Chukas 5781 Volume XXVIII Number 40

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

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 God 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" (Num. 20:12)

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 God, who were bringing water from the rock? I proposed in an earlier Covenant & Conversation that Moses neither sinned nor was punished. He merely acted as he had done almost forty years earlier when God 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 tasted bitter and they complained. God 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 God, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." God patiently instructs Moses as to what he should do, and water flows from the rock. (Ex. 17:1-7).

So Moses had successfully overcome two similar challenges in the past. Why now 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 (Taanit 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

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in honor of Leah Weiss & Izzy Klavan on their upcoming marriage! MAZEL TOV! We are SO excited for youze! ☺

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, God, 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 clich to say that leadership is a lonely undertaking. But at the same time no leader can truly survive on their 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 soulmate or soulmates 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." (Leadership on the Line, pg. 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. They lift you when you are low, and gently bring 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., pg. 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 God 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.

Even the greatest cannot lead alone. *Covenant and Conversation 5781 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"God spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'This is the ordinance (chukat) of the Torah which God has commanded, saying, 'Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring a completely red heifer, which has no blemish, and which has never had a yoke on it'" [Num. 19:1-2]. Is it more important to devote oneself to personal, spiritual development or to work for the good of the nation? I believe that a good argument can be made that commitment to the nation takes priority over commitment to one's own spiri-tual needs. And one such source is a Midrash (Shmot Rabah, Chap. 2:80), which links two kinds of animal slaughterings (not by blood, but by a common word—chukat). The Midrash has in mind the paschal lamb

sacrifice of Exodus and the paradoxical ritual of the red heifer, (purifying the defiled, but defiling all those involved in its preparation), dis-cussed in this week's portion, Chukat, and quoted above.

In regard to the paschal sacrifice, the same word, chukat, appears. "This is the ordinance (chukat) of the pesach, no stranger shall eat of it" (Exodus 12:43).

Any law in the Torah called 'chok' has no rational explanation. Essentially a 'chok' is different from those commandments which are universally understood as 'rational natural laws,' like prohibitions against stealing, killing, etc. Rational laws are the key to a society's survival, but a 'chok' is geared to the Jewish nation, religious ritual and is often mysterious, and beyond reason.

When it comes to the 'chukim' of the paschal lamb and the red heifer, their interpretation by the Midrash, focuses on two distinct approaches to Jewish life and practice.

Interpreting the verse, "May my heart be wholehearted with your statutes (chukim) in order that I not be ashamed," (Psalms 119:80), the Midrash explains that this refers to the ordinance ('chok') of the paschal sacrifice and the ordinance ('chok') of the red heifer. Concerning the first we read, 'zot chukat hapesach,' (Ex. 12:43), and concern-ing the second we read 'zot chukat haTorah' (Num. 19:2). Once on a track of linking the two statutes (choks), the Midrash ponders which of the two is the greater and more important ordinance?

The analysis takes on the form of an analogy. If two identical women go out walk-ing, how do we know which of the two is greater? Explains the Midrash that if one of the women is accompanying the other, is follow-ing behind the other, the one who is in front is the greater figure. Paralleling the case of the identical women, the Midrash guides us back to the case of the identical 'chukim' and the original question. Which is greater, the paschal sacrifice or the red heifer? Obviously, it is the one which is accompanied by the other, the one which is leading the other; and although they appear to be similar in stature, the red heifer always accom-panies the paschal lamb, following behind. Before we can eat from the paschal sacrifice we must first be purified, and it's the red heifer which provides the means of ritual purity, which must be activated before we are enabled to participate in the paschal sacrifice.

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

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

If the red heifer is about individual ritual and religious purity, and the paschal sacrifice is about national commitment, it becomes indubitably clear that when one's own spiritual development comes into conflict with a national issue, then our national commitment must come first; the national commitment is the purpose for the spiritual cleansing.

The paschal sacrifice is the goal, the red heifer is the means. Indeed, there is even a halacha which states that if the whole community is ritually impure, and if a red heifer can't be found, the people are per-mitted nevertheless to participate in the pas-chal sacrifice, symbolizing to the nation that our national unity and wellbeing transcends individual purity.

Consequently, we see how one's own spiri-tual development is only a means to the com-munal experience of the nation. Klal Yisrael comes first.

If we look at prayer, we see how its obser-vance in Jewish practice teaches us some-thing unique about our priorities. More often than not, prayer is an occasion when an individual trembles before God, an individ-ual beseeches, an individual hopes. But for Jews, prayer is closely linked to a public moment. Individual prayer is consigned to a lower spiritual potential than when a group of at least ten, a minyan, pray together and that minyan is representative and symbolic of the Jewish nation. And, indeed, even when we pray alone, our prayer is always in plural, for the entire nation: "heal us, O God, so that we may be healed; see our affliction; restore Jerusalem to us…."

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

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The fate of the generation that left Egypt and came to the Sinai desert is finally sealed in this week's Torah reading. Even though we already read in last week's Torah portion about the disaster and eventual demise of that generation because of the slanderous report of the Spies that visited the land of Israel, Moshe somehow was convinced that he himself would escape their fate. He appears to be confident that he will yet lead his beloved people into the promised land of Israel.

However, as we read in the Torah, the Lord informs Moshe that he also will not enter the land of Israel. The Torah does give us a reason for this harsh decree against the greatest of all prophets and leaders. Moshe chose to strike the rock to bring forth water instead of complying with the heavenly order speak to the rock. At first glance, we are certainly troubled by this seemingly asymmetrical form of judgment and punishment. The retribution for this sin seems to be far too harsh, especially when we consider the decades of service, sacrifice and loyalty that Moshe previously exhibited in his relationship with the Almighty. Simply put, it seems unfair. The punishment does not seem to fit the crime.

This issue has vexed Jewish minds over the ages. It is almost as though the Torah is purposely writing a real cause-and-effect relationship regarding Moshe and the land of Israel. Because of this intuitive feeling of uneasiness about the true nature of this incident, many varied explanations and commentaries have been offered over the ages.

Maimonides described the real crime as being the tendency to become angry, and anger always leads to a ruptured relationship with the Almighty and eternity. Others have pointed out that it was not so much the behavior of Moshe, as it was that this was the appropriate time when Joshua should have taken over the mantle of leadership. Every generation has its leaders, and leaders of previous generations, no matter how great they may have been, are not destined to serve as leaders of later generations.

It is this rule of history and of human nature that governs this situation. The fact that Moshe struck the rock is not the essential reason that some commentators believe that a new generation demanded new leadership to be successful. Another nuance added to this explanation is that the leader of each generation is responsible for what happens to that generation. Therefore, it is obvious that if the generation that Moshe redeemed from Egypt and led through the desert of Sinai was not going to merit entering the land of Israel, then its leader, no matter how great and noble a person he may have been, must share the same fate of the generation that he so faithfully led.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There are differing opinions concerning the meaning of chok (commonly translated as “decree”), the type of law discussed at the beginning of Parashat Chukat (Numbers 19:2). Some maintain that chok is a law that is not understood today, but will one day be understood.

The most mainstream approach to the meaning of chok is that it is a law that does not and will not ever have a reason besides the fact that it is a decree from God. For this reason alone, it must be kept. In the words of the Talmud, “It is an enactment from Me, and you are not permitted to criticize it” (Yoma 67b).

This rationale runs contrary to the modern, critical approach to law – that everything must have a reasonable explanation. Notwithstanding this critique, this mainstream approach to chok is at the very core of the Jewish legal process.

That process is based on a belief in Torah mi’Sinai, the law given by God at Sinai to which the Jewish People committed itself. Torah mi’Sinai is a form of heteronomous law, a structure of law that operates independent of any individual or group. While rabbis are empowered to partner with God in the development of the law, at its foundation is a system of ethical monotheism.

Ethical monotheism differs from ethical humanism. Ethical humanism is solely based on what human beings consider to be proper conduct. Yet this can be a dangerous approach to deciding law. Human thinking can be relative. What is unethical to one person is ethical to another. Freud is purported to have said, “When it comes to self-deception, human beings are geniuses.”

If, however, the law at its foundation comes from God, it becomes inviolate. No human being can declare it null and void. Heteronomous law assures that one does not succumb to one’s subjective thinking or tastes when the law does not suit her or him. Therefore the law ought to be kept even when its ethical underpinnings are not understood.

To be sure, halachah is a covenantal partnership between the Jewish People and God. On the one hand, we have the responsibility to raise questions and try to understand the law’s deeper ethical message. Such questions are vital to the evolution and development of halachah. On the other hand, if after exhaustive study the law is not in sync with our ethical sensibilities, we submit to God’s teachings; God is the final arbiter.

And this in no small measure is why the idea of chok is so central. It reminds us of the limits of the human mind. As Rabbi Elie Munk points out: "An essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue." *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 AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

(Not Such) Little White Lies

This parsha contains the passing of 2 of the great people in our history, Miriam and Aharon, the siblings of Moshe Rabbeinu. The loss of Miriam brought the cessation of water, which the people received in her merit.

One would think that the lack of water would cause sadness. Instead it brought out anger and frustration.

With Aharon, the loss was felt on a much deeper level. It was not anger or sadness but true mourning, felt by everyone alike.

The reason for this profound grief was due to the fact that Aharon was an "Ohev Shalom vrodef shalom". He loved peace and pursued it. Aharon had a unique ability to reunite couples, friends and others who separated through hate.

What was Aharon's trick? How did this humble servant of G-d dissipate years of animosity and division? Psychology? Mediation? Voodoo?

It seems that it all boiled down to some little white lies that Aharon would (not so) innocently spread between the 2 sides.

When Aharon would see one person he would tell them that he was approached by their spouse, friend or relative. Aharon would tell them that they were truly sorry and wanted to make amends. He would then approach the "other side" with the same narrative.

When the 2 sides would then meet, each one believed that the other was truly remorseful as witnessed by Aharon HaKohen himself!

These "little white lies" were not so little in that they saved myriads of marriages, friendships and other suffering connections.

Aharon didn't need to employ any deep therapy or counseling. He understood that deep down people truly love and care for one another. Their separation and dispute often resulted from unkind words, loshon hara or miscommunication. Aharon realized that if each side would feel the other side had a change of heart, reconciliation would be much easier to achieve.

With Aharon's death, the feeling was that there would be no one else able to achieve such feats.

The truth is, however, that we all have the ability, on some level, to replicate that trait of Aharon.

I in no way come to diminish the amazing and holy work of therapists, counselors and coaches. Many relationships do have deep issues that must be worked through. Their experience and professional guidance can be both relationship and life saving.

In many other cases, however, it is kind words, patience and understanding that can prevent arguments and heal emotional wounds.

The loss of Aharon was painful and far reaching. It created a void but also an opportunity.

As the Mishna (Avot 1:12) states:

הִלֵּל אוֹמֵר:
הֱוֵי מִתַּלְמִידָיו שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן,
אוֹהֵב שָׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שָׁלוֹם,
אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקָרְבָן לַתּוֹרָה

"Be from the students of Aharon. Love peace and pursue peace. Love others and bring them close to the Torah"

We can all emulate Aharon.

By loving others, no matter who they are, we will foster peace and love and be the "Aharons" for our times.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Reasons for Mitzvot

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In Parshat Chukat, the Torah refers to the mitzva of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) as a *chok*, a mitzva that seemingly has no rational explanation. The Talmud cites a verse (*Vayikra* 18:4), "You shall follow My commandments (*chukotai*)," and comments: "These are the decrees of the King and there is no explanation for them… You do not have permission to think about them" (*Yoma* 67b). Does this really mean that there is no rationale for the *mitzvot*? Could it mean that we have no way to understand the mitzva's rationale, but there is a rationale known to G-d?

If there is such a rationale, why shouldn't it be revealed to humanity? Possibly because there were *mitzvot* whose reasons were revealed (specifically, that the king should not have too many wives lest they lead his heart astray, or too many horses lest he return to Egypt), and this led to the downfall of a great leader (Shlomo). On the other hand, we could argue that since reasons were given for those *mitzvot*, and for many others besides (such as Shabbat and *tzitzit*), this would seem to imply that all *mitzvot* do have a rationale. If the reason is not revealed, that is because it does not necessarily explain all the can be found within a given mitzva. Thus, King David proclaims, "I have seen that all things have their limit, but Your commandments are broad beyond measure" (*Tehillim* 119:96).

This may be at the root of the disagreement between Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yehudah as to whether we are permitted to seek reasons for *mitzvot*.

Many *Rishonim* offer rationales for *mitzvot* (including the Rambam in both the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Moreh Nevuchim*). It would seem that they side with Rabbi Shimon, who permits seeking reasons for *mitzvot*.

According to these *Rishonim*, not only is it permitted, but it is a good idea to explore the rationale for the *mitzvot*. However, other *Rishonim* disagree and say that this is what our Sages warned us about when they said regarding a prayer leader (*Mishnah Berachot* 5:3), "Someone who says 'Your mercy extends to a bird's nest' should be silenced, because he makes it seem like G-d's ways are compassionate, when in reality they are decrees."

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"This is the Torah's statute Hashem commanded you saying... red cow…" (Bamidbar 19:2) Parah Aduma is unique in that it seems to defy logic. Some are purified while others contaminated. It doesn't make sense in general, why a red cow would purify more than anything else, or why the rules applied to it are better suited for purification. However, aside from the curious nature of the mitzva itself, we find something unusual in the pesukim.

The first posuk in the Parsha reads: "And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying." Then comes this one, where it reads, "This is the statute that Hashem commanded, saying." The word "saying" seems redundant. We know that generally the word "laimor" conveys the requirement to repeat it to the Jewish People, but that was accomplished in the opening line. Why does it repeat the word "laimor" in this posuk?

The Klei Yakar addresses this and explains. When it comes to the Parah Aduma, we are at a disadvantage. The nations of the world will ridicule us and ask us what the meaning and purpose of this mitzvah is. They will ask for an explanation, and we will have none. Even though there are some mitzvos which only a select few in each generation can explain, Parah Aduma's rationale was known to not even the wisest of men, Shlomo HaMelech.

There is an exhortation in Mishlei (26:5) that we "Answer a fool according to his folly, or else he will think himself wise." The Gemara in Shabbos (30b) explains that this is in relation to Torah matters. Therefore, here, when the nations of the world are calling our mitzva into question, we need an answer. That answer, says the Klei Yakar, is, "Asher tziva Hashem," this is a command of our King. The second "laimor" is telling us that this is what we should tell those who question the mitzva of Parah Aduma.

Interestingly, Rashi says it is not just the Gentiles who will mock the mitzvah for being pointless, but the Yetzer Hara as well (see Friday's Daf Yomi, Yoma 67b). This means it will not just be the nations who question the purpose of the mitzvos, but we, ourselves may come to question whether they make sense, or more likely these days, whether they are still relevant. The answer to these nagging doubts is a resounding, "We do it because Hashem said so!"

We acknowledge that our human understanding may not be able to fathom the reasons behind the mitzvos, and even if they could, who says they need to make sense? If Hashem wants us to do something, we do it regardless of our thoughts on the matter because our aim is to serve Hashem, and that means doing whatever He asks of us.

We said that Parah Aduma seems to defy logic, and at first glance it does! Logic dictates that we should understand what we're doing, thereby being able to put more enthusiasm into it. However, there is another perspective here. If we do what Hashem says even though it "defies logic," it is logical to assume that we will find ourselves willing to trust in Hashem and serve Him for His own sake, not our own.

This is a perfect answer for the Yetzer Hara. He asks, "How can you do this mitzva you don't understand?" We respond, "This is a command from Hashem and that's good enough for us. We have no answer for you, because we don't consider it a question."

One Seder night, the Sfas Emes of Gur did all sorts of unusual things, trying to elicit questions from his son, young Avraham Mordechai, the future Imrei Emes. However, the boy sat quietly without the slightest hint of a puzzled look on his face. His father kept trying, to no avail.

Finally, the Sfas Emes asked his son if he noticed anything different about that night's meal. Avraham Mordechai said that of course he did. "Then why," asked the concerned Sfas Emes, "did you not seem alarmed and ask any questions?"

The youth answered with pure innocence, "Because I know my father is smart and whatever he does he has a very good reason for doing. Why should I be the slightest bit disturbed?"

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Cure a Snake Bite With a Snake

Parashat Chukat takes place at the time of the final approach of the B'nei Yisrael into the land which they were promised by Hashem. The Torah states, "They journeyed from the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea) to go around the land of Edom, and the spirit of the people grew short with the road. And the nation spoke against Elokim and against Moshe, why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in the desert, for there is no food and there is no water, and our soul is at its limit

with the insubstantial food. And Hashem sent the snakes, the burning ones, against the people, and they bit the people, and a large multitude of the nation of Israel died. And the people came to Moshe and said, we have sinned because we have spoken against Hashem and against you, pray to Hashem that He remove from us the snakes, and Moshe prayed for the people. Hashem said to Moshe, make yourself a burning one and place it on a pole and it will be that anyone who had been bitten will look at it and live. And Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on the pole so it was that if the snake bit a man, he would stare at the copper snake and live."

There are three basic areas which we must uncover in our investigation of this section: (1) the nature of the sin, (2) the nature of the punishment, and (3) the nature of the cure. None of these three areas is clear, still, let us look first at the nature of the sin. Rashi explains that the B'nei Yisrael became worried when they turned back in the direction of the Yam Suf. They had come all this way and this reversal frightened them. Would they suffer the same fate as their parents who were kept from entering the land because of their sins with the report of the spies? HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term "and the spirit became short" is the opposite of "slow to anger". The people complained first about Hashem's guidance and then about Moshe's leadership. Moshe should have complained to Hashem and insisted that they immediately enter the land. Rashi explains that the shortening here is similar to becoming overwhelmed by the travel and the anticipation of entering the land. The people had no more space in their hearts for any additional travel or burdens. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the people were now overwhelmed at the prospect of more travel in order to tell us that this rebellion was somewhat justified. The people were not punished for the rebellion alone but in the way in which they spoke to Hashem.

The language of the Torah is very exact. It indicates that the sin of the B'nei Yisrael was not their quick temper but their lashon hara, gossip about Hashem and Moshe. They spoke about Hashem's inability to lead them into their land. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in the desert, for there is no food and there is no water, and our soul is at its limit with the insubstantial food." The Kli Yakar, based on the Midrash on Sefer Bamidbar, explains that the food and water in the desert was more spiritual than physical. The Or HaChaim explains that the B'nei Yisrael really ate two types of food, the spiritual manna and the quail which Hashem brought to them. When the B'nei Yisrael traveled, they were fed only the manna, as it was totally absorbed in their bodies. This alleviated the need to stop to empty their bowels. When the people were stationary again, they were fed the quail, also. The Or HaChaim tells us that the people who complained the most were the same people who were the last to die in the desert. HaRav Sorotzkin tells us that there these people purchased additional fruits and food items from caravans or villages because they were lacking enough faith in Hashem that He would satisfy their needs.

We turn now to the punishment which Hashem brought on the B'nei Yisrael. Most of the commentators indicate that the "burning" snakes was a reference to poisonous. The Midrash tells us that those who complained of the "insubstantial food" were insinuating that spiritual food had a deteriorating effect. According to the Kli Yakar, their complaint was that this spiritual food might have been sufficient for people at rest but not for those who were traveling. This was equivalent to a challenge of Hashem's wisdom. The poisonous snakes were sent as a "midah k'neged midah, a punishment that fit the crime." The people complained that the special food was totally absorbed within their blood stream and the same is true of the snake poison. The people claimed that the food was insubstantial and the snake, we learned from Berishit, was punished by having to eat the dust of the land, a truly insubstantial food.

Our last area of concern is the cure. The B'nei Yisrael came to Moshe and said, "We have sinned because we have spoken against Hashem and against you, pray to Hashem that He remove from us the snakes." HaRav Sorotzkin points out that many of the people had already been bitten and were in the midst of Hashem's judgment. Moshe fashioned a copper snake for the people to look at when they were bitten. The Ramban explains that "the secret of this matter is that this is one of the ways of the Torah, every deed of which is a miracle within a miracle (neis b'toch neis). Thus [the Torah] removes injury by the same means of the cause of the injury, and heals illness by the same means as the cause of the sickness." This same idea is found in koshering a pot that becomes unfit for use. The method of k'bolo kach polto, as it swallows so will it spit out, allows us to kasher the pot in the same way in which it became unfit. The Ramban continues by telling us that a person who suffers a trauma such as a snake bite can become even more traumatized by seeing a snake even years later, and this could lead to his death. It would appear that the method chosen by Hashem would heighten the trauma for those who had already been bitten. This is the miracle within a miracle, for these people would gaze on the snake, which Moshe had fashioned, and would live. In addition, the negative association with the snake would be turned into a positive association with the cure.

It is difficult for us to understand that Hashem is always protecting us from the dangers which we face daily as we walk through our own deserts. We are unaware of the dangers only because Hashem has prevented them from happening. Still, we do know that

when a danger is allowed to come into our lives, we must turn to Hashem for help and assistance. None of us can presume that we are innocent and therefore willing to face Elokim (judgment) without the help of Hashem (mercy). We seek Hashem's mercy while at the same time we must also look into our own lives to correct our mistakes. May Hashem continue to protect us and may He answer our call when we seek His assistance. © *2021 Rabbi D. Levin*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Crime and Punishment

Crime 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