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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Chukat is about mortality. In it we read of the death of two of Israel's three great leaders in the wilderness, Miriam and Aaron, and the sentence of death decreed against Moses, the greatest of them all. These were devastating losses.

To counter that sense of loss and bereavement, the Torah employs one of Judaism's great principles: The Holy One, blessed be He, creates the remedy before the disease.[1] Before any of the deaths are mentioned we read about the strange ritual of the red heifer, which purified people who had been in contact with death – the archetypal source of impurity. That ritual, often deemed incomprehensible, is in fact deeply symbolic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Please keep in mind
Penina Rachel bas Shoshana
for a refuah shelaima

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

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

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

[4] See Tolstoy's parable of the traveller hiding in a well, in his Confessions; and his short story, 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich.' See also Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death, Free Press, 1973.

[5] Num. 20:1-13.

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enter, futures we helped shape but will not live to see.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[6] Nietzsche, The Gay Science, section 125.
[7] Edmund Leach, A Runaway World?, Oxford University Press, 1968.
[8] I owe these quotes to Raymond Tallis, 'You chemical scum, you,' in his Reflections of a Metaphysical Flaneur, Acumen, 2013.
[9] Yuval Harari, Homo Deus, Harvill Secker, 2016, 395.
[10] Gen. 18:27.
[11] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"This is the statute of the law which God commanded, saying, 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer'" [Num. 19:1–2]. One of the most profound mysteries of the Bible is the rite of the red heifer, called a chok (statute) because it belongs to the group of divine decrees which human logic cannot penetrate.

We must be mindful of the fact that all other impurities other than a death impurity find their purification by the defiled individual's immersing himself or herself in a mikveh, a gathering of freshly running spring water or specially collected life-giving rainwater; in effect, in all these instances, the defiled individual actually purifies him- or herself!

Only in this rite of the red heifer does the kohen, representing God Himself, effectuate the purification. It is as though the Torah is teaching that we can save ourselves from many of our weaknesses, we can rise above many of our temptations, but only God can ultimately redeem us from death.

And from this perspective, the symbolism of the red heifer ritual begins to make sense. A heifer is the consummate symbol of life, the cow's mother-milk serving as the universal expression of maternal nurturing of her young; red is likewise the color of blood, and blood is the life-force, the very nefesh of the living organism.

However, although human beings come in various shapes, sizes, personalities, and powers – they can be as tall and proud as the cedar tree and as mean and humble as the hyssop plant – the angel of death ultimately conquers them all, because the scarlet thread of human sin condemns each of us to the common destiny of mortality.

Following the sacrifice, the personage of purity gathers the ashes of the remains, mixes them with the life-giving waters of the divine and, born-again, purified life emerges even from the surrealistic specter of death itself. Inherent in this symbolism is that historic Israel – mother nurturer of the continuity of humanity by means of the Abrahamic "compassionate rightness and moral justice" which Israel taught and must continue to teach – is destined to be slaughtered, but will always rise again to life and to the fulfillment of her mission and destiny.

This symbolism of the red heifer assumed new significance for me after a trip to Berlin I took several years ago. While there, I visited the Holocaust Memorial at the very center of the city, not far from the last bunker from which the "mad Führer" (may his name be blotted out) committed suicide.

One descends into a netherworld of hell, where pictures and stories of Holocaust victims evoke their life experiences and all of their future potential that was snuffed out, inexplicably and cruelly torn asunder from the tree of life by monstrous and subhuman hands.

I stumbled away from the experience feeling as though I had just awakened from a horrific nightmare. The symbolism of the monuments continued to haunt me months after I returned to Efrat; after all, those who lost loved ones in the Holocaust don't even have graveside monuments to weep over.

Each empty stone screams out with any name, with every name, with my name, and with my children's names, because a part of each human being was killed in those death camps whose perpetrators attempted to destroy every last vestige of humaneness.

But I also came away from the experience feeling cheated by the memorial. Something was missing, the essence was missing, the victorious ending was missing. Because, you see, the Jewish people won the war which Hitler tried to wage against us.

Yes, he succeeded in destroying six million of us, but as he records in Mein Kampf, he wasn't waging a war against six million Jews. He was waging a war against the last Jew, against Judaism, against what he called a slave morality of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, of sensitive concern for the weaker vessels, of a God of ultimate power who insists upon human protection of the powerless. And in that war, Hitler failed!

Yes, we won that war. Alas, the brilliantly alive "red heifer," a metaphor for the Jewish people, a people who nurture the world with the milk of morality of the Ten Commandments and the milk of human kindness of "You shall love the stranger" and "You shall love your neighbor like yourself" was, to a large extent, tragically and inexplicably slaughtered beyond the "human encampment" in Auschwitz and Treblinka.

But the Almighty God, the "Personage of Purity" Himself, gathered the ashes, Himself mixed them with living waters of rebirth, and Himself transformed those ashes into the fertile soil of the recreated sovereign State of Israel.

And the "Personage of Purity" Himself mixed the ashes with the life-giving wellsprings of Torah, our tree of eternal life, and in addition to our national physical being, likewise revived our spiritual being, and Torah centers to an unprecedented and unparalleled degree all over the world!

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In the Torah reading of this week we are reminded that one of the traits that Judaism emphasizes and

encourages is that of obedience. Obedience requires a suspension of one's own thought process and even behavior. Since this is not usually an acceptable state of being for humans, there is a natural tendency for disobedience and even rebellion. Children resent having to obey their parents, students chafe at the instructions of teachers and society generally abhors and disobeys government and laws on a very regular basis.

The Torah creates for us a commandment and warns us in advance that there is no rational explanation for its existence and fulfillment. It is simply a test of faith and a willingness to obey a higher authority, even if one's own intellect and nature cannot fathom the reason for the command itself. In effect, we are being taught that obedience is the necessary ingredient for human discipline and without human discipline people are little more than uncontrollable wild animals.

It is our nature to filter all rules and laws through our own intellect. If somehow it makes sense to us then we are willing to obey but if we are not able to rationalize the command to ourselves then we feel that we are not obligated to obey.

We all know that discipline plays a great role in human society. No army can exist without it. At the beginning of the Soviet revolution in 1917, the Red Army experimented with running an army based on democracy and the common consensus of the soldiers themselves. Needless to say this proved disastrous to the army as a whole and to the very soldiers individually. Until today, discipline and obedience constitute the basis for all societal organizations and commercial enterprises.

For this necessary feeling of discipline to be instilled, the individual must feel that there is justification for one's obedience, for following orders and commands. The command cannot be intrinsically immoral, illegal or contrary to human nature and tradition. Therefore, the command regarding the red heifer appears late in the books of the Torah. What has gone before shows the reliability of the commandment that is now advanced.

In the background of the commandments of the Torah, in their beauty and harmony, the demand for obedience and unquestioning discipline makes sense. All individual commandments of the Torah must be seen in the backdrop of the entire structure of halachah and Jewish tradition. There are no isolated commandments but rather they are all pieces of a whole, a tapestry of God's will and Divine intent.

The idea of discipline and obedience has already proven itself over through the commandments previously ordained by the Torah. As such, the current request for obedience even though there is no rational explanation for the demand itself, becomes more understandable and fits into the general pattern that is provided for Jewish life and survival.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Moshe (Moses) is told that he would not enter Israel because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Immediately afterwards, Moshe 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 Moshe 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. 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 God that if he is victorious in war whatever he sees first upon his return will be offered to God. 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.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Nature 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, Shlomo Hamelech (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.

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

Miriam's Well

There were three leaders of the B'nei Yisrael throughout their forty years in the wilderness, Moshe, Aharon, and their sister Miriam. Each leader was responsible for a different aspect of the people. Moshe was the political leader and the person whom Hashem had chosen to be the giver of the Law. Aharon was the Spiritual leader of the people as the Kohen Gadol and presented the korbanot and the k'toret (incense) before Hashem. He was responsible for the Shechinah, that part of Hashem that rests in the Kodesh K'dashim. Our third leader, Miriam, was the unofficial leader of the women. She led them in song after the crossing of the Yam Suf, and was herself a N'vi'ah, a Prophetess. Miriam is credited with the Well which supplied their daily water. This well followed the B'nei Yisrael in the wilderness and ceased to exist when she died.

Miriam's life is recorded through the words of the Torah and through the Midrash. We are told in the Midrash that Amram, her father, had separated from his wife when Par'oh ordered that all the male children be thrown into the Nile. Miriam complained that her father was worse than Par'oh since Par'oh only decreed against the male children but this separation decreed against female children as well. Amram listened to his daughter and rejoined his wife and through this action Moshe was born. We learn of Miriam's guarding Moshe in the basket, of her leading the women in song at the Red Sea, and of her Well that provided water for the B'nei Yisrael in the desert.

How was Miriam associated with the Well of the desert? Water is a source of redemption and purity. We find the passage of Miriam's death preceded by the laws of the Parah Adumah which helped to purify a person who had become tamei, impure. The ashes of the Parah Adumah were mixed with water and sprinkled on a person who was tamei to return him to a state of purity. The Aznayim L'Torah explains that each time a Parah Adumah was prepared some of its ashes were separated and preserved. In that way the Parah Adumah lasted for many years. Rashi quotes the Gemara to the effect that passage in the Torah of the Parah Adumah was placed next to Miriam's death in order to make a connection between the two. Just as a Parah Adumah brings atonement so does the death of a righteous person. The Yalkut Shemini explains that the waters of the chatat (sin offering), which consisted of a mixture of the ashes from the Parah Adumah with water which was specifically drawn for that purpose, brings atonement just as the death of the righteous brings atonement.

What was this Well and how did it follow the B'nei Yisrael throughout the desert? Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald quotes Tosefet Sukkah about the Well: "It resembled a rock the size of a beehive, from which, as out of a narrow-necked jug, water coming out in a trickle shot high in the air like a geyser. The well rolled up mountains with Israel and went down into valleys with them. Indeed, whenever Israel encamped, the Well rested close by on an elevated spot opposite the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The princes of Israel would come and walk around the Well with their staves as they chanted the song (found in Numbers 21:17-20), "spring again, O Well, ask it to respond." At that, the waters welled up, rising high like a lofty pillar; each of the princes digging with his staff channeled water toward the prince's tribe and towards his family. Unfortunately, since this was a daily occurrence and repeated itself in every location where the Jews encamped, the miracle of the Well and also in whose z'chut this Well gave forth water disappeared from the minds of the people. Only when this miracle ceased upon Miriam's death did the Jews remember. Miriam had become their Mother-figure and their cries upon the cessation of water were equally divided among their tears at the loss of their "Mother".

Miriam was a constant source of strength for Moshe as his older sister. Not only had she saved his

life by guarding him at the Nile River, but her suggestion to Par'oh's daughter that he could be nursed by Yocheved enabled his true family to have an influence on his early years until he was weaned. Along with his mother's milk he was also fed with his Heritage and his connection to Hashem. Miriam continued to be a source of inspiration to Moshe while in the desert. Her son was chosen to support Moshe's hands in the battle with Amalek. Her husband was one of the spies who returned with a positive evaluation of the land. Moshe was frustrated with the rock that Hashem chose to replace Miriam's Well. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains Miriam's influence on this situation. "For the first time Moshe faces a challenge without (Miriam), and for the first time Moshe 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. Moshe owed her his entire relationship with his natural family, as well as his identity as one of the Children of Israel….A careful reading of this famous episode in the context of Moshe's early life suggests that Miriam was Moshe's '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."

Miriam is an inspiration for all of us and she presents a picture of a strong Jewish woman who maintained a fine balance between the modesty necessary for a religious woman and the ability to take a visible role when the situation arose. There is a need for righteous Jewish women to take a place in leadership within our communities but maintain a strong sense of modesty. It is clear that many wonderful leaders have emerged within our communities yet it is also clear that this emergence has created problems within our communities in the struggle for the proper role of the religious and modest woman. May we look to Miriam as a source for this debate. *© 2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin*

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Sprinkling the Ashes

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

A person who came in contact with a dead person must be sprinkled with the Ash of the Red Heifer (Parah Adumah) on the third and the seventh day. Additionally one cannot be sprinkled on the Shabbat. According to one view one cannot be sprinkled on a Tuesday since the seventh day after the original sprinkling would fall on a Shabbat and sprinkling of the Parah Adumah on the Shabbat is prohibited. Why is one forbidden to sprinkle on the Shabbat?

Two reasons are given.

1. Based on the section of the Talmud Pesachim 69a, this law was enacted by our Rabbis (Gezeirat Chachamim) similar to the law that one is forbidden to sound the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, or to make the blessing on the Lulav and Etrog on Succot that falls on the Shabbat for fear that one may carry them in a public domain on the Shabbat. Similarly, the ash of the Parah Adumah could not be sprinkled on the Shabbat for fear that one would carry it on the Shabbat.

2. Based on the section in Talmud Beitzah 17b, the same reason one is forbidden to immerse utensils in a Mikvah on Shabbat, (for to do so would fix (Mitakein) the utensil for use), so too this rule would apply to forbidding the sprinkling of the ash of the Parah Adumah on a person who is Tamei (defiled) if Pesach eve falls on Shabbat, for to do so would allow the person to eat from the Pascal lamb. This association is cited by Rashi in Tractate Pesachim 65b.
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YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ZT"L
Adapted by Matan Glidai, Translated by Kaeren Fish

Our parasha mentions two complaints of Bnei Yisrael:

1. "And Bnei Yisrael -- all of the congregation -- came to the wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the nation sojourned in Kadesh, and Miriam died there, and she was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation, and they gathered against Moshe and against Aharon. And the people strove with Moshe, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord! And why have you brought God's gathering to this wilderness, to die there -- we and our cattle?'" (Bamidbar 20:1-4)

2. "And they journeyed from Hor Ha-har, via the Reed Sea, to circumvent the land of Edom, and the spirit of the people grew impatient with the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moshe: 'Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, nor any water, and our soul loathes this miserable bread.'" (21:4-5)

At first glance, these appear to be two similar stories about a lack of basic necessities during the journeys through the wilderness, leading the nation to grumble. It is precisely this similarity that makes God's sharply contrasting responses to these episodes so surprising. In the first story, God simply instructs Moshe to deal with the people's problem by bringing forth water from the rock. In response to the second complaint, however, God punishes the nation, sending the deadly serpents. How are we to explain this?

Perhaps the difference lies precisely in the fact

that these two complaints follow one after the other. In other words, the difference in the reaction reflects the fact that in the first instance, God had already forgiven the nation.

Am Yisrael "tested" God in the wilderness "ten times already" (Bamidbar 14:22), to the point where Moshe later rebukes them with the words, "You have been rebels against God since I have known you" (Devarim 9:24). God did not punish the people the first time, nor the second time, but His responses grew gradually more exacting. The second complaint that appears in our parasha is the "last straw," as it were, and the people are then punished as they deserved to have been after the very first complaint.

Nevertheless, this explanation does not put our minds at rest. Does God not punish the nation "measure for measure"? Is such a harsh punishment really meted out after the second complaint only because God has "had enough," as it were? It seems that a closer look at the respective episodes reveals a fundamental difference between the second complaint and the other grumblings of Am Yisrael, and it is this that gives rise to God's differing responses.

The first complaint came in the wake of Miriam's death and the disappearance of the miraculous well of water that, while she was alive, had accompanied the nation in her merit. The nation now suddenly had no water to drink. Clearly, the concern for this most vital commodity -- especially for a nation journeying through the wilderness -- is quite understandable. Until now, God has taken care of all of the nation's needs in miraculous ways, and therefore the manner in which they approach Moshe and the way in which they voice their concern are certainly improper. Nevertheless, we understand the crisis that they experience when their reliable source of water suddenly disappears.

The second complaint is a different story. It arises from no sudden or critical lack. The Torah describes a very simple, human reason for this new criticism of God: "The soul of the people grew impatient with the way." Their complaint arises from impatience, from the absence of fortitude to continue with the journey. Although the people want to get to Eretz Yisrael, they feel that they lack the strength to endure the long and arduous journey that this entails. The commentaries try to offer more substantial reasons for their complaint (see Rashi ad loc.), but from the verses themselves it appears that more than anything else, they are simply "fed up." Their claims that "there is no bread, nor any water" are simply excuses; the crux of the problem is spiritual weariness, impatience, and lack of strength.

Unfortunately, the problem is all too familiar amongst Am Yisrael in our times, too. The secularism that arose in western Europe was a response -- albeit a mistaken one -- to genuine troubles and distress. The Gemara (Eruvin 65a) notes the difficulty of serving God during the course of the exile with all of its trials. Thus, the Gemara learns from the verse, "... and she who is drunk, but not from wine" (Yishayahu 51:21), that while in exile, Bnei Yisrael are compared to drunks who are exempt from punishment if they prayed without the proper concentration.

In our times, however, this is no longer the situation. The State of Israel certainly faces some very challenging problems, but the yoke of exile and its struggles have unquestionably been removed from our necks. The secularism that we encounter in our times -- including the secular spirit that is becoming manifest among the religious public, too -- arises from nothing more than spiritual weariness. It reflects a desire to do only that which is pleasant and convenient -- even where this aspiration is not compatible with the rigorous demands of Torah, whether on the halakhic level or in terms of spiritual consciousness. It is a phenomenon that arises from a "now"-centered thinking, from an unwillingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the future.

As benei Torah, this cultural and spiritual situation should be a prime concern, since it presents a most dangerous threat to the fate of Am Yisrael for the generations to come. *(This sicha was delivered on Shabbat parashat Chukat 5754 [1994].)*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"The entire congregation of the Children of Israel arrived at the desert of Tzin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there." (Bamidbar 20:1) It is amazing how much we "fight" our parents as children, and then respect them later as adults. For the longest time as teenagers, we think our parents can't "hear" us, and don't understand who we really are. Once grown up, and especially after raising children of your own, we usually realize that our parents were just trying to share their gained wisdom with us, as we now try to do with our own children, who claim that WE don't hear or understand THEM. It's a cycle of foolishness.

Everything changed for me with MY father on a single day, and rather unexpectedly. I was at university at the time, but I had borrowed a book from a friend on the laws of honoring one's father and mother. Needless to say, with each page that I turned, I also turned a new leaf. I could not believe how, in fighting for my personal childhood "rights," I had violated so many Torah laws regarding the all-important mitzvah of "Kibud Av v'Eim."

Before even finishing the book, I picked up the phone to call my father long-distance from school, and to apologize for years of inexcusable behavior. I told him about the book and what it said, and how I had completely come to realize and accept that even if I was right about the things I wanted, I had been wrong

about the way I fought for them.

My father could tell, even long distance, that my apology was heartfelt. We had a decent relationship UNTIL that time, but a far closer one FROM that point. This week marks my father's, a"h, sixth yahrzeit, and greatly miss his insights, love, and friendship. I dedicate this week's PERCEPTIONS in his memory, to Yisroel Ya'akov ben Tzvi, z"l.

I didn't just mention this in passing. This week's parsha also has something to say about a parent-child relationship, though it is not obvious from the parsha itself. But the Talmud says that the well dried up in this week's parsha following the death of Miriam to make it known that it followed the Jewish people in the desert for 40 years in her merit.

Which merit? The Talmud relates: "There went a man of the house of Levi" (Shemos 2:1): Where did he go? Rav Yehudah bar Zevina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation, and when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed, "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river," he said, "We labor in vain do." Therefore, he divorced his wife, and all [the men] divorced their wives as well.

His daughter said to him, "Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's, because Pharaoh decreed only against the males but you hast decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world, but you have decreed concerning this world and the World-to-Come. In the case of the wicked Pharaoh, there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, but in your case, because you are righteous, it is certain that your decree will be fulfilled..."

So he went and took his wife back, and all [the men] took their wives back as well. (Sotah 12a)

There are a few questions that should be asked on this little account, especially given that Amram was the Gadol HaDor at the time, and Miriam had been all of six years old, a very MATURE six years old. But why focus on how such a great man could overlook what his six-year-old daughter clearly saw when we can discuss their relationship that led to the birth of their future savior?

Granted that they were extraordinary people. Most fathers are not Biblical characters, or leaders of their generation. Most six-year-olds are not mature enough to grasp the gravity of a situation and advise their father about how to deal with it. But, what counts here is not the age, but the example created for other parent-children relationships henceforth.

It's also important to take a step back and realize the Hashgochah Pratis of the situation. God runs the show, not a Gadol HaDor or his precocious six-year-old daughter. He wrote the script. He built into it a redemption through a six year old daughter. God is the One Who made the future redemption depend upon the wisdom and confidence of young girl. The question is, why?

Normally we say that a person is zocheh to accomplish great things because of previous great merits. But, this was before the era of Torah and mitzvos, and a six-year-old is not even obligated in mitzvos. It's before the age of the yetzer tov, so what free will does such a young child have anyhow? What merit could she have had already by the age of six that would have put her in such a glorious historical position?

The answer to that question actually appeared at the beginning of Parashas Shemos, albeit with the explanation of the Talmud:

Pu'ah was Miriam. Why was she called "Puah"? Because she cried out -- po'ah -- to the child and brought it out. Another explanation of "Pu'ah" is that she used to cry out through Ruach HaKodesh and say: "My mother will bear a son who will be the savior of the Jewish people!" (Sotah 11b)

A name defines a person. A Hebrew name defines a person's soul and spiritual drive in life. This is what Miriam was all about, the redemption of the Jewish people, even at the very tender age of six. She may have been advanced for her age, but whether she was delivering babies or predicting the birth of a future savior, her mind was always on the redemption of her people.

So much so, in fact, that people called her by a name that indicated this. And this is why Amram gave her his ear and followed her advice, even though HE was the leader of the generation. He saw a connection to their people and their redemption that he didn't even see in himself. And, it impressed him enough that her age did not cause him to downplay the importance of her message.

In fact, BEING only six, Amram knew that such a special message through such a special daughter had to be a special message from Heaven. So, rather than stand on ceremony and overlook the one who was truly seeing clearly at the time, Amram heeded the words of Miriam which led to the redemption of the Jewish people, and as Rashi points out in this week's parsha, the mystical life-sustaining well that followed them throughout their 40 years in the desert. *© 2018 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org*