

Lionel Stein's Shabbat Newsletter

Chukat

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This newsletter is dedicated to the memories of

דוד בן אפרים יונה הכהן איתא בת אריה לייב הכהן שמעון בן שאול

&

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Shabbat Shalom – Lionel Stein
"Am Yisrael Chai"

See www.nahartorah.com edited by Rabbi David Levy and Rabbi David Chiger for more Torah articles including this week's Parsha

Editorial

What a week it was.

Depending whether you follow President Trump's views or those of Jonathan Pollard, you will be totally confused as to the outcome of the war between Israel and Iran.

In the event that Pollard's views are correct, then hopefully Trump will come back to the party as he has intimidated.

At the same time there are worrying concerns regarding Netanyahu's visit to Washington next week. There are claims of an agreed 60 day cease fire between Israel and Hamas. If these claims are correct, then the question begging is whether all the hostages will be returned?

We need to wait for Netanyahu's visit to the White House next week to know what the outcome is going to be. See Lawrence Kadish's article on page 51 of this newsletter that arrived after finishing this editorial.

The good news is that President Trump has made his views known on the Deep State lawfare attack on Netanyahu. As wished for previously in this column, Donald Trump's intervention in this matter would hopefully bring the Deep State in Israel to its senses, if it is at all possible without America having to sanction those responsible.

One thing that is pretty clear on the home front is that Cyril Ramaphosa's doubling down on BEE seems to fir the narrative of Nero fiddling while Rome was burning.

Ramaphosa, having been part of the plot of initially introducing BEE, being a recipient of it, controlling cadre deployment and sitting idly by during all the years of State Capture while Deputy President is all set on allowing his few cronies who have not yet benefitted, to still have the opportunity of joining the BEE train which has cost the economy up one trillion Rand according to Professor Gumedé.

It is obvious that programmes such as NHI etc. are there to allow his few cronies a chance to ride on the gravy train at the cost to all other South Africans.

This greed of his and his fellow cronies who have been prepared to tell off the chance of a healthy trading relationship with America is a very sad happening which must be making Nelson Mandela turn in his grave.

Kodesh

RABBI AVRAHAM CHAIM TANZER TALKS

CHUKAT

VOL 5/5785

GIVING, REALLY

וְכִסּוּ בְּגָדָיו הַכֹּהֵן וְרַחֵץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמִּיּוֹם וְאַחֵר יָבֹא אֶל הַמִּקְוָה וְטָמֵא הַכֹּהֵן עַד הָעֶרֶב

The Kohen shall immerse his garments in the Mikva, and he shall immerse himself in the Mikva, and only then may he come into the camp. He shall remain impure till evening (19, 7)

The enigma of the *Parah Adumah* – the red heifer – is well known. The person upon whom the waters were sprinkled became Pure; whereas, seeming mystically, the person who sprinkled the waters upon the impure person, would himself become impure – even though he was pure at the outset. This is famously known as ‘*metaher es hatemei'im, umetame es hatehorim*’ – an enigma that apparently even Moshe *Rabbeinu* could not fathom.

What is clear, however, is that the decision to assist a fellow to purify himself came at a price to the kohen – the sprinkler had to allow himself to lose his standing, at least temporarily, to assist the other.

“The only way you can hope to save another; to assist another, is if you are prepared to sacrifice something to help him. – Rav Yitzchak of Vorki

The great Chassidic Master, Rabbi Yitzchak Kalish of *Vorki*, explained that contained within this enigma is a profound truth: The only way you can hope to save another, to assist another, is if you are prepared to sacrifice something to help him.

If you declare your willingness to help all in need, but only if you don't have to lose anything or risk any comfort, you will not be able to help anyone at all. Hashem built this into the system in order to bring out love for people. Your ability to uplift, to inspire, to protect, and to save depends on your ability to love. The measure of your love is how much you are willing to go out of your way for people.

Rav Yitzchak of Vorki himself was initially a successful and wealthy property owner, and subsequently instructed by his own Rebbe to become a schoolmaster of only a few Talmidim. When he complained to the *Chofe* that his charges were not succeeding in their lessons, he was told: ‘*Daven* for them’. He learned valuable life lessons during his time as a School Master, and later returned to his wealth and became a world-renowned Rebbe himself.

Perhaps his Rebbe was teaching him this fundamental idea – only by giving from your talents, time, resources and care; you develop love for people. That love is what influences them.

I heard from *Gedolei Torah*, that Rabbi Tanzer *zt'l* fulfilled this ethic in person. He came to South Africa at a time when Spirituality and Torah were not ‘on the table’, they weren't a serious part of the communal agenda. Torah learning, sadly, wasn't seen as part of the agenda for success or successful people.

“I was truly surprised by what we saw here when we initially landed, but we got busy, and thought: This is exactly the work the Almighty wants us to do now. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

Himself a great *Talmid Chacham*, he gently lowered himself to fit the job that needed doing at that time, because he understood that it was a job for him to perform. He gave up some of his Greatness in Torah scholarship – a real and true ‘*Mesirus Nefesh*’ – genuine self-sacrifice. He did this as an act of love for the people and Torah.

The results, history testifies, are still incredible. A life of love – he taught *Mentchlichkeit* and *Ahavas Yisrael* and *Ahavas Habriyos*, whatever subject of Torah he was teaching.

SHALL WE DRAW WATER?

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־הַקָּהָל אֶל־פְּנֵי הַסֹּלֶעַ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּ־נָא הַמַּרְיָם הַזֶּה נֹדְעִיא לָכֶם מָיִם:

Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” (20, 10)

So much ink has been spent trying to define the sin of Moshe Rabbeinu. Rabbi Tanzer said that sometimes it appeared that too much attention was given to Moshe's ‘sin’ – holding a magnifying glass over it and going over it every year with minute precision. But that is the nature of the Tzadik – Moshe would get credit for teaching us ever greater awareness of Hashem and sensitivity to duty – that was ultimately Moshe's only honor.

The Ramban brings that the sin was contained in the words: ‘Shall we bring out water for you from the rock?’ – it implies that Moshe and Aharon would perform the miracle – losing a great opportunity for Kiddush Hashem. Moshe should rather have said ‘will Hashem bring forth the water for you?!’. It's quite incredible that Moshe forfeited his

entry to the holy land for this; surely everyone knew that Moshe almost never acted without first receiving a mitzva from Hashem? Surely it was plain to all that Moshe had greater self-effacement and abnegation of pride than any other human being ever?! Yet, he still was punished for this unfortunate ‘slip’.

Rav Simcha Zissel Brodie explained that although Moshe never intended to take the glory, Chas Veshalom, from Hashem – it was the very last thing you could accuse him of. It was certainly the very last thing on Moshe’s mind.

Nevertheless, human nature is what it is, and people are prone to errors in judgement, and are always looking subjectively – they are always looking for politics. Moshe needed to compute that before he spoke. He could not afford to give even a momentary pause for someone to suggest that Moshe had taken matters into his own hands.

It’s certainly part of the responsibility of Moshe’s leadership – every phrase matters. Every word you say is an opportunity to give credit, to thank Hashem. Even under stressful situations, Moshe was held ultimately responsible – certainly due to his incomparable standing in history – for even one mis-chosen word, even though it was clear that he was naught but the stick in Hashem’s hands....

Rabbi Tanzer’s rule of thumb was that the greater you become, the more humble and the more careful you need to be. The more people scrutinize you, the more you need to self-edit. For Moshe Rabenu, it wasn’t sufficient that he didn’t intend the wrong thing; it could not even be implied in his words.

It’s important not only to mean the right thing, but to speak in a way that reflects, as truthfully as possible, our beliefs and our values. There are no small sins when it comes to words; they are simply too potent. Perhaps Moshe, the humblest man who ever walked the face of the earth and the last one to misuse his words, came to teach history the lesson of the

A KIDDUSH HASHEM

יְעַן לֹא הִאֲמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישׁוֹנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Because you didn’t have faith in me to sanctify my Name before the children of Israel. (20, 12)

In this passage, Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon that although they have been great leaders who have brought the Nation of Israel from Slavery to Israel, nevertheless, they will not bring Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael, but rather, they will be buried outside Israel. The reason for this punishment is because of this Sin mentioned in this Pasuk: they failed to bring about a national Kiddush Hashem – Sanctification of the Name of Heaven, by hitting the rock rather than by speaking to the rock.

Surely, we would query, they did indeed bring about a great Kiddush Hashem, by the very act of hitting the rock and thereby drawing water for the entire nation and the cattle – in the middle of the Wilderness? Why didn’t Hashem recognise this wondrous act as a Kiddush Hashem?! Surely, they did bring the People closer to faith in Hashem through this incredible open miracle?

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“People will say: I like that fellow; I like his Torah; I like his G-d. Heaven forfend, if we make the wrong impression, they will certainly say the opposite. This is the great challenge of live Al Kiddush Hashem” ~ Rav AC Tanzer

Rabbi Tanzer used to speak on the great mitzvah that every Jew needs to bring about a Kiddush Hashem in the way he lives every part of his life. He needs to remember that everything he says is either bringing about a great honour to Hashem and to Torah, or *chas veshalom* the opposite. The greatest success is to act in a way that causes people to say: I like the way that fellow acts; I like his character, his ethos, and his Torah, and his G-d. People, he would say, judge Hashem and his Torah by our behaviour – that is a great responsibility.

Also, in the professional workplace and the markets, he used to admire his friends and *Talmidim* who excelled in their professional pursuits, whilst at the same time striving for and achieving great Torah achievement. Your success becomes much greater and more meaningful – it becomes a success for the Jewish People, for Torah, and for Hashem.

*

Rabbi Tanzer enjoyed repeating the answer that sure, producing a water system for an entire nation by simply striking a rock is certainly a wonder and a miracle. But it’s not yet fully a Kiddush Hashem.

Rashi explains what was missing: If Moshe would have spoken to the rock and it would have given forth its water in response to his words, people would have said: ‘If a plain rock, which cannot even speak, and cannot hear, and does not require any assistance with its livelihood, *parnassah*, nevertheless, fulfils the word of the Almighty, how more so, *kal vachomer*, we humans, who do hear and speak, who need Hashem’s assistance with our *Parnassah*, how much more so should we respond to the words of Torah that we hear... That would have been a true and full Kiddush Hashem.

Kiddush Hashem in the fullest sense, is not simply showing a miracle – to show the miracles that Hashem can do for us; rather, the essence of Kiddush Hashem is for other people to learn from us, how committed we are to Hashem – what we are prepared to do for Hashem!

“The greatest Kiddush Hashem, is that which brings people to a more profound respect for a word of Torah, for a Torah thought – even one idea. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

The greatest Kiddush Hashem, is that which brings people to a more profound respect for a word of Torah, for a Torah thought – even one idea.

This was the essence of Rabbi Tanzer’s teaching and preaching; bringing each and every listener to a greater love of Hashem’s Torah, it’s ideas and values, and to Hashem Himself.

His greatest pleasure was to treat people in such a way that they would say: if that’s Torah, then I need more of it in my own life; a message we heard many times over.

And yet, he wasn’t about making impressions; it was real and sincere, but he understood human nature and recognised that we are always making a lasting impact. Use it wisely. Be an ambassador.

THE WALLS HAVE EARS

וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֶּלֶעַ לְעִינֵיהֶם

Speak to the Rock (20, 8)

“Speak to the rock”; the crucial heart of all Chinuch – Consider to whom you are talking. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

Hashem told Moshe that although in a previous Parsha (Beshalach 12, 6), hitting the rock was ok; now it wasn’t. Now you had to speak to the rock to bring forth it’s blessed waters.

Rabbi Tanzer felt that this is a magnificent metaphor for all *Chinuch*. Gone are the days when you could rely on the proverbial rod to educate a child. Nowadays, the children aren’t the same and the generation is different. The essence to all Torah Chinuch is ‘*Vedibartem*’ – Speak! even when you feel you’re speaking to heart of stone, or to the walls; Speak, and let the words go in. In, they will go, if you speak true words of Torah.

Rabbi Akiva taught that; soft waters eventually penetrate might rocks; how much more so will the potent words of true Torah, spoken without anger, just spoken as eternal truths, will wither away at the calcified surface; the pure and True words of Torah will touch the listener in way and in a place that you, the teacher are simply not able to.

“Our job as educators and parents and community teachers is simply to place the words of Torah – a perek or a halacha, upon the hearts of the Talmidim, and let them sit. They will find their own way in. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

The Torah will do it’s own life changing, and character developing work. Your job as educator and parent and community teacher is simply to place the words of Torah – a perek and a halacha upon the hearts of the *Talmidim*, and let them sit. They will find their own way in.

Even with a stone proper, the Torah teaches, the supernatural power of Torah is to find a way to address even stones and mortar at an elemental level, and change them at a nuclear level. How much more to grow a thinking, listening human being.

There is a caveat, however, ‘*Speak to the rock*’; the crucial heart of all Chinuch – know who you are talking to. Talk in a real yet relevant way, without diluting the message, but without hitting him on the head – not with a stick, and not verbally.

Torah has a transformative quality, especially when it emerges from the heart. Just expose the ‘heart of stone’ to real Divrei Torah and see what happens. This is the real Kiddush Hashem.

CANAAN WAGES WAR

וַיִּשְׁמַע הַכְּנַעֲנִי מֶלֶךְ עָרָד יָשָׁב הַנֶּגֶב כִּי בָא יִשְׂרָאֵל דֶּרֶךְ הָאֲתָרִים וַיִּלָּחֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

The Canaanite King of Arad, who dwelled in the south, heard that Israel had come by way of the spies and he waged war against Israel (21, 1)

Arad ‘heard’ something which gave him reason to think the Jewish people were weakened, and that he could vanquish them; this informed his decision to attack.

What precisely did he hear? The Sages teach that this is juxtaposed immediately with the passing of Aharon the Kohen Gadol. This implies that Arad heard of the death of Aharon and presumed that Kelal Yisrael were weakened.

When Aharon died, the *Ananei Hakavod*, the clouds of Glory which had protected the Jews, departed; they were left vulnerable (Gemara, Rosh Hashana).

The Ateres Mordechai explained that Aharon was the ultimate man of Shalom in Israel: peace in the home, peace in the community; Shalom over Israel. As long as Aharon lived, there was a powerful force for peace in Israel – this provided a deterrent against Machlokes. When Aharon passed away, the Jewish People were left vulnerable to Machlokes; dissent set in immediately; the clouds departed; the people were weakened. This signaled to Arad that it's time to attack.

Aharon died on the 1st Av, the month of national mourning over the Churban of the Beis Hamikdash, and over the bitter Machlokes which, over the millennia, was the cause of the external enemies gaining foothold.

Where there is Shalom in a home there is Bracha; and chas veshalom the opposite is also true.

Even in the community; where there is harmonious cooperation there is Divine Bracha.

Rabbi Tanzer taught that where there is Machlokes, quarrels and dissent and hatred within the community of Kelal Yisrael, we lose the protection of Shalom. He taught again and again, that where there is Shalom in a home there is Bracha; and chas veshalom the opposite is also true. Also, in the communal sphere; where there is harmonious cooperation, there is Divine Bracha.

Rabbi Tanzer taught that you don't and can't build on divisiveness. It's a red flag. You need to think many times before waging machlokes. Thinking doesn't mean simply ruminating; it means consulting with objective, wise counsel. It's like going to war; easy to begin, and almost impossible to know where it ends.

Where the Jewish People are committed to the goal of domestic and communal harmony, to avoiding machlokes, we enjoy a special Divine protection.

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"The Fire That Waited" - A True Story from Radin

In the town of Radin, where the Chofetz Chaim (Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan) lived, there was once a terrible fire that broke out late one night. The flames spread rapidly, devouring homes and threatening to consume the entire Jewish quarter.

Panic gripped the townspeople. Buckets were passed, prayers were whispered, and families fled with whatever they could carry. But then something strange happened: the fire reached the edge of the Chofetz Chaim's street and stopped.

Not a single home on that street was touched.

Later, people asked: Why did the fire halt there?

One of the elder townsmen quietly explained: "Do you know what happens on that street every Friday afternoon? The Chofetz Chaim walks from house to house, making sure that no one is upset with their neighbor before Shabbos. If he hears of a quarrel, he won't rest until it's resolved. That street is soaked in *shalom*. And fire has no permission to pass where peace reigns."

The Chofetz Chaim, himself a Kohen, was truly a Talmid of Aharon – he was 'ohev es habrios umekarvan laTorah' – he drew the people close to Torah through love. This story has been passed down by students and biographers of the Chofetz Chaim is consistent with his life's mission: to promote peace, avoid *lashon hara*, and protect the Jewish people through unity.

Where the fire of machlokes rages, no water is enough to extinguish the problems that can ch'v occur; where the fire of strife is not granted a foothold, no fire is big enough to enter.

We have no better protection against the uncertainty of life than Shalom – peace and harmony among Yidden. When you pursue Shalom, it protects not only you, but also the people amongst whom you sowed brotherhood.

THE SONG OF THE WELL

THE KEY TO LEADERSHIP

אֶזְרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלֶי בָּאָר עָנּוּ לָהּ

Then Yisrael sang this song: Rise up oh Well (21, 17)

There is a fascinating point of comparison between the two songs that were recorded during the years of Kelal Yisrael in the wilderness. The first song was sung as they began their sojourn in the desert; even earlier, as they escaped from Egypt. The second, in this Parsha, was sung at the end of the travels in the Wilderness. The one was an opening song; the other, a closing one.

The first, more famous song in Beshalach: "Then Moshe sang and Bnei Yisrael this song...". The second song, in this Parsha, spoke of the well: "Then, (when Bnei Yisrael saw the remains of the enemy in the well water) they sang this song: 'Oh well, arise! Raise your voices in song to it...'."

The stark distinction between the two songs is that in the first song at the Yam Suf, Moshe himself led the song, he called on the nation to sing with him, and he articulated the essence of the Shira. Yet, in the final song of the Well, Moshe's name does not even appear. It simply begins 'Then Israel sang this song'.

One great insight mentioned in the Shemen Tov is that you can truly measure the success of the stay of Kelal Yisrael in the Midbar by these two songs, and indeed, by the omission of Moshe's name from the second.

In the first song – the Shiras Hayam, the people needed Moshe to instruct them to respond to the miracle with a Song to Hashem. He even needed to articulate the aspects of the Miracles that required Song. Bnei Yisrael had just left Mitzrayim; they weren't able to articulate the inspired song, they weren't able to cohesively sing together as a nation; they could respond. Moshe galvanised, inspired, and instructed them. They followed suit.

By the end of their stay in the Midbar, however, they witnessed the miracle of the well, and they, of their own accord, knew the correct response: they collectively, as one man, joined together in the song to Hashem. They knew which aspects needed highlighting; they knew how to articulate the song; they felt themselves as one united band in song.

Moshe had been successful. Ultimately, he forged all Israel into a cohesive unit with a sensitivity to recognise and evaluate, and the ability to articulate. The success of the Rebbe was that the Talmidim could function independently. They knew how to respond.

The entire 40 years in the wilderness were, after, to forge them into a Nation; indivisible, under the banner of the Torah, with hearts devoted to Hashem.

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Rabbi Tanzer was ever mindful that the success of the mentor lies not in his ability to control the people, nor even the factions, although maintaining unity amongst the factions is truly one of the goals of leadership. Rather, the key to leadership is to produce an independent, thinking, and capable community of people who can work together, and who readily recognise Hashem as the source of salvation, and who can articulate with full hearts the song to Hashem.

True leadership is not about having many people dependent on you; rather, it may be about developing them as independent functioning individuals, as a nation!

The essence of Chinuch is not just to give a 'taste' of Judaism, but rather, to foster strong, independent, self-sufficient students of Torah.

QUESTIONS ARE THE ANSWERS

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל בִּלְעָם לֹא תִלְךָ עִמָּהֶם לֹא תָאֵר אֶת הָעָם כִּי בְרוּךְ הוּא

Hashem said to Bilaam, Do not go with them; do not curse the Nation, for they are blessed (22, 12).

Bilaam was the super-prophet of the gentiles – the gentile answer to Moshe Rabbeinu. "There arose not in *Israel* another prophet equal to Moshe" (Devarim 34, 10), implying that there will arise amongst the gentiles a prophet like Moshe—that prophet was Bilaam.

We sometimes think that if only Hashem would speak to me, reveal Himself clearly, if only we knew with certainty, then we could demand of ourselves to be as righteous as Moshe Rabbenu himself.

The episode of Bilaam challenges that notion. It is put to the test and shown wanting.

The Talmud ([Makkos 10b](#)) teaches that along the path that a person wants to go, he is led. This is learned from Bilaam. When the elders of Midyan and Moav approached Bilaam to come curse Bnei Yisroel, Hashem told him: "Don't go with them, don't curse the nation because they are blessed, (22:12). In the end, when Bilaam pursued it, Hashem told him that he could go with them.

"Bilaam is held up, almost like a caricature, of how many of us would behave if we were granted a direct prophecy with Hashem.

Every person has their free will. They choose the path, and then they are led along that path.

Hashem sent so many 'obstacles' to Bilaam, in addition to instructing him clearly that He shouldn't go with Balak. With his super-sized ego, Bilaam ignored them all.

Bilaam, Rav Isaac Sher shows, was sent ten obstacles to stop him from going against the will of Hashem. Wake-up calls to make him realize that the path he was going on was contrary to the will of Hashem. He 'overcame' these obstacles and with stoic-like resolve and hatred destroyed himself for eternity.

Twice, Hashem spoke to him. He was told not to curse – 'they are blessed'. In the end, he was allowed to go but only to bless, not to curse them. He "overcame" the obstacle, going and hoping to somehow find a way to curse them.

An angel, unseen by him but seen by his donkey, was sent to block the way, causing it to veer off the path three times. He overcame. Ignoring the clear message being sent to him about the advisability of the path he was going on, he simply beat his donkey.

Then, the donkey begins to debate him, to discuss the situation with him. “Why are you hitting me?!” Once again, he simply enters a discussion with his donkey, explaining the decision-making process which led to his hitting him.

Bilaam is held up, almost like a caricature, of how many of us would behave if we were granted a direct prophecy with Hashem. We might simply continue to whine, demand and insist that we get our way.

“In truth, Hashem sends each of us many messages and messengers to alert us to the problems on our ‘derech’. We often simply ‘double-down’ and ignore them all. We only look for sometimes false reassurances that somehow what we are doing is right and justified. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

The truth is that Hashem does send each of us many messages and messengers to alert us to the problems on our ‘derech’. We mostly choose to simply incorporate each one as either something to be ignored or sometimes even as proof of the correctness of our aspirations and desires.

We see through Bilaam’s own experience, how, once our personal agenda get going, we are able to ignore even talking reasoning donkeys, and somehow that too becomes part of the norm!!

It seems that the truly tonic and key distinction between Moshe and Bilaam, was not the level of prophecy, nor the level of Divine ‘feedback’. Rather, their starting question was different. Moshe asked, from the outset, not ‘what’s in it for me?’, but rather, he made the critical distinction: Ask, what’s my duty.

Bilaam, on the contrasting polar opposite, asked: ‘What’s in it for me?’ – once you ask that question, there is simply no end to the myopia and intellectual blindness and moral equivalence that we can incorporate as ‘normal’.

Rabbi Tanzer used to often quote the famous American President, who, in crisis war years, electrified the American People with the call: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

This, Rabbi Tanzer felt is the critical difference that produces either leaders like Moshe Rabbenu, or the absolute opposite; takers like Bilaam the Wicked.

“Ask not what your society and community can do for you, but, what you can do for your people. Ask what’s your deepest and truest contribution to life, to the Jewish People, to Torah to the world. ~ Rav AC Tanzer, paraphrasing one of his favourite quotations.

Our most basic identity and operating system depends on the 5-word plan: ‘what’s in it for me’. To be a character like Moshe Rabbenu, one of his disciples, we need to change the 5-word formula to a 6-word formula: What does Hashem want from me? What does life need from me?

This was one of Rabbi Tanzer’s key educational attitude shifts. If one simply asks the 5-point plan, he can become *Chas Veshalom*, a monster like Bilaam – rationalising, scheming, and ignoring all that is holy and good, and even trampling on it.

The main question in life is never about your brains, or your aptitude or even desires. The main point is to clarify that you are here for a reason. You were placed here to do a job. For others. Now, ask Hashem for help to know your job, to know what He hopes and expects from you.

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THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Yet, Bilaam managed to ignore all the screaming headlines plastered on all the walls, almost to the point of comedy.

Sadly, we can recognise much of ourselves in his tragic comic responses. The Torah is talking directly to our own situations; we each have our own talking donkeys and hidden angels. We often miss them entirely, determined, as we are, that we be ‘right’.

“The key take-away of the story of Bilaam might be that character, rather than brains and talent, really make the person. ~ Rav AC Tanzer

Part of the Bilaam message to history is that Character, rather than brains and ego, make a person. Bilaam was one of the greatest philosophers and minds of History. Yet he could not come to terms with the simple evidence and feedback he was receiving from all around him.

Many people are so sure of their ‘read’ of the situation, and the correctness of their views, that they fail to test these against the very real signposts that Hashem places along the route.

We too have the uncanny almost superhuman ability to ignore all evidence that is contrary to our visceral desires or the imaginations of our ego.

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“When you’re so sure of yourself that you are not able to hear, to listen to feedback; it could be a sign that you’re on the wrong track.

Bilaam caricature allows us to reflect and gaze in the mirror. Do we see a donkey with speaking ability? Do we see a ‘prophet’ – unseeing and not listening?

Or can we identify a *Talmid* of Moshe Rabbenu and Avraham *Avinu*, alert to the needs of others, looking to help and not to hurt. To build and not to break down. Alert for the Divine cosmic feedback.

As Rabbi Tanzer used to say: When you’re so sure of yourself that you are not able to hear, to listen to feedback, it could be a sign that you’re wrong. You need to always be alert, listening for reasonable and intelligent feedback, and always thinking and ready to adapt and even to change course if that is correct.

QUOTES TO PONDER

Rabbi Tanzer used to say... On leadership and self-leadership

“My wife and I only came for 2 years...

Even when you can’t commit for a lengthy time, commit for a short time.

But then, don’t tell anyone that it’s just a short time. Act as though you’re in it for life, because if you tell them you’re just doing it for 2 years, no one will take you seriously.

*

“If not for my wife, I wouldn’t have dreamed of coming to Africa.

Rabbi Tanzer attributed all his communal success to Imma’s outgoing personality and her confidence and sense of adventure.

Mrs Tanzer always believed in him and encouraged him to go further.

He related that when, as a young Avrech, he discussed with Rav Hutner the suggestion of leaving for far-away Africa, Rav Hutner responded: With your wife, you’ll be ok even in distant Africa! Rabbi Tanzer always got Nachas from that approbation from one of the Gedolei Hador. (Rav Hutner had come to Cleveland, and Rabbi Tanzer, since he had a car, was assigned to drive the Gadol to his meetings; it allowed him to discuss much with the Rav.)

*

“Our job (as teachers) is not to fight with the kids. Try to build relationships.

When the relationship is strong, the Torah will naturally be absorbed almost by itself.

The for the parent, for the Rabbi, for the educator is to nurture that relationship.

*

“Avoid ego battles.

For the most part, at the heart of any machlokes lies a battle of ego. People easily feel wounded and slighted. They are sensitive. Put your ego aside for the greater goal of harmony.

Make it a clear statement of intent: In any machlokes that arises, remind yourself immediately that ego doesn’t matter; it’s only an illusion, it’s not real. Give up your ego for the sake of Shalom.

*

“No one wins a machlokes. Everyone loses.

*

“Even a small machlokes can very quickly get out of hand.

Rabbi Label Lam on this week’s Parsha “torah.org”

Educated Taste Buds

HASHEM spoke to Moshe and to Aaron saying, “This is the statute (Chukos) of the Torah, which HASHEM has commanded, saying: “Speak to the Children of Israel and they shall take to you a completely red cow- which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come. (Bamidbar 19:1-2)

This is the statute of the Torah: Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, “What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have?” Therefore, the Torah uses the term “statute.” I have decreed it; You have no right to challenge it. — Rashi

There we have it. A Chok is by definition a law cannot be explained. It transcends human reason. It is futile to search for a reason. By declaring it so we are quieting the oppositional voices in advance. Yes, we do some things that do make sense to us but it’s not so with Chukim.

However, it is not an act of blind faith or even a leap of faith. Many Mitzvos do have a Taam, a reason, literally a taste that may overlap with the human mind. Let us say someone goes to a doctor and he delivers cure and after cure, and the remedies are sensible and the results are real. Then this person goes to the same doctor with a more serious and urgent ailment and the doctor prescribes some bizarre and bitter medicine. Would the patient then defer taking the medicine until he took enough classes in pharmacology to understand how this particular pill works!? Of course not. Why should he!? The doctor has proven his medical expertise in enough revealed areas that by the time he is asking him to do something that does not make immediate sense, he already trusts his wise judgment.

Maybe now we can understand a question the Sefas Emes asks about the question of the “wise son” at the Pesach Seder, “What are these testimonies and (Chukim) statutes, and judgments that HASHEM our G-d has commanded you!?” The wise son is curious to understand Chukim and Chukim cannot be understood. He is not told that his question has a mistaken premise. No! The answer he gets is not to eat anything after the Afikomin.

He should conclude the holy night of Pesach with the taste of Matzah in his mouth. How is that an answer? Firstly, it is no mistake that the same letters that spell MATZOS are exactly the same that spell MITZVOS. Matzos are a prototype of all Mitzvos. Amongst the types of Mitzvos there is a category called CHUKIM. Like Matzos they seem to be bland and tasteless and much less attractive from the outside.

However, once they are eaten everything changes. This is the Naaseh V’ Nishmah affect! At Mount Sinai the entire Jewish Nation declared unanimously “We will do and we will learn!” Sometimes a person does not understand or appreciate a certain Mitzvah until it is practiced. Once one has an experience of the Mitzvah a flavor of appreciation is gained. I remember taking education classes and as eager as I was to gain the information it didn’t make that much sense until I got into the saddle and started to teach a class of students. Then I was a better student of the dynamics of the classroom.

Matzos and some Mitzvos start out as a Chok. Try to figure them out in the abstract and you will be met with frustration. However, once experienced or tasted then it assumes a TAAM. A flavor emerges, and it begins to make sense. Aha! Naaseh V’Nishmah- We will do and then we will learn. Some aspect of every Mitzvos starts out as a Chok and ends up with a Taam, a taste, a good reason.

In the material world of superficiality and impulsivity things work the other way around. Many even very smart people begin engaging in certain behaviors that at first make sense to them because they have some attractive quality, but later on they find themselves stuck, addicted, imprisoned by those same actions. Ask them why they do it, if they already find it wasteful and destructive and they have no good explanation.

It’s a bad habit – an impractical joke. They may start out with a Taam but after a while they become a flavorless Chok. While a Chok in the Torah begins with no flavor but the doing of it leads one to acquire **educated taste buds**.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky on this week’s Parsha “torah.org”

Symbolism Over Substance

the Land he so desired to inherit. What happened is as follows: during the desert journey, a miraculous well traveled with the Jews. This well existed in the merit of Miriam. When she died, it ceased to flow. The Jews complained bitterly that they were thirsty. Hashem commanded Moshe to “take his staff and speak to the rock,” thereupon the rock would disgorge water to nourish a parched people. Moshe did not end up speaking to the rock. The nation was upset and impatient. When Moshe chose the wrong rock they chided him. “He in turn turned to them and said, “Listen you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?” (Numbers 20:10) Immediately Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it and water flowed from it.

Hashem is angered by Moshe’s actions. “Because you have not sanctified me in the eyes of the nation, you will not enter the the land of Israel. (Numbers 20:12) Rashi, the classic medieval commentator, departs from his standard text-based explanation and bases his explanation of this verse upon the Midrash. “Imagine,” said Hashem, “if the Jewish nation would have seen that scenario. A rock, that does not talk nor hear and does not need sustenance, produces water by the request of the Almighty. Surely, they would have taken heart when Hashem speaks to them! The impact would have been far more reaching!

Moshe’s prelude to his action is noteworthy: “Listen, you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?”

The nation just wanted water, they did not ask for miracles or rock-wells. It was Hashem who told Moshe to approach the rock. Moshe knew that the water would come. Then why was his admonition given in the inquisitive mode, rather it should have been decreed in the declarative mode! Listen you rebellious folk! I am

going to extract water from a rock? It seems that Moshe, himself, (Heaven-forbid) doubted his own authority. (Though many commentaries explain the question as rhetorical.)

Surely, the rock-water connection cannot be taken at face value. All who have merely dappled in the writing of our sages are familiar with the water as Torah and the rock dry and parched. Obviously, Hashem meant to send a message that even the driest stone can produce water. Why then did Moshe not play on that lesson to the rebellious folk and tell them that even the driest amongst them could become a wellspring of Torah?

Reb Shraga Faivel Mendelovitz was the founder of Yeshiva Torah Voda'ath. Once he stayed in Miami for Shabbos at the home of a former student. The man escorted the Rebbe home from synagogue, but when he opened the door the young man was shocked and embarrassed. His wife, exhausted from a week's worth of child rearing, and the responsibility of keeping a home was sprawled on the couch. The Shabbos table was half-set, the dishes placed in a pile next to the kiddush cup and wine. In front of the head seat were two large challos sitting uncovered.

The custom is to cover the challos when making kiddush. As the blessing over bread normally precedes that of wine it is a somewhat an metaphorical embarrassment to the bread thus it is covered during the kiddush.

The student, who was embarrassed at the state of affairs, called out to his wife in a somewhat demeaning manner. "Please let us prepare the table in its entirety." Turning to his mentor, he exclaimed, "I'm sure that leaving the bread uncovered was an oversight! Everyone knows," he exclaimed shifting his self-inflicted embarrassment upon his wife, "that we must cover the challah before the kiddush.

Reb Mendelovitz was annoyed at the man's self-righteous behavior and turned to him. "Over the years, I have heard many problems that people faced. Students, couples, and adults from all walks of life have entered my office to discuss their personal situations with me. Not once did a challah ever enter my office, suffering an inferiority complex because it was left uncovered during kiddush! Do you know why?

Because we are not concerned with the challah! We are concerned with making ourselves cognizant of feelings. We worry about challos because the goal is to worry about people. How than can you embarrass your wife over not covering the challah when the act of covering is supposed to train you in sensitivity?"

Moshe understood the valuable lesson that Hashem wanted to teach His nation. But if all that was on their minds was water to drink and not the great lessons for eternity, he questioned his mission. Listen you rebellious folk," he questioned. "Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?" Do you expect that the lessons of the great parable can be taught to those whose minds are only set on the parable itself? Perhaps that is why Moshe cast the great lessons aside and hit the rock, thus disobeying Hashem's initial command. Perhaps he felt that a nation that focuses solely on the flow of drinking water couldn't understand the wellsprings of its spirituality.

In the corporeal world that our sages call a "foyer to the World To Come," we must realize that everything is a preparation for eternity. All of life's experiences can teach us how to grow and how to strive. But like extracting water from a well, we must all dig a little deeper

The Parsha Quiz by Rabbi Jonathan Fox

Questions and answers are based on the simple translation of the Chumash.

Shabbat Chukat

Q. Regarding the command to take and burn the red cow: (a) Besides being completely red, what other requirements does the cow have to fulfil? (b) Is the cow to be slaughtered before it is to be burned? (c) What three items must be thrown into the burning of the cow? (d) Does the person who burns the cow become impure? (e) For how long does the one who collects the ashes remain impure?

A. (a) It must be without blemish and no yoke may have come upon it [19:2] (b) Yes [19:3] (c) Cedarwood, hyssop and crimson thread [19:6] (d) Yes [19:8] (e) Until evening [19:10]

Q. A person who touches a human corpse remains impure for seven days. On which of the days must the ashes of the red cow be sprinkled on him?

A. On day three and day seven [19:12,19]

Q. What is the punishment for one who contaminates the Tabernacle of Hashem while he is impure after having touched a human corpse?

A. He will be cut off from Israel [19:13]

Q. A person dies in a tent. Do all vessel in the same tent become contaminated?

A. No [19:15]

Q. What is mixed with the ashes of the red cow before it is sprinkled on an impure person?

A. Spring water [19:17]

Q. Regarding the one who sprinkles the ashes of the red cow on the impure person: (a) Must he be pure when does the sprinkling? (b) Is he pure after performing the sprinkling?

A. (a) Yes [19:18] (b) No [19:21]

Q. In which place was Miriam buried?
A. In Kadesh [20:1]
Q. To whom did the People of Israel say: “If only we had perished as our brethren perished before Hashem!”?
A. To Moses [20:3]
Q. To whom did God say: “speak to the rock before their eyes”
A. To Moses [20:8]
Q. (a) How many times did Moses strike the rock? (b) What came forth from the rock?
A. (a) Twice [20:11] (b) Abundant water [20:11]
Q. In the words of Hashem, why would Moses and Aaron not bring the congregation to the Land (of Israel)?
A. Because they did not believe in Him to sanctify Him in the eyes of the Children of Israel [20:12]
Q. Which nation said: “You shall not pass through me – lest I come against you with the sword”?
A. Edom [20:18]
Q. After Edom refused to allow the Children of Israel to pass through its border, to which mountain did the Children of Israel travel?
A. To Mount Hor [20:21-22]
Q. On which part of Mount Hor did Aaron die?
A. On the top [20:28]
Q. For how many days did the House of Israel mourn for Aaron?
A. For thirty days [20:29]
Q. Which Canaanite king fought with Israel in a place that was named Chormah?
A. The Canaanite king of Arad [21:1-3]
Q. In response to the people’s complaint regarding the lack of food and water, what did God send to bite the people?
A. The fiery serpents [21:6]
Q. Of what substance was the serpent that Moses placed on a pole to heal those who had been bitten?
A. Copper [21:9]
Q. What is the border between Moav and Emor?
A. Arnon [21:13]
Q. Who sang the song about the well?
A. Israel [21:17-20]
Q. Did Sichon allow Israel to pass through his border?
A. No [21:23]
Q. What was the name of the city of Sichon, about which the poets would say that a fire has come forth from it?
A. Cheshbon [21:26,28]
Q. Who was the king of Bashan?
A. Og [21:33]

Shabbat Shalom Fax by Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

I have written several times on the incredible personal benefits of being a grateful person and that the Hebrew word “Yehudi – Jew” is derived from the Hebrew word for thank you. Thus, the very definition of being a Jew is that at your core you should express gratitude.

There are many studies that conclusively show that people who have an “attitude of gratitude” are significantly happier with their lives. People who focus on being grateful and appreciative can apply this attitude to the past (being appreciative of a teacher or other elements of childhood), present (not taking current blessings for granted), and future (looking forward with an optimistic attitude). This is a very worthwhile area of self-growth.

However, in this week’s column I would like to put aside the benefits of gratitude and focus on the obligation of being grateful and thankful to others. Sometimes we take kindness for granted and, even worse, we often adopt an expectation – as if it is owed to us. Children and teenagers often act this way and, unfortunately, some people never grow out of it. This reminds me of a joke.

A little old lady sold pretzels on the street corner for fifty cents each. Every day, a young lawyer would exit his office building at lunch and, as he passed her pretzel stand, he’d leave two quarters. However, he never took a pretzel. He would just smile and be on his way. This went on for many years.

Though they never spoke, every day he’d gently lay down his quarters, make eye contact, and she would nod her gratitude as he walked away without a pretzel. One day, as the lawyer passed her stand and placed his fifty cents, the pretzel woman softly touched his arm and finally spoke to him:

“**Sir**, I appreciate your business, and you are my favorite customer. But I need to tell you something. The price

of pretzels has gone up to seventy-five cents.”

What are the parameters of owing someone a “thank you”? If a person feels entitled to something, does he owe a debt of thanks? The feeling of owing something to someone can be rather unpleasant. As King Solomon wrote, “*A borrower is a slave to the lender*” (*Proverbs 22:7*). We therefore often go to great lengths to avoid feeling indebted to another – even to the point that we often ascribe selfish motivation for their kindness (e.g. “he didn’t do it for me; he did it for himself”).

So let’s consider to whom we may owe a debt of thanks. Do we owe the airline agent who is getting paid to help you book your flight? What about a waitress who is being paid to bring you your food (with the added hopes for a tip)? How about thanking soldiers in uniform when we see them out and about?

We must also consider how we thank people; is it merely a perfunctory “thank you”? When getting out of an Uber, do we mumble some barely audible token of appreciation or do we look the driver in the eye and convey a real expression of thankfulness? Most of us can improve at being in the moment and truly communicating a genuine sense of appreciation.

Sometimes we think that we don’t really owe them much gratitude because they (Uber drivers, waitresses, etc.) are getting paid for their service. We justify our lack of appreciation by thinking about how they are providing services for their own purpose (like paying rent). We feel that we are merely beneficiaries as an afterthought. We begin to think, “Why do I owe them a debt of gratitude if they did it for their own reasons?” In this week’s Torah reading we have a rather astonishing – almost outrageous – example of this:

“Og, king of Bashan, went out against them, he and his entire people, to do battle in Edrei. Hashem said to Moses, ‘Do not fear him, for into your hand I have given him [...]’” (*Numbers 21:33-34*).

This week’s Torah portion ends with the tale of the epic encounter between Moses and Og, the giant-king of Bashan. Og had been one of the Nephilim (those who fell or “fallen angels” see Rashi on *Genesis 6:4*); a race of giants from the time before the Great Flood. He was known as “the escapee” because he survived the destruction of the flood (see Rashi on *Genesis 14:13*). The verse tells us that Moses was very worried about meeting Og in a war.

At first glance, this seems a little odd. Beyond all the miracles that God had performed in Egypt, the Israelites had fought many wars and even decimated Sichon king of Cheshbon, who was reputed to be one of the mightiest warriors in the world. So why was Moses suddenly concerned about fighting Og?

Rashi (21:34) explains that, almost 500 years prior, Og had done a favor for Abraham, the forefather of the Children of Israel. Moses was afraid that the merit of this kindness would offer Og protection, perhaps even render him invulnerable to them. What kindness had Og done for Abraham that would offer him such divine protection?

In Genesis (14:1-12), the Torah relates some of the details of an epic war that embroiled nine kingdoms. Four kings went to war against five kings and soundly defeated them as well as many other nations that were in their path. One of the nations that was utterly destroyed was the Rephaim, a nation of giants, and Og was the lone survivor (“fugitive”). In addition, one of the five kings who was defeated was the king of Sodom, where Abraham’s nephew, Lot, resided.

Og came to Abraham to inform him that his nephew had been taken captive by the four kings. This was the “great” kindness that Og did for Abraham, that had Moses concerned about meeting Og in battle. However, this is difficult to comprehend. Rashi (*Genesis 14:13*) very clearly states that the reason Og came to inform Abraham what had happened to Lot was for his own selfish reasons.

Abraham was married to Sarah who, according to the Talmud (*Megillah 15a*) was one of the most beautiful women to have ever lived. Og hoped that Abraham would feel impelled to enter the war (to rescue his nephew) and in the course of the fighting he would be killed; thereby clearing a path for Og to be with Sarah. Thus, Og had very selfish reasons for giving Abraham the news about his nephew: Og actually hoped Abraham would die! How does this end up being such a merit that after 500 years Moses is still concerned that Og would be protected?

To illustrate, imagine for a moment that someone is attacked by a mugger and struck upon the head. Following this unfortunate event, the victim heads to the nearest hospital to be examined. The doctors decide to perform a CT scan of his head to be sure that there isn’t any more extensive damage. Miraculously, the CT scan reveals that while there is no permanent damage from the mugger’s blow, there is a cancerous tumor that

is slowly growing inside the skull that must be removed.

This tumor would have very likely killed the person and, had the person not been mugged, perhaps it would not have been caught in time. Does the victim now owe a debt of gratitude to the mugger? How's is this different than the story of Og?

It is actually very different. In the case of the mugger, the victim never wanted to suffer a severe blow to the head. That it, providentially, led to finding a tumor is really just the guiding hand of the Almighty. However, in the case of Og, Abraham **desired** the information that Og was providing **and** was well aware of risks he was taking by entering a war with the four kings.

The fact that Og had his own agenda doesn't lessen the kindness to Abraham; Og was providing Abraham a service that he wanted and Abraham was appreciative. Doing a kindness for someone as great as Abraham was reason enough to give Moses pause. Therefore, the Almighty had to reassure him.

The Torah is teaching us a remarkable lesson in *hakarat hatov* (recognizing the good that we have been given). How often have you been at a wedding or *bar mitzvah* and listened to others make disparaging remarks about the host/hostess: "Can you believe how much money they spent on this?" Or perhaps attended some lavish "Gatsby-esque" party and heard others make snide remarks about the hosts being pathetic social climbers and "nouveau riche," all the while munching on their food and drinking their wine?

We hate to feel that we owe a debt. We therefore naturally work very hard to try to ascribe a selfish motivation to a benefactor that would seem to paint them as self-serving, or in the very least as not totally altruistic. We do this to lessen our feeling of obligation to this person. This is wrong. The Torah is teaching us that we must appreciate any kindness that is done for us, irrespective of the benefactor's motivation.

Chukat, Numbers 19:1 – 22:1

The Jewish people wander the desert for their final year. The laws of the red heifer (Parah Adumah) are stated; it was burnt with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread. The ashes were then used in a purification ceremony for those who had come in contact with the dead. Strangely enough, all who were involved in the making of the ashes became ritually impure, but all who were sprinkled with them became ritually pure. It is a lesson that we must do the commandments even if we can't understand them. God decreed the commandments. They are for our benefit. We may not always know why.

Miriam, Moses' sister and a prophetess, dies. The portable well that had accompanied the Israelites on her merit ceased to flow. The people rebel against Moses and Aaron because of the lack of water. The Almighty tells Moses to speak to the rock for water. Moses gets angry and hits the rock instead and water rushes forth. However, the Almighty punishes Moses and Aaron for not sanctifying Him by forbidding their entry into the land of Israel. (It pays to follow instructions and to withhold anger!)

Aaron dies. His son, Elazar, is appointed the new High Priest. The Canaanite king of Arad attacks the Israelites and is soundly defeated. There is another rebellion over the food and water, which is answered by a plague of poisonous snakes. Moses prays for the people and is instructed by God to put the image of a snake on a high pole. All who saw it would think of God, repent, and live.

The Israelites then annihilate the Amorites and Bashanites who not only refused us peaceful passage through their lands, but also attacked us

Summary of the weekly Torah Reading by Rabbi Aron Tendler "torah.org"

1st Aliya: The laws of the Red Heifer, are detailed. In Nissan of the 40th year, Miriam died. The well dried up and the nation gathered against Moshe and Aharon to complain about their thirst.

2nd Aliya: The hitting of the rock occurred and Moshe and Aharon were forbidden to enter into Eretz Yisroel. Edom refused to allow the Jews to travel through their land.

3rd Aliya: Aharon died and Elazar succeeded his father as Kohain Gadol. They encountered the southern Canaanites (13 miles west of the Dead Sea) and bested them in battle. Following Aharon's death the protective clouds departed and the nation began to complain about the living conditions. G-d sent poisonous snakes to attack the nation and Moshe was instructed to create the copper snake on a stick to miraculously save those having been bitten. The nation traveled to Yeshimon northeast of the Dead Sea.

4th Aliya: In the conclusion of Chukas, the nation was refused access to the lands of Sichon and Og and Moshe led them into victorious battle against them. Parshas Balak begins with King Balak's offer to Billam the Prophet to curse the Jewish people and G-d's refusal to allow him to accept.

5th Aliya: Balak sent a second negotiating team and Billam was given permission to go. Along the way the incident with the talking donkey occurred.

6th Aliya: Billam failed his first two attempts at cursing the Bnai Yisroel and blessed them instead.

7th Aliya: Billam attempted his final curse but again blessed the Jews. As he left in disgrace, Billam told the assembled coalition of kings of their eventual destruction by the Jews. As a parting shot against the Jews, he advised Balak to seduce the Jewish men with Midianite women which would bring G-d's wrath down upon the nation. The Parsha concludes with the incident of Baal-Peor and Pinchas's heroism.

Summary of The Haftorah: Haftorah Chukas Judges: 11 1:33

In the year 2779 Yiftach HaGiladi became Judge - Shofet. Yiftach is described as a gifted warrior who was seemingly unworthy of becoming the Shofet. His brothers had cast out Yiftach because he was the son of a concubine. While away from his family Yiftach gathered around himself an army of outlaws. Due to the oppression and tyranny of Ammon, Yiftach was asked by the elders of Gilad to return to the family and lead them against the forces of Ammon. Yiftach was victorious and remained Shofet for six years.

There are a number of reasons why the story of Yiftach was selected to complement Parshas Chukas. First of all the issue of leadership. The Talmud tells us that "Yiftach in his generation was like Samuel in his generation."

Although Yiftach was not the greatest scholar, he nevertheless was the recognized leader and a prophet. As such he was accorded the absolute support of the Halacha and the people. This support can at times appear as dogmatic as the law of the Red Heifer. However, our absolute support for our acknowledged Torah leadership is the foundation of our legal system and the transmission of Torah from generation to generation.

The second reason has to do with the battle with Sichon. Sichon was king of the Ammonites who had taken possession of lands once belonging to Moab. Sichon refused to allow the Bnai Yisroel to pass through his lands and went to war against them. Sichon was destroyed and his lands were forfeited to the Bnai Yisroel. In our Haftorah, the king of Ammon, as cousins to the Moabites, claimed legal ownership to the lands which Moshe had taken from Sichon, who had taken them from Moab.

1 Minute on the Parasha with Rav Adin Steinsaltz z"l

Parashat Hukkat

Between Two Worlds: The Irreplaceable Essence of the Tzaddik

In Parashat Hukkat the matter of the death of the righteous appears twice: once in connection with Miriam and a second time in connection with Aaron. The death of the righteous presents us with a fundamental paradox that our sages understood when they connected Miriam's death to the laws of the red cow.

When a tzaddik departs from this world, we experience two types of loss: the measurable absence of their function, which successors can potentially fill, and the unmeasurable loss of their unique spiritual essence, which creates an irreplaceable void. This is why the Torah specifically records certain deaths—not merely as historical events, but because these individuals possessed such singular personalities that their passing marks a permanent change in reality itself.

The tzaddik cannot be truly replaced—you can appoint a new High Priest, but you cannot create another Aaron. Some people can be replaced because their value lies in their role, but Aaron transcended his function with a unique combination of wisdom, character, and spiritual qualities that could never be replicated.

The profound mystery lies in understanding that the tzaddik, in the deepest sense, does not die. Just as our sages declared that "Jacob our patriarch is not dead," these souls continue to exist within the fabric of our national consciousness. Their deaths mark transitions between worlds—the soul departing from one realm and ascending to another. This transition creates what we might call a "breach in the partition between worlds," generating both tuma and atonement simultaneously. The greater the spiritual vitality of the person who departs, the more significant the purification that emerges from this cosmic fissure. Like the red cow ritual, where death mysteriously purifies death, the tzaddik's departure creates something positive—atonement and spiritual elevation that continues long after they're gone.

The death of the righteous thus serves as both tragedy and redemption. When Aaron ascends the mountain in his priestly garments to die, he performs his final act of service—not merely leaving the world, but transforming it through his departure. His death becomes an act of ultimate sacrifice, generating atonement for the entire generation. This explains why the red cow and the death of the righteous share the same essential nature: both achieve purification through the profound paradox that death can create life, that ending can become beginning, and that loss can transform into the deepest form of spiritual gain. The greatest individuals don't just fill positions—they embody unique spiritual realities that create lasting change no successor can replicate.

In honor of the 31st Yartzeit of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. May his memory be a blessing for all Am Israel.

Tammuz 75785 – Message from the Steinsaltz Center

Dear Friends,

There is a moment that comes after every great trial—a moment suspended between what was and what could be. It arrives quietly, almost unnoticed, as the immediate crisis fades and the adrenaline subsides. In this moment, nations, like individuals, face their truest test: not how they respond to attack, but how they respond to victory.

History is littered with societies that survived external threats only to consume themselves from within. The victory becomes a mirror, and in it, people see not their shared triumph but their individual grievances. Every tactical decision gets second-guessed, every sacrifice questioned, every leader's choice dissected until the fabric of unity that once held them together unravels thread by thread. **אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בִּלְעָדוֹ** They devour each other alive, turning survivors into enemies.

But this moment also holds another possibility—one rarer and more precious. When a society emerges from existential threat with its moral foundation intact, when it has defended itself without losing its soul, it possesses something extraordinary: the credibility to imagine peace. Not the hollow peace of exhaustion, but the substantive peace that comes from strength tempered by restraint.

Israel's recent victory was remarkable not merely for its military precision, but for its moral consistency under impossible pressure. This was not accidental—it flowed from a tradition rooted in Torah, which demands righteousness even in war. The ancient commandment **צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּ** - justice, justice you shall pursue—applies especially when pursuing justice is most difficult. Against an enemy that glorified civilian murder, Israel maintained rules of engagement. Against calls for collective punishment, it pursued targeted justice.

The Torah's wisdom in demanding moral conduct during warfare is profound: it recognizes that how a nation fights determines not just whether it wins, but what it becomes. This is why studying Torah as our guide remains crucial—it provides the moral framework that prevents victory from corrupting the victor. This restraint was not weakness disguised as virtue, but strength refined by eternal principle—the kind of strength that can reshape a region. When the world watches a nation defend itself with both power and conscience, something shifts in the broader moral landscape. The cynics, initially skeptical, find their arguments complicated by uncomfortable evidence of ethical warfare. The fence-sitters discover that moral clarity still exists in a murky world.

Now comes the test of what to do with this moral capital. The choice is stark: turn inward toward recrimination and finger-pointing, or turn outward toward the possibility that this victory could herald something unprecedented in the Middle East—the beginning of the end of an entire era of conflict.

אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ יָעֹזֵר וְלֵאמֹר יִזְכָּק -each person helps their neighbor and says to their brother: be strong. This is not merely about internal unity, though that is essential. It is about extending that same spirit beyond borders, offering strength to those ready to choose peace over perpetual conflict.

May we merit peace within and beyond.

Rabbi Meni Even- Israel Director

Antisemitism Uncensored: Let Them and Let Us by Rabbi Efrem Goldberg Senior Rabbi Boca Raton Synagogue

Last week, Piers Morgan, whose show has over 4 million subscribers on Youtube, hosted virulent and unapologetic antisemite Candace Owens. Seething with hate for the Jewish state and the Jewish people, Candace opened by calling Israel a terrorist state and falsely accusing Israel of perpetrating a genocide and a holocaust by indiscriminately and intentionally murdering innocent children in Gaza. She described AIPAC as owning American policy and claimed that American soldiers have died and will continue to die for Israel.

“I would say as an American that if we're going to get behind a regime change it should be in Israel first... I think [that would be] the position of a lot of people who are waking up to the fact that Zionism has brought us nothing but grief in America. Can you name one positive thing that Zionists have contributed to America?”

At the conclusion of the interview, Piers closed by saying, “Candice, always good to have your views on Uncensored. You know that I appreciate you coming on. Thank you.”

Good to have your views?! Would it be good to have the views of a white supremacist, a member of ISIS, a blatant racist, or anyone else filled with hate for a particular people and lies about an entire nation?

Someone shared this clip with me and I only watched a few moments, but it was enough to make me want to jump through the screen, correct the lies, and set the record straight to both the antisemitic guest and the host who has sold his soul for views by platforming such heinous individuals. Hearing them even for such a brief period of time, and then catching that conclusion about it being “good” to have her views, made my blood pressure rise, my pulse quicken, and my stomach turn.

When I calmed down it quickly struck me – why in the world did I watch that? Why did I allow them to take up space in my head and heart? They certainly didn’t impact my beliefs or opinions an iota and obviously, being a passive spectator, I didn’t influence their views either. All that was accomplished was giving them another online “view” and causing me to get terribly upset. In retrospect, there couldn’t be a worse use of time.

Hearing the distortions, lies, hate, and fake news about Israel on podcasts, viral clips, social media and even some mainstream news programs is infuriating, maddening, and ultimately unproductive. If we care about our beloved people and our people’s homeland, the truth is that there are much better ways to use our time.

In her bestselling book, “The Let Them Theory,” Mel Robbins describes an almost universal phenomenon of wanting to control everyone and everything around us. We want to dictate what people say, believe, and do, and when we can’t, it frustrates us enormously often leaving us feeling stuck. The Let Them Theory teaches how to stop wasting energy on what you can’t control and start focusing on what you can: YOU.

The theory is made up of two parts, Let Them and Let Me. When you find someone speaking, behaving, or believing things that bother you, frustrate you or disappoint you, say to yourself - Let Them. Let them think that, let them say that, let them do that. Let them. But the theory only works when followed by Let Me. Let Me focus on myself, my life, my happiness, what I can control, what I am supposed to do, who I am supposed to be.

Robbins writes: “When you say Let Them, you make a conscious decision not to allow other people’s behavior to bother you. When you say Let Me, you take responsibility for what YOU do next.” **Let Them:** Have their opinions, judge your choices, think what they want, talk behind your back. **Let Me:** Live authentically, focus on growth, find happiness. The brilliance of the theory is its simplicity and in the book she provides science-backed evidence for why it works.

Reflecting on the recent Israeli triumph over Iran and its success fighting on seven fronts over the last almost two years, one marvels at Israel’s capacity to practice Let Them and Let Me. Shutting out all the noise from around the world, Israel has focused on what it needs to do and the results are stunning. By saying “Let them,” let the haters make noise and “Let us,” let us eliminate our enemies, neutralize existential threats, and take a leadership role in providing security for the Middle East and the world, Israel has earned both the fear and respect of unlikely sources. We hope and pray that it comes to fruition but even the prospect and rumor of several countries that were previously hosts to Israel’s enemies now open to joining the Abraham Accords is welcome great news.

Rav Soloveitchik commented that slavery and subjugation come in two different forms – both the physical component and also a mentality. Physical slavery means that a person is literally under the control of somebody else who decides what he can and cannot do. The Jewish people who were under the rule and control of the Egyptians were released from this form of bondage at the time of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Nevertheless, they still were not freed from their slave mentality. They still felt inferior, subservient to the opinion and perspective of other people. They not only assumed that others viewed them as “grasshoppers,” as small and inferior, they allowed that projection to overwhelm them with fear, hold them back, and ultimately keep them from the Promised Land.

For 2,000 years we have been fighting to survive, subjugated by our host countries who orchestrated pogroms, attempted to exterminate us, or expelled us. Today, with endless gratitude to Hashem, though we remain in a state of galus, we are physically and religiously free. Yet, the long conditioned galus mentality breeds a feeling of inferiority, a concern for what others think of us. We seek validation for something as simple as a right to exist. The truth is, the opinion we should be most obsessed about is that of Hashem and the question of if we are fulfilling His vision and mission for us.

In the *beracha* with which we conclude the *maggid* section of the *seder* on Pesach, we express our hope to experience our final redemption, when we will praise Hashem *al ge’ulaseinu v’al pedus nafsheinu* – “for our redemption and the redemption of our souls.” Rav Soloveitchik explained that we anticipate the time when we will experience not only *ge’ulaseinu*, physical redemption, freedom from those who oppress and exert control over us, but also *pedus nafsheinu* – mental freedom, the freedom from our insecurities and our sense of

inferiority, so that we will have the confidence to act as we are supposed to act without worrying how we will be perceived and what others are thinking and saying.

When Hashem summoned Moshe back to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the second set of tablets, He commanded, *v'ish lo ya'aleh imach* – “and no man shall ascend with you” (Shemos 34:3). The *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*, grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, comments that whenever we “ascend,” seeking to grow and lift ourselves higher, we should not bring anyone else with us; we should not be worrying about what other people are thinking or saying about us. What others think about us is their problem, not ours. We should live with the freedom to “climb the mountain,” to rise to the greatest heights we can, without worrying at all what people are thinking.

It is true that we rely on the help and support of others and therefore it is critical to engage in lobbying and advocacy with those in elected office. If we are in a position to have our voices heard, we must use those voices as much and as loudly as possible. But when it comes to watching, listening and reading the news, we must be judicious and mindful in distinguishing between staying informed and aware of the news, and becoming aggravated and infuriated by the lies.

Let them! Let them make noise and spew hate.

And let us! Let us climb higher and higher in our unity, our love, or faith, fighting for our people and spreading Hashem's light.

Rabbi Shlomo Katz on this week's Parsha "torah.org"

Pillar of Prayer

In this week's Parashah, Aharon passes away. R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (“Netziv”; 1816-1893; rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva in Volozhin, Belarus) writes: Our Sages teach that Moshe and Aharon were equal. Nevertheless, Moshe merited to be the “Father of all Prophets” because that was the mission given to his particular Neshamah / soul. Aharon's Neshamah made him fit to be the father of all Kohanim. (Similarly, King David's Neshamah made him suitable to be the father of all kings.) The fact that these Tzaddikim had different missions does not indicate that one was greater or lesser than the other, only that their respective Neshamot had different “roots” in Heaven.

Netziv continues: Aharon's task included offering sacrifices, in the merit of which Bnei Yisrael received their sustenance. In Egypt, Netziv says, Bnei Yisrael received their sustenance from Pharaoh as long as they were slaves. However, as Pharaoh gradually lost his hold over them, he stopped sustaining them and they were sustained only in the merit of Aharon's prayer. This, writes Netziv is why the Torah places Aharon first in the verse (Shmot 6:26), “This was Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said, ‘Take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt according to their legions’.” At the time of the Exodus, it was Aharon's prayer that sustained Bnei Yisrael more than Moshe's activities. (In contrast, the next verse says, “They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take Bnei Yisrael out of the land of Egypt; this was Moshe and Aharon.” When it came to standing up to Pharaoh, Moshe comes first.)

Consistent with the above, notes Netziv, a Midrash records that Moshe eulogized Aharon as the “Pillar of Prayer.” (*Birkat Ha'Netziv Al Mechilta: Bo – Hakdamah*)

“This is the decree of the Torah . . .” (19:1)

Midrash Rabbah teaches: Hashem said, “I have enacted enactments and decreed decrees. You may not transgress My decrees.” [Until here from the Midrash]

Why does the Midrash use seemingly repetitive language? R' Nosson Lewin z"l (1857-1926; rabbi of Rzeszów, Poland) explains: Our Sages teach that Hashem “looked in the Torah and created the world,” i.e., the Torah is the blueprint for the world much as an architect's drawings serve as blueprints for a building. This means that everything in the world is somehow connected with a Mitzvah or a lesson of the Torah.

There are many things in the world that we do not understand, writes R' Lewin (writing in approximately 1907)—for example, electricity and magnetism. Nevertheless, they are a reality, and we are bound by the natural forces that produce them. Likewise, we must recognize that we are bound by the Mitzvot whether we understand them or not. Just as we cannot “transgress” the decrees of nature, so we should not try to avoid the enactments of the Torah, whether we understand them or we do not understand them. (*Petach Ha'bayit to Shu"t Bet Yitzchak: C"m*)

“Bnei Yisrael, the whole assembly, arrived at the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon. The people quarreled with Moshe and spoke up saying, ‘. . . And why did you bring us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? [It is] not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate; and there is no water to drink!’” (20:1-5)

Why did the lack of water suddenly cause Bnei Yisrael to complain that they had no figs, grapes, or pomegranates? R’ Aharon Lewin z”l Hy”d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust; his yahrzeit is this week) explains:

Midrash Shir Ha’shirim asks: From where did Bnei Yisrael get wine to accompany their Korbanot during the forty years in the desert? The Midrash answers: From the “Well of Miriam,” which produced grasses, vegetables, and trees. [Until here from the Midrash.] It follows, writes R’ Lewin, that when Miriam died and the well dried up, Bnei Yisrael’s source of fresh fruits disappeared as well; therefore they complained. (*Ha’drash Ve’ha’iyun*)

“Hashem said to Moshe and to Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them’.” (20:12)

In what way did Moshe and Aharon not believe in Hashem? R’ Yaakov Moshe Charlap z”l (1882-1951; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav) explains: A fundamental tenet of Emunah / faith in Hashem is that He will keep His promises even if we are unworthy. Thus we read regarding Avraham (Bereishit 15:6), “And he believed in Hashem, and He reckoned it for him as righteousness”—i.e., Avraham believed that Hashem would keep His promise that the Jewish People will be as numerous as the stars, even if we are unworthy.

Here, Bnei Yisrael were unworthy of receiving water miraculously, as is evident from Moshe’s rebuke (20:10), “Listen now, you rebels! Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Even so, Moshe should have believed that Hashem would keep His promise that water would come out of the rock if Moshe spoke to it. (*Haggadah Shel Pesach Mei Marom* p.106)

“For a fire has come forth from Cheshbon, a flame from the city of Sichon. It consumed Ar of Moav, the masters of Arnon’s Bamot/ heights.” (21:28)

R’ Meir Margulies z”l (1707-1790; rabbi of Ostrog, Ukraine; one of the earliest disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov) writes: Our Sages speak of there being seven Middot / characteristics that could cause a person to feel pride: beauty, strength, wealth, honor, wisdom, old age, and children (see Pirkei Avot 6:7). Therefore, the Psalms and the Prophets warn us in various places not to feel proud—among the best known (Yirmiyah 9:22), “Let not the wise man laud himself for his wisdom, and let not the strong man laud himself for his strength, and let not the rich man laud himself for his wealth.”

The Gemara (Sotah 5a) teaches, however, that a Torah scholar must feel “an eighth of an eighth” (i.e., a little bit) of pride. [Until here from the Gemara]. R’ Margulies observes: The phrase “an eighth of an eighth” implies that pride can be spoken of as having 64 parts (i.e., 8 x 8). And, since there are seven Middot that might lead to pride, there are a total of 448 (i.e., 7 x 64) parts to pride—that number being the Gematria of the word “Bamot” (במות)/ “heights”—alluding to pride—in our verse. One must engage in a “Cheshbon”/ accounting with himself to eradicate this pride, our verse hints.

We read (Tehilim 45:5), “Ride over [your foes] for the sake of Emet / truth and righteous humility.” R’ Margulies notes that the Gematria of “Emet” (אמת) is 441, seven less than “Bamot.” If a Torah scholar is encouraged to have “an eighth of an eighth” of pride, then he should have 7/448 units of pride when all seven Middot are taken into account. This leaves 441 units (“Emet”) to be replaced by “righteous humility.” (*Yachin U’Boaz* ch.3)

Shabbat

The Gemara (Beitzah 16a) teaches: “All of a person’s sustenance is determined between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, except for his expenditures for Shabbat, Yom Tov, and teaching his children Torah. For these items, if he spends less, Heaven will give him less, and if he spends more, Heaven will give him more.” Rashi z”l comments: Heaven will give him the money when he needs it or after the fact. (Rashi appears to be saying that this Gemara is not guaranteeing that a person will have the money to pay these expenditures when he needs it; one may need to go into debt to pay these bills. However, the Gemara is promising that a person who has these expenses will receive more from Heaven than he would have received if he did not incur these expenses.)

R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon) writes that the Gemara is not speaking only of physical sustenance, but also of the soul's sustenance. This means that, on Shabbat and Yom Tov, a person can attain higher spiritual levels than would have been expected of him based on his spiritual standing during the preceding High Holidays.

R' Reuven Schlossberg shlita (Rosh Kollel in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood of Yerushalayim) writes that the Vilna Gaon's comment includes two lessons: (1) that the judgment on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur addresses a person's spiritual future, not only his physical future; and (2) that that judgment does not cover the spiritual growth that a person will achieve on Shabbat and Yom Tov during the coming year.

This means, writes R' Schlossberg, that there is no limit to what a person can accomplish spiritually on Shabbat—through his Torah study, through his prayers, and through his pleasure at connecting with Hashem. A thinking person will use these days wisely! he adds. (*Da'at Ha'Shabbat* p.3)

Rabbi Yaakov Menken on this week's Parsha "torah.org"

Imaginary Fears

Several years ago, one of the writers for Torah.org reached out to me in a hurry. He had made a mistake and wanted to stop the distribution of the email he had just sent.

What was his mistake? He had identified the weekly reading as "*Parshas Bila'am*" — this was, of course, in a year when *Balak*, half of this week's reading, was read separately, unlike this year when it is read together with the previous parsha, *Chukas*.

Misnaming this particular parsha was what we might call a "scholar's error." The reading is named after the Moabite King Balak, but the story centers around *Bila'am*, the evil prophet hired by King Balak to curse the Jews. Balak is something of a minor figure in the parsha that carries his name; it is primarily about *Bila'am*!

But, of course, without the actions of Balak, the whole story of *Bila'am* would not have happened.

I heard the following from Rabbi Meilich Biderman, a well-known inspiring speaker. He asks, did you notice that Balak is in a panic about the Jews coming from Egypt, that he is terrified of them? He says the Jews "will eat up everything around us like the ox eats up the vegetables in the field" [22:4]. He expects the Jews to come through, ruin the fields, and eat the crops. That is what caused Balak to send messengers to *Bila'am* to hire him to deliver curses, and the entire parsha comes as a result of this fear.

Balak's fear was entirely, unquestionably, 100% baseless. Hashem had specifically told the Jews "Do not bother Moav and do not provoke war with them, for I will not give to you from their land as an inheritance..." [Deut 2:9]. So Balak was afraid for no reason. And because he acted on his irrational fears, he brought destruction upon himself and his people.

What do we learn from this? The Torah, Rav Biderman said, is eternal, and there's a lesson in here for us today. I should introduce what he says by explaining that our Sages teach that everything G-d does is good, in ways we do not understand, and specifically good for us. Nothing comes to a person unless G-d wants it to be so, and He only wants the best for us.

So, he says, we shouldn't be living in fear! We must remember that Hashem runs the world and there's nothing to be afraid of. Obviously, we should behave in a way that is prudent and reasonable, but not second guess ourselves, regret bad investments, or be afraid of every distant possibility. Balak's unfounded fears led to the entire story!

For those interested, it's not really possible to retract or stop a bulk email once sent. So every subscriber did receive a class entitled "*Parshas Bila'am*" that day. Yet the teacher had nothing to be afraid of—few noticed, and none, to my knowledge, lost any respect for him. It was, after all, a wise man's error!

It is interesting that Rabbi Biderman is often described as a *Mashpia*, which translates as "influencer." In today's culture, an "influencer" is a teenager or twentysomething with many social media followers, who convinces them to buy the brands that he or she is being paid to promote. Think about the difference between one "influencer" and the other. We can all be influenced, it's just a matter of which influencers we listen to!

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig on this week's Parsha "torah.org"

The Power Of Prayer

"And Moshe sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom..." (20:14)

Moshe sends a delegation to the king of Edom requesting permission to pass through his country. He instructs his emissaries to relate the Jews' experience in Egypt to the king. The Torah records that one of the statements which was made to the king was "*vanitz'ak el Hashem vayishma koleinu*" – "and we cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice".¹ From the fact that the verse states that Hashem heard our voice, rather than our cries, Rashi interprets that Moshe is sending a warning to Edom that we have the legacy of our Patriarchal

blessing received from Yitzchak, “hakol kol Yaakov”, the power of the voice of Torah; Bnei Yisroel are infused with the blessing that when we pray, we are answered.²

The king of Edom responds by saying that he will come out with sword in hand if Bnei Yisroel attempt to traverse his land. Rashi again comments that through his words the king of Edom is invoking the Patriarchal legacy which was conferred upon Eisav, the father of Edom, “by the sword you shall live”.³

Moshe must have been aware that just as Bnei Yisroel have the power of prayer to facilitate their success, the Edomites have the power of war. Why does Moshe assume that Bnei Yisroel’s Patriarchal legacy is superior?

The key to solving this dilemma lies in Rashi’s comment on the preceding verse. The emissaries relate “and with us the Egyptians dealt evilly and with our fathers.”⁴ The construct of the verse appears convoluted. Why does the verse not simply state that “the Egyptians dealt evilly with us and our fathers”? Rashi explains that the verse is stressing the notion that the affliction suffered by our fathers is a byproduct of our affliction. The “fathers” referred to in the verse are not our biological fathers who endured the servitude in Egypt with us, rather our Patriarchal Fathers who, although they were not present with us in Egypt, suffered our pain.⁵

Why is it necessary for Moshe to allude to this concept in his message to the king of Edom? The power of prayer which Bnei Yisroel have rests not only in our capacity to extricate ourselves from our own predicament, but also in our ability to relieve our Patriarchs of the distress caused to them by our situation. It is this ability which motivates Hashem to answer our prayers, not only in our merit, but in the merit of our Forefathers as well. The ability with which Edom is imbued benefits only them, and not their forefathers. Their forefathers do not feel the distress of the later generations, for they do not enjoy a closeness to them as do the Forefathers of Bnei Yisroel to the Jewish nation.

1.20:16 2.Rashi ibid. 3.Ibid. 4.20:15 5.Ibid.

Community Minded

“And Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock...” (20:11)

The Talmud relates that after Miriam died, the well, which was a water source for Bnei Yisroel in the desert, disappeared.¹ Hashem commanded Moshe to bring forth water from a rock. The Torah records that Moshe and Aharon sinned.² However, the exact nature of the sin is not specified in the verses. Rashi understands that Moshe’s sin was a result of striking the rock to bring forth water rather than communicating with it.³ The Ramban questions Rashi’s approach, for Hashem instructed Moshe to take the staff from the Holy of Holies and bring it with him. If Hashem had not intended for Moshe to strike the rock, why had He commanded Moshe to bring the staff along with him?⁴

The Maharsha points out an apparent contradiction between two Talmudic statements: The Talmud in Tractate Ta’anis relates that the well, the source of water for the entire Bnei Yisroel, was in the merit of the prophetess Miriam.⁵ However, the Talmud in Tractate Bava Metzia relates that since Avraham Avinu supplied the angels with water, his descendants had water in the desert. Was the well in the merit of Avraham or Miriam?⁶

The Talmud states that the merits of an individual help for the needs of that individual. However, an environmental change that will benefit the needs of many can only be achieved through the merits of the entire community.⁷ An individual is generally concerned with his own short-term needs and of those close to him, while the responsibility and concern for long-term needs is borne by the community. A community, by nature, is an ongoing perpetual entity and therefore, it has the responsibility to ensure that not only its short-term needs are met, but, to whatever extent possible, that all of its future members’ needs will be met as well. Consequently, all matters that might have long-term societal implications such as ecological and environmental issues must be addressed on a communal level, and then filtered down to the individuals. For a miracle to occur which would create a long-term environmental change, Bnei Yisroel had to ask as a community.

Once the well of Miriam was no longer available in the desert, the individual was concerned with his immediate need for water. Hashem instructed Moshe to give over the message to Bnei Yisroel that they should not request water to satiate only their individual needs, rather that their concern should be on a communal level, for this would ensure the availability of a long-term reservoir that would serve as a perpetual source of water. The staff symbolizes leadership, as we find in the blessing to Yehuda “the staff will not depart from Yehuda”.⁸ Moshe was not instructed to bring along the staff in order to strike the rock, rather as a representation of his leadership, for as leader he would herald the energies of the entire community, bringing them together to request a perpetual water source.

In Avraham’s merit the needs of the individual were met. What Miriam’s merit accomplished was that Bnei Yisroel would have a perpetual source of water for the ongoing community. The Talmud refers to this quality of Miriam as a “parnes”, a person who ensures that all of the needs of the entire community are met.⁹

1.Ta’anis 9a 2.20:12 3.20:11 4.20:1 5.9a 6.86b, See Maharsha 7.Ta’anis 9a 8.Ibid., See Rashi 9.Ta’anis ibid

Rabbi Yissocher Frand on this week’s Parsha “torah.org”

Why Aharon HaKohen Was Mourned by the Entire House of Israel

The *pasuk* in Parshas Chukas says, “Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom: Aharon shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the Children of Israel...” (Bamidbar 20:23-24). The Torah describes the ceremony of how Aharon HaKohen died on the first of Av, and how his son Elazar took over after him as the *Kohen Gadol*. The *pasuk* then says: “When the entire assembly saw that Aharon had perished, they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Israel.” (Bamidbar 20:29).

Rashi famously points out here that when Aharon died, the *pasuk* says that he was mourned by “**kol** Beis Yisrael” – the **entire** house of Israel. However, when Moshe died, the Torah only mentions that he was mourned by “Beis Yisrael” – the house of Israel, but not by “**kol** Beis Yisrael.” Rashi explains that Aharon was mourned by both the men and the women because he was a peacemaker who brought *shalom* between arguing parties and between quarreling husbands and wives.

This is not to say that the women did not mourn the death of Moshe Rabbeinu, but they were particularly saddened by the death of Aharon HaKohen, who was known as an *ohev shalom v'rodef shalom*, who patched up many troubled marriages. In short, there was a greater outpouring of grief for the loss of Aharon than there was for the loss of Moshe.

Avos D'Rav Nosson (12:3) describes Aharon HaKohen. The Mishna says (both in Avos and in Avos D'Rav Nosson) that Aharon was a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace. Avos D'Rav Nosson says that the *pasuk* “The teaching of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and with fairness and turned many away from iniquity” (Malachi 2:6) is referring to Aharon. Avos D'Rav Nosson then describes Aharon's peace-making technique: When Aharon would be walking along the road and meet a wicked person, he would give that person a very friendly greeting. The next day, when that person was tempted to do an *aveira*, the person would stop in his path and say “Woe is me! How can I do such a thing and ever be able to look at Aharon HaKohen straight in the eyes again? I am too embarrassed to disappoint him like that because he treated me as such a friend!” So the person ceased and desisted from doing any further *aveiros*.

I saw an observation brought down in the name of Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch (Rosh Yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Europe at the time of its destruction in 1944). As we all know, there are people who, whenever they meet you, they greet you with a big smile and say, “How are you? It is so great to see you. How are things going?” But when the person walks away from you, you feel that the greeting was really just lip service. He didn't really mean it.

Why didn't people have that attitude with Aharon HaKohen? Why didn't people say “He was just putting on an act. He doesn't really care about me!”? In fact, how was it that Aharon, who was a *tzadik*, **was** able to mean it when he greeted all those *reshaim* with such a warm and friendly disposition?

The answer is that if we reexamine that *pasuk* in Malachi which describes Aharon HaKohen, we notice that Aharon was **not only** a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace. The *pasuk* also notes that “The Torah of truth was in his mouth and iniquity did not pass his lips.” These two phrases: 1) *Toras emes hayesa b'feehu* (i.e. – he never uttered a falsehood) and 2) *avla lo nimtza b'sfasav* (i.e. – when he had to give a person *mussar*, he apparently gave him *mussar*, but it was never in an angry or annoyed way). Aharon did not give *mussar* (chastise) with venom or a put-down or scorn. This is a very difficult needle to thread. On the one hand, *Toras emes hayesa b'feehu* – when Aharon saw you doing something wrong, he was not going to pull his punches. He spoke words of truth. But yet, *avla lo nimtza b'sfasav* – he never said a cross word!

So, when he gave someone this warm “*Shalom aleichem!* How are you? It is so good to see you!” people believed his sincerity. He had the reputation of being impeccably honest. His warm greeting and his *Shalom aleichem* were not fake emotions. As much as he was known for being an *ohev shalom v'rodef shalom*, he was equally known for speaking only truth and *Toras emes*. He never faked it or put on an act.

Therefore, someone who met Aharon and was greeted so warmly by him would not turn around and do an *aveira* tomorrow – simply because he would be too embarrassed to meet Aharon again. That was a very hard tightrope to walk, but Aharon HaKohen was successful in doing it.

Saraf Sensitive Suppresses Sinful Serpent Associations

The middle of Parshas Chukas contains the story of the serpents. The *pasuk* says that the people complained that there was no bread or water, and that they were sick and tired of eating just *mann*. As a punishment, Hashem made *nechashim* (poisonous snakes) attack and bite them, causing many of Bnei Yisrael to die. Of course, at that point the people repented. Hashem told Moshe to construct a *saraf* (serpent) and post it on a flagpole. In Hebrew, there is a difference between *nachash*, *saraf*, and *akrav* – all of which refer to snakes. Here *themitzvah* was to specifically make a *saraf*, hang it on a high flagpole so that anyone bitten by the snakes could stare at it and be healed.

However, when describing what Moshe actually does, the Torah says that he made a *nachash hanechoshes* (copper snake) and placed it on a pole. Notice carefully what transpired: The plague involved *nechashim*. Hashem told Moshe to construct a *saraf* but Moshe actually constructed a *nachash nechoshes*! Moshe apparently did not follow the words of Hashem here! What happened? Why did Hashem specify a *saraf*? And if Hashem told Moshe to make a *saraf*, why did Moshe make a *nachash*?

The Rishonim (the Riva, the Rosh, etc.) ask this question. Listen to how Rabbeinu Efraim (one of the Baalei haTosfos and a disciple of Rabbeinu Tam) answers this question, and ponder the lesson we may derive from it:

Moshe Rabbeinu thinks to himself, “We are being attacked by *nechashim*; Hashem told me to make a *saraf*. Consider for a minute... When Hashem first appeared to me at the burning bush and He was displeased that I first hesitated to accept His mission, He told me to throw down my staff and turned it into a *nachash*. Again, when I was supposed to circumcise my child and I didn’t, He sent a *nachash* to swallow me up! Also, now when the people complained, He sent *nechashim*.” Moshe reasoned that every time he or the people slipped up, Hashem sends *nechashim* as a warning/punishment. Therefore, Hashem is now telling me to make a *saraf*, because had he said make a *nachash*, I would be frightened that He is coming to remind me of my past *aveiros*. In other words, Moshe felt that Hashem really wanted him to make a *nachash*, but He used the word *saraf* as a type of euphemism for the word *nachash*, inasmuch as the latter word evoked painful memories for Moshe. He knows that I am sensitive to that word and He doesn’t want to make me feel bad.

On the basis of this assumption, Moshe Rabbeinu changed what Hashem told him and made a *nachash* rather than a *saraf*. Why? Because Hashem acts with sensitivity. Hashem would even avoid saying a word which might make someone feel badly. The practical lesson of all this is simple: There is a *mitzvas aseh* (positive Biblical command) of “Hevi domeh lo” – to emulate the ways of Hashem. If the Ribono shel Olam acts with such sensitivity to human beings, how much more so do we need to act that way to each other.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman’s Sermonette

Letters of Light and Love

A Jew is a Jew is a Jew....

“Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.” That’s one of many great lines authored by the legendary Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. But we don’t always know what things mean, do we?

This week’s Parsha is called *Chukat* which, in its simple definition, means a “decree.” There are different types of Mitzvot in the Torah. There are commandments which are perfectly logical, like not stealing, or honoring our parents. We call these commandments *mishpatim*.

Then there are laws which may not be so obvious that we would have thought of them ourselves, but once we are taught about them, we can see the sense in observing them, like Shabbat or the *Chagim*, having a Brit, or wearing Tefillin. They are known as *eidot*, testaments, and they are permeated with much symbolism and deep spirituality.

But then there are laws of the Torah with no written, explicit, or even logical reason. These are called *chukim*, decrees, for which the Torah gives no explanation. These laws we need to take on faith. Most of Judaism is rather logical. But there are a handful of notable exceptions where we are required to respect the Higher Authority and bow our heads in submission to G-d. As believers, even if we don’t quite understand these laws, we still observe them.

The most famous of the *chukim* is the first item in our parsha, the Red Heifer. To be purified from having come in contact with the dead, one needed to have the ashes of a red heifer sprinkled upon them. Frankly, it was a very strange ritual which really did defy logic. That’s why it is called “**The** decree of the Torah.”

But it wasn’t only the red heifer. There’s also *shatnez*, not to mix wool and linen in the same garment. We still practice that one today. Did you know that there are *shatnez* laboratories in organized Jewish communities to help people perform this Mitzvah? And believe it or not, even something as famous and commonplace as Kashrut is also a *chok*-decree! I mean, why shouldn’t we mix milk and meat? Why is it that if we take meat which is perfectly kosher and milk which, too, is kosher, and then if we put them together it suddenly becomes *treif*? Is this logical? No, it’s not. It’s a *chok*, a statutory decree which we were not given to understand. These mitzvot challenge our faith and when we observe them, we show ourselves to be loyal, even when it tests that faith.

Of course, we believe that G-d has His own good reasons for everything He asks us to do. Whether these are in our capacity to grasp is another matter. But whether it makes sense to our mortal minds or not, we trust G-d that there must be a good reason for it, even if we don’t quite get it.

But there’s another meaning to the word *Chukat*. It comes from the word *Chakikah* meaning “engraved.” By observing these laws which challenge our rational minds we demonstrate that the Torah is so much part of our being that it is “engraved” in our hearts.

Back in the 1940’s, two venerable Chabad rabbis were visiting Chicago. When they paid a call to a wealthy businessman, he assumed they were there to collect funds for their institutions in New York. But they declined his offer to contribute, saying they were not there to fundraise but to raise awareness of Judaism. The businessman was rather taken aback. He hadn’t ever had such a visit before.

The visitors explained their mission by means of an illustration. In the old country there were traveling scribes (*Sofrim*) who would visit smaller communities throughout Eastern Europe to check the Tefillin and Mezuzahs of the country folk and ensure they were still kosher. After all, with the passage of time, the ink on the parchments could fade, thus rendering the Tefillin and Mezuzahs invalid. The traveling scribes would examine the parchments and establish if they were still kosher or required some repair.

“We are like those traveling scribes,” said the rabbis. “Every Jew is compared to a letter of the Torah. We, too, are here to check in on our Jewish brethren and see if their own letters of faith, their Jewish identity, may have perhaps faded. If they need some re-inspiration, we are here to provide it. No fundraising.”

The man was impressed.

When the rabbis returned to New York and shared this story with the previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, he remarked that their illustration was only partially correct.

A Jew is indeed compared to a letter of the Torah but not to letters of ink on parchment, but rather to letters engraved in stone, like the Tablets Moses brought down from Sinai. The difference? Letters on parchment may indeed fade. Letters engraved in stone, however, never fade. All that may occur is that some dust may come to settle on the letters, but engraved letters will never fade. Visit any Jewish cemetery and you will see the engraved inscriptions on tombstones well over a hundred years old and they are still complete and fully legible. So, too, a Jewish soul can never fade. There may be some dust or dirt that has accumulated but a Jewish *Neshama* remains intact forever.

A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Never write off anyone!

While I’ve always known this intellectually, I must confess that every now and then I meet a Jew who really challenges this characterisation. He or she seems so far removed from the mainstream of Judaism that I mistakenly think they are beyond hope. And so often I am reminded that I was wrong when I witness their most incredible spiritual transformations. People I might never have imagined were even candidates for living active, Jewishly inspired lives continue to surprise me.

I hope I never again give up on anyone. I really should know better.

The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

Shabbat 5772 Chukat

Losing Miriam

It is a scene that still has the power to shock and disturb. The people complain. There is no water. It is an old complaint and a predictable one. That is what happens in a desert. Moses should have been able to handle it with ease. He has been through far tougher challenges in his time. Yet suddenly at Mei Meriva (“the waters of contention”), he exploded into vituperative anger:

“Listen, you rebels, shall we bring you water out of this rock?” Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff.” [Num. 20:10–11](#)

In past essays I have argued that Moses did not sin. It was simply that he was the right leader for the generation that left Egypt but not the right leader for their children who would cross the Jordan and engage in conquering a land and building a society. The fact that he was not permitted to lead the next generation was not a failure but an inevitability. As a group of slaves facing freedom, a new relationship with God, and a difficult journey, both physically and spiritually, the Children of Israel needed a strong leader capable of contending with them and with God. But as builders of a new society, they needed a leader who would not do the work for them but who would instead inspire them to do it for themselves.

The face of Moses was like the sun, the face of Joshua was like the moon ([Bava Batra 75a](#)). The difference is that sunlight is so strong it leaves no work for a candle to do, whereas a candle can illuminate when the only other source of light is the moon. Joshua empowered his generation more than a figure as strong as Moses would have done.

But there is another question altogether about the episode we read of this week. What made this trial different? Why did Moses momentarily lose control? Why then? Why there? He had faced just this challenge before. The Torah mentions two previous episodes. One took place at Mara, almost immediately after the division of the Red Sea. The people found water but it was bitter. Moses prayed to God, God told him how to sweeten the water, and the episode passed. The second episode occurred at Rephidim ([Ex. 17:1–7](#)). This time there was no water at all.

Moses rebuked the people: “Why are you quarrelling with me? Are you trying to test God?” He then turned to God and said, “What am I to do with this people? Before long they will stone me!” God told him to go to a rock at Horeb, take his staff, and hit the rock. Moses did so, and water came out. There was drama, tension, but nothing like the emotional distress evident in this week’s parsha of Chukat. Surely Moses, by now almost forty years older, with a generation of experience behind him, should have coped with this challenge without drama. He had been there before.

The text gives us a clue, but in so understated a way that we can easily miss it. The chapter begins thus: “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. Now there was no water for the community...” ([Num. 20:1–2](#)). Many commentators see the connection between this and what follows in terms of the sudden loss of water after the death of Miriam. Tradition tells of a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites during Miriam’s lifetime in her merit.^[1] When she died, the water ceased.

There is, though, another way of reading the connection. Moses lost control because his sister Miriam had just died. He was in mourning for his eldest sibling. It is hard to lose a parent, but in some ways it is even harder to lose a

brother or sister. They are your generation. You feel the Angel of Death come suddenly close. You face your own mortality.

Miriam was more than a sister to Moses. She was the one, while still a child, to follow the course of the wicker basket holding her baby brother as it drifted down the Nile. She had the courage and ingenuity to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that she employ a Hebrew nurse for the child, thus ensuring that Moses would grow up knowing his family, his people, and his identity.

In a truly remarkable passage, the Sages said that Miriam persuaded her father Amram, the leading scholar of his generation, to annul his decree that Hebrew husbands should divorce their wives and have no more children because there was a 50 per cent chance that any child born would be killed. "Your decree," said Miriam, "is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, yours applies to females also. He intends to rob children of life in this world; you would deny them even life in the World to Come."^[2] Amram admitted her superior logic. Husbands and wives were reunited. Yocheved became pregnant and Moses was born. Note that this Midrash, told by the Sages, unambiguously implies that a six-year-old girl had more faith and wisdom than the leading rabbi of the generation!

Moses surely knew what he owed his elder sister. According to the Midrash, without her he would not have been born. According to the plain sense of the text, he would not have grown up knowing who his true parents were and to which people he belonged. Though they had been separated during his years of exile in Midian, once he returned, Miriam had accompanied him throughout his mission. She had led the women in song at the Red Sea. The one episode that seems to cast her in a negative light – when she "began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife" ([Num. 12:1](#)), for which she was punished with leprosy – was interpreted more positively by the Sages. They said she was critical of Moses for breaking off marital relations with his wife Tziporah. He had done so because he needed to be in a state of readiness for Divine communication at any time. Miriam felt Tziporah's plight and sense of abandonment. Besides which, she and Aaron had also received Divine communication but they had not been commanded to be celibate. She may have been wrong, suggested the Sages, but not maliciously so. She spoke not out of jealousy of her brother but out of sympathy for her sister-in-law.

So it was not simply the Israelites' demand for water that led Moses to lose control of his emotions, but rather his own deep grief. The Israelites may have lost their water, but Moses had lost his sister, who had watched over him as a child, guided his development, supported him throughout the years, and helped him carry the burden of leadership in her role as leader of the women.

It is a moment that reminds us of words from the book of Judges said by Israel's chief of staff, Barak, to its judge-and-leader Deborah: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you do not go with me, I cannot go" ([Judges 4:8](#)). The relationship between Barak and Deborah was much less close than that between Moses and Miriam, yet Barak acknowledged his dependence on a wise and courageous woman. Can Moses have felt less?

Bereavement leaves us deeply vulnerable. In the midst of loss we can find it hard to control our emotions. We make mistakes. We act rashly. We suffer from a momentary lack of judgement. These are common symptoms even for ordinary humans like us. In Moses' case, however, there was an additional factor. He was a prophet, and grief can occlude or eclipse the prophetic spirit. Maimonides answers the well-known question as to why Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive, with the simplest possible answer: grief banishes prophecy. For twenty-two years, mourning his missing son, Jacob could not receive the Divine word.^[3] Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, remained in touch with God. It was God, after all, who told him to "speak to the rock." But somehow the message did not penetrate his consciousness fully. That was the effect of grief.

So the details are, in truth, secondary to the human drama played out that day. Yes, Moses did things he might not have done, should not have done. He struck the rock, said "we" instead of "God," and lost his temper with the people. The real story, though, is about Moses the human being in an onslaught of grief, vulnerable, exposed, caught in a vortex of emotions, suddenly bereft of the sisterly presence that had been the most important bass note of his life. Miriam had been the precociously wise and plucky child who had taken control of the situation when the life of her three-month-old brother lay in the balance, undaunted by either an Egyptian princess or a rabbi-father. She had led the Israelite women in song, and sympathised with her sister-in-law when she saw the price she paid for being the wife of a leader. The Midrash speaks of her as the woman in whose merit the people had water in a parched land. In Moses' anguish at the rock, we sense the loss of the elder sister without whom he felt bereft and alone.

The story of the moment Moses lost his confidence and calm is ultimately less about leadership and crisis, or about a staff and a rock, than about a great Jewish woman, Miriam, appreciated fully only when she was no longer there.

[1] Rashi, Commentary to [Num. 20:2](#); [Ta'anit 9a](#); [Song of Songs Rabbah 4:14, 27](#). [2] Midrash Lekach Tov to [Ex. 2:1](#). [3] Maimonides, *Shemoneh Perakim*, ch. 7.