshiva* and a Torah-true community to make his way to the furthest hinterlands to infuse them with the light of spirituality. This is what G-d tells Moses when he sends him away from his Torah study—his unique rendezvous with the Divine at the time of the Golden Calf: "Get down from the supernal heights of Mount Sinai and go down to the errant Jews worshiping the Golden Calf; the only reason I bestowed greatness upon you, Moses, was for the sake of Israel; if your nation is sinning, what need have I of you?" (B.T. Berakhot, 32a) From the beginning of his ministry, Moses is totally committed to his people. When he kills the Egyptian taskmaster to defend an Israelite slave he sacrifices his position as an Egyptian prince and risks 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.

Herein 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 rebelliously treated him, he can no longer to lead them.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe was a profound scholar, and leader of his people. The timeless and constant message of the Chabad movement is 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).

The preservation of the eternal Torah requires a people strong enough and determined enough to devote their lives to it, and even to risk their spiritual lives for it. The Lubavitcher Rebbe raised an army of emissaries (*shluchim*) whose love for and commitment to our nation is so great that they readily leave *batei midrash* (study halls), their families and communities for the farthest recesses of the globe to bring Jews back to our Torah.

When I asked the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a blessing before leaving New York City for the uncharted hills of Efrat, he said: "The Almighty will extend your ministry in Efrat until the coming of the Redeemer, but I must send emissaries all over the world who will be modern on the outside and Chabad on the inside."

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**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

Over all of the millennia since the incident described in this week's parsha regarding Moshe striking the rock instead of speaking to it, the great commentators to Torah have struggled to make this incident more understandable and meaningful to us ordinary mortals. At first glance, the punishment does not seem to fit the crime. Because of this, many of the commentators have seen the incident of hitting the rock instead of speaking to it not as an isolated incident, but rather as the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak.

Maimonides explains it as the accumulation of incidents where Moshe allowed human anger to overtake his otherwise unquestioned loyalty and obedience to G-d's word.

Abarbanel also sees it as the culmination of preceding events in the life and career of Moshe. Other commentators, such as Rabbi Meir Simcha Cohen of Dvinsk, Latvia, hesitant to place the entire burden of this strange incident on Moshe alone, attributes the fact that Moshe would not lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel as being not so much a punishment of Moshe but a reality that for this new generation of Jews. They never experienced Egypt and since they saw Moshe as a distant almost supernatural personality, Moshe could no longer be effective as the leader of Israel.

The incident described in this week's parsha is the catalyst for his not entering the Land of Israel, but not really the true cause of his exclusion from further leadership of the people. In effect, this latter line of thinking portrays Moshe, the greatest of all humans, as being subject to the grinding gristmill of generational history and events. However we will deal with this incident, it will always remain rationally perplexing to us.

There is a debate amongst the thinkers and scholars of Israel as to whether the youthful Moshe is to be held blameless for slaying the Egyptian taskmaster. Rashi points out to us that Moshe slew him by the use of his tongue, pronouncing the ineffable name of G-d, so to speak. Moshe then came to realize the power of words, especially of holy and sacred words.

That is why he composed the final book of the Torah in order that those holy words would have an eternal and powerful effect in guiding and teaching all later generations of the Jewish people. Being able to kill someone with a stick, a spear, a gun or a bomb is unfortunately a natural and everyday occurrence in human life.

Being able to destroy an enemy by pronouncing a holy word – the name of G-d, so to speak – is a completely different and supernatural event. Perhaps this is the basis for understanding the

punishment of Moshe for hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. Hitting the rock, miraculous as it may seem to some, will be interpreted by others as somehow being natural and ordinary, a magical trick.

Hitting the rock employs man-made tools and thus when human action is involved the presence of G-d is often hidden, if not even disregarded. Speaking to the rock, like speaking to the Egyptian taskmaster in holiness and faith, is not subject to rational interpretation. That would have been the supreme sanctification of G-d's presence, so to speak, in human events. And, alas, perhaps therein lies the shortcoming that Heaven saw in Moshe's response to the lack of water in the desert for the Jewish people. ©2015 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 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. ©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 SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**N**ature dictates that children look somewhat like their parents, fruits look like other similar fruits, and animals act in predictable ways. But if that were always true, then how do the laws of the Red cow, brought in Parshat Chukat, make sense? How could the impure be purified, while the pure become impure? How do these things make sense, if there is to be order in nature and creation?

The Mofet Hador explains that we too were all given opposing forces. We were given the Torah, which tells us of these and other 'contradictions', and we were given the brain that wonders about all of it. The Parsha starts by helping us deal with these, and other issues. 'This is the law of the Torah'...our laws make sense, even if we don't understand them. We're limited in our wisdom. In fact, King Solomon, who was given all the knowledge, couldn't understand the laws of the Red Cow, and said, "It is far from me". The logic is there, but none can discern it, and that too is part of nature. So when we come to a fork in our lives, and we're deciding whether to do what we know we should or what we think we could, we should remember this lesson: Our minds might be limited in understanding, but the Torah's wisdom is eternal. ©2015 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**"A**nd G-d sent the poisonous snakes against the nation" (Bamidbar 21:6). "And G-d said to Moshe, 'make for yourself a viper" (21:8). "And Moshe made a snake of copper" (21:9). Among the questions asked by the commentators is why Moshe made a snake ("nachash") to put on a post for the nation to look at and be healed if G-d had asked

him to make a viper ("saraf"). Even though vipers are poisonous snakes, so even if Moshe made a viper it could be called a snake, why does the Torah change the way this snake is described?

Some (e.g. Kli Yakar) say that a "nachach" and a "saraf" are not the same thing, and it was two different creatures that attacked, (non-poisonous) snakes and vipers. [See D'varim 8:15, where they are listed as two separate entities, as opposed to Bamidbar 21:6, where the word for "vipers" could be an adjective describing the kind of snakes that attacked (which is how I translated it above). These commentators would treat this expression as if there is a connecting "vuv" between the two words, translating it as "snakes and vipers." Although saying that "n'chashim" and "s'rafim" refer to two different creatures makes the question stronger (as it means that Moshe made a totally different creature than G-d had told him to make), an answer is widely provided (Rosh, Tur, Riva, Bartenura, R' Chaim Paltiel, Moshav Z'keinim, Toldos Yitzchok). However, it either doesn't really answer the question or it raises issues of its own.

The basic scenario described by these commentators (with very slight variations) is that the two creatures, the snakes and the vipers, attacked because of two separate sins. For rebelling against G-d, He sent the snakes, and for rebelling against Moshe He sent the vipers. After the nation recognized their sins ("for we have spoken against G-d and against you"), they were confident that Moshe would forgive them, so only asked him to intercede on their behalf regarding the snakes (see 21:7), which had attacked because of their rebellion against G-d, but didn't think they needed any further help regarding the vipers. G-d told Moshe to make a "viper," for although He forgave them (so making a "snake" was unnecessary), he wasn't going to let them get away with what they had done to Moshe. Moshe, who had forgiven the nation, saw no need to make a viper on his behalf, but wasn't willing to let them get away with what they had done to G-d, so made a snake. But how could Moshe deviate from G-d's instructions? If G-d had specifically told him to make a viper, how could he decide, on his own, to make a snake instead? We may now know why Moshe would want to do things differently than G-d had asked him to, but this doesn't explain how Moshe could have defied His orders. Additionally, if both G-d and Moshe were willing to forgive the nation to the extent that Moshe thought there was no longer a need to make a viper, and G-d thought (and had told Moshe) that there was no need to make a snake, why was it necessary to make anything at all? Why did Moshe dismiss G-d's forgiveness, thinking a snake was still necessary, if he felt that his own forgiveness was satisfactory as far as no longer needing a viper? Did he question the level of G-d's forgiveness? And since G-d's own forgiveness was enough to take care of needing to make a snake,

and He knew that Moshe's forgiveness was complete (and sincere), why wasn't it good enough to make a viper unnecessary too?

Interestingly, some of the commentators who seem to understand "snakes" and "vipers" as two separate creatures, also indicate that they were one and the same. For example, even though Or Hachayim (21:6) says that the nation's sin "brought about two things, the nachash and the saraf," and specifies that "the snakes were because they spoke against Moshe" and "the vipers were because they spoke against G-d" (which is the opposite of how the other commentators assign each, but that is irrelevant for this point), he also says that they were "snakes that did two things; they killed the person and burned his life-force." The Tur (21:9), before describing the above scenario where G-d wanted Moshe to make a viper to defend Moshe's honor and Moshe wanted to make a snake to defend G-d's honor, quotes the Ramban's commentary, where the viper is described as a specific type of snake ("one with red eyes and a wide mouth whose body has an appearance similar to copper"), which can be best represented if made from copper (see also S'fornu). It therefore seems that even the scenario described by these commentators does not preclude the "snake" Moshe made from also being considered a "viper." It is only how it is described that changes, not what is being described. The scenario is meant to explain why the description changes.

There are snakes that aren't poisonous, and some that are, and two different kinds of snakes are being described in D'varim (8:15), since the desert contains both. It's possible that both kinds of snakes attacked after the nation spoke against G-d and against Moshe, with each being a separate punishment for the separate sins (the non-poisonous snakes for speaking against G-d and the poisonous ones, the "vipers," for speaking against Moshe), or it's possible that G-d would have only sent non-poisonous snakes had they only spoke against Him, but since they also spoke against Moshe, the snakes he sent were poisonous ones.

The nation may have known this, and because they were confident that Moshe forgave them, they only asked him to ask G-d to remove the "snakes," referring either to the non-poisonous snakes, or to the aspect of the snakes that were sent because of the sin against G-d. [It is also possible that they were referring to the species as a whole rather than to the specific kind or kinds of snakes that had attacked them.]

G-d asked Moshe to make a poisonous snake (a viper), because it corresponded to the nation's sin against Moshe. [It's impossible to make a "poisonous snake" without it being a snake, so there was no way to avoid the "snake" part. But G-d specified that it was "for you," i.e. because of what they had done to you, to indicate that He wanted it made specifically because of

what they had done to Moshe.]

Moshe didn't want the nation to be punished on his behalf, but didn't want to disobey G-d's instructions either. Therefore, he made a "copper snake," which resembles a poisonous snake (because it was made out of copper), thereby fulfilling what G-d had told him to do. Nevertheless, he called it a "snake" not a viper because he wanted it to correspond to what the nation did against G-d, not to what they had done to him.

Despite being forgiven by both G-d and Moshe, it was important for there to be a reminder about what happened, so the "copper snake" had to be made. G-d wanted the nation to focus on what they had done to Moshe, so wanted it to be a "viper" (which it was since it was made out of copper), and Moshe wanted them to focus on what they had done to G-d, so called it a "snake." It was both (since a viper is a kind of snake), and Moshe did exactly what G-d had asked of him, with each showing more concern for the other's honor than for their own. © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON**

## **Perceptions**

**"T**his [was named] the 'Waters of Merivah', because the Children of Israel argued with G-d..." (Bamidbar 20:13) In exactly one week the Three Weeks will begin, b"H. The fast day of the 17th of Tammuz will be postponed for a day since other than on Yom Kippur we do not fast on Shabbos. Likewise, Tisha B'Av, which falls on Shabbos this year, will be pushed off to the next day, the 10th of Av, for the same reason.

Since the 17th of Tammuz begins the Three Weeks, and Tisha B'Av ends them, it would appear as if they are related, connected to each other by the three weeks between them. In actuality, the 17th of Tammuz resulted because of the golden calf in the first year after leaving Egypt, and Tisha B'Av resulted from the sin of the Spies in the second year of the exodus. This makes them distant from each other in time and conceptually, raising the question, why are they part of one long period of mourning?

The answer, of course, is that the former led to the latter. The sin of the golden calf changed everything and made possible the sin of the Spies. Had the Jewish people not committed the first sin they would have received Torah and then left straight for Eretz Yisroel never once considering the possibility of rejecting the Land. The entire episode of the Spies was THE direct consequence of the calf.

So was Korach. In a world of true and false Korach would never have considered challenging Moshe Rabbeinu. In a world of good and evil, his argument with the greatest leader of the Jewish people ever became inevitable. In a world of true and false the yetzer hara, if it exists at all, is not part of man and can be judged objectively. In a world of good and evil the

yetzer hara is part of man, and it can easily be incited and confused for a person's true desire.

Prior to the calf, the Jewish people, the Talmud says, freed themselves of the yetzer hara: "When the serpent came to Chava he put zuhama into her. When the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, their zuhama left them." (Shabbos 145b)

On a simple level, zuhama is a level of spiritual impurity for which there is no remedy until Tachiyas HaMeisim, or the Resurrection of the Dead. That is when people will be created anew, like Adam was when he was first made, without the imprint of zuhama. Since the Jewish people underwent resurrection at Mt. Sinai, effectively removing the yetzer hara from them, they achieved this at that time.

The only problem was that the Erev Rav -- the Mixed Multitude -- that left Egypt with them did not lose their zuhama at the giving of Torah. They remained mortal and with an internal yetzer hara, as did a couple thousand Jewish stragglers. They were the ones who panicked when Moshe Rabbeinu did not return on time and built a golden calf to replace him.

Once that happened, it pulled down the rest of the nation that had not participated in the sin of the calf. They ceased to be immortal and some of the zuhama even returned to them. This corrupted them enough to allow Korach to rebel against Moshe Rabbeinu, and the Spies against G-d. In each case they thought G-d was on their side only to find out how deadly wrong they were. This kind of incorrect perception could only occur after the sin of the golden calf.

This is what it means when it says: "And now go, lead the people to [the place] of which I have spoken to you. Behold My angel will go before you. But on the day I make an accounting [of sins upon them], I will bring their sin to account against them." (Shemos 32:24)

"But on the day I make an accounting, etc.: Now I have listened to you not to destroy them all at once. When I take an accounting of their sins, I will also account a little of this sin with the other sins. [This means that] no punishment happens to the Jewish people in which there is not part of the punishment for the sin of the [golden] calf." (Rashi)

Did not the Jewish people atone for the sin of the calf? Apparently yes, as it says: "And Moshe returned to G-d and said, 'Please! This people has committed a grave sin. They have made themselves a god of gold. And now, if You forgive their sin But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written.'

"And G-d said to Moshe, 'Whoever has sinned against Me, him I will erase from My book!'" (Shemos 32:31-33)

And that's what happened. The perpetrators were eliminated and those who remained were forgiven. If so, then what does Rashi mean that every punishment in history is also part punishment for the sin

of the golden calf?

Exactly what we are saying. The only reason there has been need for punishment since the golden calf is because of sins committed. The only reason sins have been committed is because the incident of the golden calf restored the inner yetzer hara and made future sin possible. In this respect, every future punishment is also punishment for the sin of the golden calf.

This goes for the hitting of the rock in this week's parshah as well. What should have been a straightforward and joyous event turned out to be a catastrophic and tragic failure. Clarity was usurped by confusion, peace by anger. The event cost Moshe Rabbeinu the opportunity to cross the Jordan river into Eretz Yisroel and the Jewish people their Moshiach. The golden calf struck again.

Before this, though, comes the mitzvah of the Red Heifer. As Rashi points out, it is the cure for the golden calf, representing its opposite. The calf was gold which represents eternal materialism. The heifer was red, like blood, symbolizing the temporal nature of the physical world. A calf is young and playful and shuns responsibility. A heifer carries a yoke and lives to channel its energy in a productive manner.

These two points of view are contrasted in this week's parshah as if to give us a choice of paths in life. One leads to "golden calves," which ultimately results in sin and punishment. One goes in the same direction as the Red Heifer, allowing a person to avoid the kind of lifestyle that can result in a golden calf related punishment.

The decision seems to be a no-brainer. Given a choice between a pleasant and productive life or a meaningless and deadly one, who in their right mind would choose the latter? Given the history of the Jewish people, and the world in general, billions of people! Crazy, isn't it?

The Talmud confirms the insanity of such a choice: "A person doesn't sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him." (Sotah 3a)

In a specific sense, this means that a person loses perspective, and this allows him to sin. After he has, and the reality of what he has done catches up to him, he may ask, "What was I thinking?" Others certainly ask this about him. It's as if a person becomes insane, albeit temporarily, when committing the sin.

In a more general sense, the Talmud is referring to the net effect of the sin of the calf. Just as eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil dramatically changed mankind for all of history until Yemos HaMoshiach, likewise did the sin of the calf do the same thing. For all intents and purposes, the world has been "insane" ever since, not completely, but enough to have more than one world war and to carry out a Holocaust.

This is what G-d acknowledged after the Flood,

if not for His benefit than for ours: "... the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Bereishis 8:21)

Evil is crazy, insane. Never mind the fact that the most "normal" individual can perpetrate it, the evil he does is not normal, at least in the ultimate sense. The verse is telling us that as a result of descending from the level of true and false to that of good and evil, it became possible to be crazy on some level even if the rest of a person is perfectly sane.

Recently I was sent an article from a fellow Canadian about Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. We both live in Israel now, but remain proud Canadians. Israel is my home and my first love when it comes to countries, but I have a tremendous appreciation for the life I was able to enjoy as a Jew while growing up in Toronto.

That pride increased somewhat over the last few years because of the Canadian Prime Minister. His unwavering support for Israel from within an international community that is quite hostile to the Jewish state is more than just admirable, it is righteous. This only made me more curious as to why the Canadian leader was willing to risk international popularity (especially now that President Obama does not share his sentiments about Israel and its leadership) to support a country to which his country owes very little.

The article, printed in the magazine "Mishpachah," was informative. It revealed the man to me and removed the mystery. Though politics and popularity tend to go hand-in-hand, giving rise to the compromising of values, Stephen Harper marches to the beat of a different political drum. For him, it is not an issue of popularity but one of right and wrong.

The interests of his country, the Canadian PM insists in contradistinction to his opponent in the upcoming election, Justin Trudeau, is best served by supporting a true democracy such as Israel, and in protecting it from the evils of mankind. Canada needs to be, he says, a country that is more interested in doing the right thing than the politically expedient thing.

All I can say is, "Wow." I say this for three reasons. The first is that I am amazed that there are still some people like this in the world who believe this and stand behind it. The second source of my wowness is the fact that he was elected with such an opinion to public office of a major international country. The third reason for my awe is that he is still in office at this time of history, which can't be anything short of a miracle.

From a big picture point of view, which always interests me, I wonder what he is doing here at this stage of history. Nothing happens by chance and everything is meant to teach us something. The more something catches our attention and makes us wonder about its existence, the more this is so. What does Stephen Harper teach us at this critical stage of history?

The answer to this question might be, it depends upon who you are. Different people might learn different things from this political anomaly. Therefore, I can only tell you what I learn from it today, which may be somewhat different from what I learn from it tomorrow.

The truth is, what I learn is nothing new, as far as the principles are concerned. The first is, make truth your priority and guide in life. The second is, do not abandon your commitment to truth when falsehood becomes powerful and the majority opinion. These are ideas that every decent person already knows.

What I learn from Stephen Harper is how to walk the walk, and not just talk the talk. I see in him a man for whom pursuing truth is not just a theory, but daily practice. I see a level of sincerity that I do not see so often in others, even many who are supposed to be practicing such levels of sincerity as a unction of living by Torah. Yes, I include myself as well.

Ultimately, what I see in the Canadian Prime Minister is a source of inspiration, one that should come from me and my own community, but does not always. It is a little incriminating, even if I do fulfill more Torah obligations on a daily basis. As Rashi points out in the first parshah of the Torah, being a *mentsch* does not automatically follow from a Torah lifestyle, anymore than reading the instructions automatically results in a built model plane.

That's the part that G-d left for us to do, and it doesn't hurt to have an example of it from time to time, even if that example comes from outside the community. Learning such an approach to life can save us from making our own versions of the golden calf, and the punishment that it invites. With the Three Weeks about to begin, this is what we have to consider.

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