

Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

Sponsored by Saadia & Lily Greenberg
and Bryna & Paul Epstein of Rechovot, Israel,
on the occasion of the yahrzeit of Bryna and Saadia's mother,
Evelyn L. Greenberg, a"h
(Chava Tova bat Yitzchak Dov) 7 Tammuz

Volume 28, Issue 39

Shabbat Parashat Chukat - Israel Edition

5782 B"H

Covenant and Conversation Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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.

To sponsor an issue of Likutei Divrei Torah:
Call Saadia Greenberg 301-649-7350
or email: sgreenberg@jhu.edu
<http://torah.saadia.info>

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.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

"And he [Moses] said to them: "Listen now rebels"...and he struck the rock twice." (Numbers 20:10) Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav tells a tale of a king who was beside himself because his only son was behaving like a rooster: he divested himself of all of his clothes, romped about under the table, ate corn and fodder, and would only emit sounds of "cock-a-doodle-doo." When all of his trusted doctors failed to find a cure, he sought in desperation the advice of a rabbi. The first thing the rabbi did was disrobe, get under the table, and introduce himself to the hapless prince as a fellow rooster. After several days of cock-a-doodle-dooing together, the rabbi began to eat real food. "You can be a rooster and still enjoy a scrambled egg and vegetables," said the sage – and the prince joined him in the meal. And so, stage by stage, the rabbi brought the prince out from under the table and into the world of human discourse and relationships. But in order to effectuate the cure, the rabbi himself had to enter the quasi-animal world of the diseased prince.

But then why leave the hallowed halls of the beit

midrash in the first place? In the laws of the red heifer, we saw how the kohen himself risks impurity by purifying the individual who became impure.

Why attempt to purify those who are defiled if you run the risk of becoming defiled yourself? Why does the Rabbi in the Rabbi Nahman story allow himself to become “roosterized” by consorting with the Prince-Rooster. Is he not worried that he will find acting like an animal to be more pleasant and certainly with fewer responsibilities than living the burdened life of a Prince?

The answer is indubitably clear: that’s what love of Israel is all about! The kohen, the Jewish leader, must love his people to such an extent that he is willing to sacrifice a portion of his own spirituality in order to bring those who have wandered far away closer to their religious roots. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter so defined *mesirat nefesh*, the commitment of one’s soul for Torah: it cannot mean giving up material opportunities for the sake of Torah, for that would be *mesirat haguf* (the commitment of one’s body); it must mean giving up a little bit of my portion in the World to Come so that my fellow Jew can have a portion as well.

And perhaps that is the responsibility of leadership as

well. After all, it can be justifiably argued that if the religious leader had done a proper job, no Jew would ever become defiled!

What has this to do with the punishment of Moses for his having struck the rock twice, thereby demonstrating displaced anger against the nation which he in truth wanted to strike! God told him to speak to the rock but he struck the rock; he was expressing displaced anger at a thirsty and complaining Jewish people. He even lashed out at them, referring to them as “rebels,” criticizing not only their negative actions by ungratefully and unfaithfully kvetching for water but also denigrating their very personalities by classifying them as “rebels.” He had lost the ability to empathize with them, to “get under the table with them” and feel their discomfort – as he had done so effectively when they were slaves in Egypt and first began their desert experience. Perhaps we cannot blame him for having lost patience – considering all the ingratitude and rebellions he had suffered. But nevertheless he was sinning! In striking the rock (i.e. the Jewish people who were stiff-necked as a rock) he demonstrated that he no longer had the requisite love for his people which is after all the primary requirement for Jewish leadership.

The kohen, on the other hand, scion of Aaron who “loves all creatures and brings them close to Torah,” takes the life-giving water of eternal Torah and transforms the dead ashes of the red heifer into the life-giving purity of the religious ritual; the kohen, representative of God, affirms the eternity of Israel and the ability of every Jew to be purified from death to eternal life within the continuity of the traditions of his people. And his love for Israel is so great that he is willing to defile himself in order to bring redeeming purity to his fellow Jews who have become impure. And similarly the Rabbi in Rabbi Nachman’s story understood that only by empathizing and loving the Rooster-Prince would he have the possibility of weaning him away from his roosterism and restoring him to the world of humanity.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
The Many Songs of Leadership

Everyone has his or her own voice. Some express it loudly and clearly; some just mumble or whisper. There are those who let their voices be heard only in their professional lives and are silent and withdrawn at home. Others use their voices only within their families and stifle their voices in the outside world.

Our voices can be expressed in a variety of ways: through speech, through the written word, and even by means of our postures and gestures. Our voices can also be expressed through song.

In a book he wrote for managers of organizations coping with the complex challenges of the 21st century work environment, Stephen Covey makes the following statement: “There is a deep, innate, almost inexpressible yearning within each one of us to find our voice in life.” That statement is the basis for his book, *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, which is designed to help organizational leaders find their voices and inspire others to find theirs.

Each of the great leaders of the Jewish people, from biblical times down to the present, had his or her own distinctive voice. The voice of Abraham was heard throughout his world; the voice of Isaac was almost silent in comparison. Moses described his own voice as defective, yet he was capable of supreme eloquence. Joshua’s voice is never described as wanting in any way, yet we have few examples of his personal unique voice.

Some of our great leaders, including Moses, expressed their voices in song. We have the Song of the Sea in which the

voice of Moses dominates; his sister Miriam responds to Moses’ song in her own voice; the Prophetess Deborah and King David are exemplary in their ability to use the medium of song to express their unique and distinctive voices.

All of the above are examples of how individual Jewish heroes and heroines found and expressed their voices. This week’s Torah portion, Parshat Chukat, provides an example of an entirely different kind of a voice: not the voice of one person, but the voice of an entire group, indeed of an entire nation. It is the Song of the Well, of the Be’er:

“...the well where the Lord said to Moses, ‘Assemble the people that I may give them water.’ Then Israel sang this song:

Spring up, O well – sing to it –
The well which the chieftains dug,
Which the nobles of the people started
With the sceptre, and with their own staffs.
And from the wilderness to Mattanah,
and from Mattanah to Nahaliel,
and from Nahaliel to Bamoth...” (Numbers 21:16-19)

This is a much briefer song than the song that Moses led when the people of Israel miraculously crossed the Sea.

But part of this passage too, at least in the synagogues with which I am familiar, is chanted melodically.

I have long been impressed by the fact that this week’s Torah portion, in which the Song of the Well appears, describes a critical transition in the leadership of the Jewish people. From the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people essentially have had three leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. In this week’s parsha, Miriam dies and is buried; Aaron too is “gathered unto his people” and is mourned; and Moses learns that his leadership role will come to an end sooner than he had thought, before the Jewish people enter the Promised Land.

This is indeed a story of transition, of the end of an era, of the passing of the mantle of leadership to a new generation.

No wonder then that the song sung in this week’s parsha is so very different from the song sung by Moses at that triumphant moment near the beginning of his leadership career.

Our Sages tell us in the Talmudic tractate of Sotah that the Song of the Sea was sung by the people responsively. That is, Moses said the first phrase, which the people said after him.

He proceeded then to the second phrase, and the people echoed him. Moses was an authoritative leader, and the people were obedient followers. Moses was the active composer of the song, the choirmaster as it were, and the people were but the choir.

In this week's Torah portion, two of the leaders pass from the scene, and Moses learns that his leadership authority is waning. The Song of the Well is an entirely different leadership song from the Song of the Sea. In this week's song, the entire people sing as one. It begins not "Then Moses sang this song," but rather "Then Israel sang this song." The leadership passes from one Divinely chosen charismatic leader to the people as a whole.

The people find their voice, and it is the voice of song. How beautifully this is expressed in the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni (Chukat Note 764):

...after 40 years, the people finally matured and began to sing a song on their own accord, saying, "Master of the Universe, it is now incumbent upon You to do miracles for us and for us to sing, as it is written: 'It has pleased the Lord to deliver us and that is why we sing our song all the days of our lives...'" (Isaiah 38:20)

Jewish history has known epochs in which there were clear leaders, gifted and often charismatic individuals who, by virtue of their wisdom or heroism, seemed ordained by the Almighty Himself to lead our people. But we have also known times, such as the present, when such prominent leaders are not apparent.

It is at times such as these that we all must assume leadership responsibilities. It is at times such as these that we cannot afford to humbly refrain from acting as leaders in our own families and communities. It is at times such as these that we must, each of us, find our own voices and sing the songs of leadership.

**Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's
Derashot Ledorot: A
Commentary for the Ages**

Weakness – The Fatal Flaw

Our sidra this morning tells of one of the most painful episodes in biblical history, one which was seared into the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the incident of mei meriva, "the waters of contention" (Numbers 20:13). The Israelites, after the death of Miriam, complained about the lack of water. From a mere water shortage, they escalated their complaints to a general attack on Moses, expressing a preference for having remained in Egypt as comfortable slaves

over being in the desert as starving and thirsty freemen.

Thereupon, the Lord told Moses and Aaron, "You shall address the rock [or, speak concerning the rock] before them, and it will give forth its waters" (v. 8). Moses and Aaron then turned to the Children of Israel and said, "Listen here, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Then Moses raised his hand with the staff in his hand he smote the rock twice and the water came out.

The punishment ordained for Moses and Aaron was severe: "Because you did not have sufficient faith to sanctify My Name before the Children of Israel, therefore you will not enter the Promised Land but will die on this side of the Jordan" (v. 12).

What was their sin? The biblical text is unclear, and many interpretations have proposed by commentators both ancient and modern. Rashi offers the most popular explanation: Moses was commanded to talk to the rock, and he hit it instead. However, Nahmanides is unhappy with this interpretation because everything Moses did during his ministry was performed by the striking of the staff. Besides, as we indicated above, Moses and Aaron were not commanded to speak to the rock, but about it. Maimonides maintains that the

sin of Moses and Aaron was their anger. They lost their temper when they said, “Listen here, you rebels.” Nahmanides, however, criticizes this interpretation as well because, first, Moses was right in expressing his anger, and second, there are other occasions when Moses appeared to lose his temper and he was not reproached. Nahmanides therefore follows the interpretation of Rabbenu Ḥananel and maintains that the sin of Moses and Aaron was to use the first person, “Shall we bring forth water,” rather than, “Shall He (the Lord) bring forth water.”

My own interpretation, which I respectfully submit to you, is an expansion and modification of that offered by Abarbanel and certain modern exegetes: The misdeed of Moses and Aaron was that of weakness. The first reaction of Moses and Aaron when they heard the rebellious complaints of the Children of Israel was not the immediate response of challenge, but of fear and retreat.

Moses and Aaron retreated from before the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and there they fell on their faces. When they should have stood up, they fell back.

More precisely, I believe we can pinpoint the sin of Moses in the

second strike of the staff. Permit me to explain.

Moses and Aaron started to assert themselves when they confronted the Children of Israel and said, “Listen here, you rebels.” However, they kept themselves back. They restrained their response. Now psychologists, especially psychoanalysts, have taught us that inhibited aggression is usually directed against the self or against inanimate objects. If I am angry at someone and secretly wish to harm him I will stamp my foot or slap my thigh.

Now, the first time that Moses struck the rock was understandable. Everything he did, from splitting the Red Sea to bringing forth water, was performed with a strike by the staff. However, the second time he hit the rock, it was an act which expressed misplaced hostility, originally felt toward the Israelites, now redirected towards the rock.

Why was that wrong? What should he have done? Simply this: He should have expressed his anger directly to the Israelites, rather than the inanimate rock. Crudely put, he should have wielded the staff not on an innocent rock, but on the heads of this ungrateful and recalcitrant people who, after thirty-eight years in the desert, still proved that they were

immature slaves, still whining, “Why did you take us out of Egypt?” One could expect this from a generation that was born in slavery and still primitive and immature – not from a generation born in freedom in the wild desert.

Moses and Aaron should not have fled, not have feared, not have conceded, not have compromised, not have taken it out hysterically on a rock. They should have encountered the Israelites with force and indignation.

In other words, Moses and Aaron were taught – and through them, we are taught – that weakness in a leader can be a fatal flaw.

Jewish leaders have always been commanded to be tender and loving. Moses and David are, in our tradition, the archetypes of gracious leadership. Both were taken from the sheepfold to become the shepherds of Israel. Just as a shepherd must learn to look after every stray lamb, to pick it up tenderly and hold it close to his breast, so must the leader of our people be a shepherd to human charges. But not always! There are times that strength and power and courage and resistance are called for in a leader. So, the first King of Israel, Saul, was deposed because he was too merciful, too compassionate, too soft, towards

Amalek, where he should have been firm and strong. The Talmud (Ketubot 103b) tells us about the death of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was both the most eminent scholar of his generation and the nasi, the political leader of all of Israel. On his deathbed, his children came in to bid him farewell. Rabban Gamliel, his son, entered, and his father transmitted to him the orders of leadership, telling him how to conduct himself as his successor. And he said to him, “My son, conduct your presidency with strength.” Lead from on high, with dignity and power and pride.

Leadership is not meant for diffident weaklings. A leader must often act against the masses. A leader need not necessarily be a “consensus president.” He must be at the head of his people and sometimes demand of them, reproach them, rebuke them. That vox populi vox dei, that the voice of the people is the voice of God – is not a Jewish idea!

The Torah teaches us something of historic importance in recording the punishment meted out to Moses because of that second strike. Weakness is a fatal flaw in Jewish leadership. Sometimes you think you are being good when you are really doing evil. You think you are helping, and you are destroying.

You submit to momentary compassion, and in the process you lose the Promised Land.

A Jewish leader must be gentle but must also be strong. He must be considerate but must know how to use power. Power, of course, can corrupt. But the attainment of a good life requires the benevolent use of power. Without it, we are in contempt of emuna (faith) and we have failed to perform kedushat Hashem (the sanctification of God’s Name).

When we do use power benevolently, then it becomes a source of blessing: “Blessed are You, O Lord, ozer Yisrael bigvrura (who girds Israel with strength).”

And blessed is Israel when it responds with its own strength.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Power of One to Purify the Many

Parshas Chukas begins with the laws of Tumas Mes, where we learn that if a person comes in contact with a dead body (or is merely under the same roof as a dead body) he is given the status of a ‘Tameh Mes’ and the only way for him to become tahor (pure) is for him to be sprinkled with the water of the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) on day three and day seven of a seven-day procedure.

The pasuk reads, “And the pure one shall sprinkle on the impure one on the third day and on the seventh day, and he shall purify him on the seventh day; then he shall immerse his clothing and immerse his flesh in water and be pure in the evening. [Bamidbar 19:19]. There is an interesting passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) which certainly requires further exposition. Rav Yehoshua ben Kafsai said “My whole life I read this pasuk ‘the pure one shall sprinkle on the impure one...’ and I assumed that a single tahor individual needed to sprinkle the Parah Adumah water on a single impure individual.” Rav Yehoshua ben Kafsai then says, “This was the case until I learned otherwise from ‘Oztroseha shel Yavneh’ (literally – the storehouse of Yavneh) that a single tahor individual can even sprinkle on many tameh individuals.”

The question is, what does it mean he learned this law from the “Otzros of Yavneh”? What does the Talmud Yerushalmi mean by the term storehouse of Yavneh? Rav Meir Shaprio, the Lubliner Rav and the founder of the Daf Yomi concept, was also a powerful orator. He presents a homiletic exposition to this passage of the Talmud Yerushalmi.

What happened in Yavneh? At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai met Vespasian, the Roman General who later became Emperor of the Roman Empire. Vespasian granted Rav Yochanon ben Zakkai three wishes. One of the three things Rav Yochanon ben Zakkai asked for was “Yavneh and her Sages.” Yavneh was a city on the Mediterranean Coast of Eretz Yisrael. It had a Yeshiva. Rav Yochanon pleaded that this Yeshiva be spared so that despite the great Destruction that was coming to the Temple and the Jewish population in Jerusalem and other parts of the country, he would have a few remaining Talmidei Chachomim who would preserve Torah and Judaism for future generations.

The Talmud (Gittin 56b) suggests that Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai may have made a mistake. Perhaps one of his requests of Vespasian should have been to spare the Beis HaMikdash. Be that as it may, Rav Meir Shapiro suggests that the Yerushalmi, in referring to the “Otzros of Yavneh,” was indeed referring to the lesson learned from the Yeshiva of Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai in Yavneh!

The Torah that we learn here today, and the fact that there are

still people who learn Torah throughout the Jewish world, is the result of the few Talmidei Chachomim left in Yavneh after the Churban HaBayis who literally saved the world of Torah. Had they been wiped out, Torah would have been forgotten.

So, what do we see from the “Otzros of Yavneh”? Rav Yehoshua ben Kafsai was saying, “I see from Yavneh the power of one individual. One person—and certainly a few good people—can make a difference, can save the world! I always thought that one tavor person can sprinkle on one other tameh person and have a one-on-one affect. But from Yavneh I see that one tavor person can affect hundreds of people.”

We have seen in our lifetime individuals who have revolutionized the world. It is his homiletic insight, so we can cite him as an example. Consider Rav Meir Shapiro himself. It is mind-boggling to think of the zechus Rav Meir Shapiro has for coming up with Daf Yomi—now in their 14th cycle of daily Talmud study, completing Talmud Bavli once every seven-and-a-half years by synchronized study of a Daf a Day! Thousands and thousands of people worldwide learn Daf Yomi. Rav Meir Shapiro did not live 2,000 years ago or even 200 years ago. He lived in the 20th

century. He came up with an idea that revolutionized the world. There are people like that.

There are others as well—Rav Aaron Kotler, the Vilna Gaon, the Ramban and the Rambam—people that revolutionized the Torah world. But even people like us can make a difference. One person can make a difference. For example—this is not a plug, but it comes to mind—The Ner Israel Rabbinical College, which many in my audience had the zechus to attend, started in 1933 with four students. Those four boys came to a nothing of a Yeshiva—it hardly even existed. But because four people came, it came into existence. Those four people who ‘took the plunge’ in 1933 can take at least partial credit for all the thousands of people who have passed through the portals of Ner Israel in all the subsequent decades of its flourishing development. They made a difference. This is what the Gemara means when Rav Yehoshua ben Kafsai says, “This I learned from the ‘Otzros of Yavneh’.” This is why one pure person can effectively purify many tameh individuals.

The Ultimate Battle Between the Sechel and the Lev

The pasuk in this week’s Parsha says, “The Canaanite, king of Arad, who dwelled in the south, heard that Israel had come by

the route of the spies, and he warred against Israel and captured a captive from it.” [Bamidbar 21:1]. So, who is this? There is a very interesting Rashi here. He explains that this Canaani nation who lived just south of the southern border of Eretz Yisrael who attacks Klal Yisrael is actually none other than our old nemesis Amalek, because it says about Amalek [Bamidbar 13:29] that they dwell in the land of the South.

If this nation is Amalek, what does our pasuk mean when it calls its leader “the Canaani”? He is not a Canaani but is an Amaleki? Rashi explains: They disguised their language to speak the Canaanite language (rather than the Amalekite language) in order to trick the Jews. The plan was to mislead Bnei Yisrael to pray to Hashem “to deliver this Canaanite nation into our hands” when in fact they were not Canaanites! Their strategy was to deflect the prayers of the Jews by having them pray for the wrong thing!

Rashi, however, notes that there was a major flaw in their “battle plan”. The Jews noticed that they were dressed like Amalekites, even though they were speaking the language of Canaan. The Jews therefore became suspicious and were unsure whether they were dealing with Canaan or with Amalek. That is why, Rashi

continues, Bnei Yisrael offered a generic prayer without mentioning a specific nationality: “If You will deliver this nation into my hand...” [Bamidbar 21:2].

Let me ask a question: These Amalekites are so wise and so perceptive that they realize that if a Jew davens to the Ribono shel Olam, it is going to be effective. They are even so knowledgeable that they know if a Jew davens to Hashem and he utters the wrong Tefilla, it is not going to be effective. They know the Almighty listens to prayer and that it is effective and how precise it must be. Furthermore, they knew that the Jews already did battle with Amalek once (at the end of Parshas B'Shalach) and they knew the Jews realized Amalek was a fierce enemy. The Jews recognized that defeating Amalek would require dedicated and focused prayer. Part of Amalek's plan was to pretend they were only Canaanites. The Jews would think they were doing battle with a pushover nation, so their davening would not be as intense. Less intense davening will not be as effective.

One might ask: If Amalek knows all this, the power and effectiveness of prayer and the existence and omnipotence of Hashem, then why do they remain Amalek? Why do they

persist in their evil ways? Why don't they say, “Listen, Hashem Elokim Emes”? How can one remain an Amaleiki if he knows all of this? Why not throw in the Amaleki towel and say “I give up. You are right” and convert to Judaism?

The answer is that their sechel (intellect) may have told them that, but whatever their tayvos (lusts) and lifestyle had been was not compatible with being a Jew or being a Shomer Mitzvos. I can see something as clear as day right in front of my hand, but there is a long distance from a person's brain to his heart. They may have known it with their minds. The point could have been proven to them intellectually and rationally, but if it does not fit in with a person's personal agenda, he may not make that final leap. He will twist and turn and rationalize and be in denial, but will refuse to honestly confront the truth.

This is not only the story with Amalek. This is the story with all of us. We know the Emes. We know that the Ribono shel Olam knows everything we do. We know what He expects of us. But from time to time, we do things that we should not be doing. Ay, we know the truth? We know that one day we will need to pay a price for this? But there is a big difference between

the Sechel (intellect) and the Lev (heart).

We see another example of this in this week's parsha. There is a big dispute among early authorities regarding the exact aveira (sin) of "Mei Meriva." What did Moshe do wrong? Rashi and other commentaries learn that he hit the rock, when he should have spoken to it. The Rambam in Shmoneh Perakim offers a different explanation. He says the aveira was that Moshe Rabbeinu lost his temper. He said "Hear ye, you rebels." [Bamidbar 20:10]. There must be fifteen different interpretations as to what the aveira was.

The Ramban here cites an explanation of Rabbeinu Chananel, which he endorses. He explains that their aveira was in verbalizing the question "Shall WE EXTRACT for you water from this rock?" implying that it was within their power, not that of the Almighty, to perform such a miracle. Moshe's aveira was giving the nation an opening by which they might not fully believe in the powers of Hashem.

Let us ask the following question: Chazal say that all of Klal Yisrael, which numbered in the millions of people, all stood around the rock and saw the rock. But how could that be? It is impossible to fit two million

people into a ten square foot area. Rashi explains that it was a miracle. "This is one of the places where a small area (miraculously) held a great number of people." Furthermore, Chazal say that once this Rock opened up, all the rocks in the area began spouting water. Another miracle!

Thus, there could absolutely be no denying that they were witnessing miracles from Heaven. There was no way anyone could err and believe it was some kind of trick that Moshe was doing though sleight of hand. And yet, Chazal say that from the fact that Moshe used the expression "WE SHALL EXTRACT for you water" – people could rationalize and say "It is not from G-d, it is from Moshe Rabbeinu."

This is yet another example of the phenomenon that something undeniable can be staring a person in the face, and yet, if the person wants to rationalize and wants to 'make a mistake' and deny, he can deny: "No! Moshe Rabbeinu had some kind of trick up his sleeve." It is the same principle: Something can be as clear as day, but if for some reason psychologically we don't want to believe and we don't want to accept, we will find an excuse.

I once said over the following story, but it bears repeating. It is another classic example of this same idea:

A story occurred with Rav Yechezkel (Chatzkel) Levenstein, the mashgiach of Yeshivas Mir in Europe, and later of Ponevezh in Eretz Yisrael. An irreligious cab driver who was driving Rav Chatzkel remarked that he had once witnessed an open miracle.

When secular Israelis complete their army service, they typically unwind by touring some exotic location. After his army service, this cab driver decided to tour a mountainous region in Africa with some of his army buddies. One night, they awoke to hear one of their friends screaming in terror. The young man was enveloped by a huge boa constrictor, which was squeezing the life out of him.

They had no idea how to free their friend, and they were afraid to do anything to the snake, lest they antagonize it and make it squeeze even harder. Facing what seemed to be the inevitable, one of the friends said, "I know that when Jews are about to die, they recite Shema. Maybe you should recite it now."

As soon as the ex-soldier screamed, "Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem

Echad,” the snake unwound itself and slithered away into the darkness of night.

“That miracle changed my friend’s life,” the cab driver concluded. “He vowed to become a baal teshuvah, and he kept his word. He traveled directly back to Israel and is now a thoroughly religious Jew.”

Rav Chatzkel turned to the cab driver and asked, “U’mah itcha—and what about you?” “Me?” the driver responded in a quizzical tone. “The Rav doesn’t understand. The snake wasn’t wrapped around me; it was wrapped around my friend. “He had the snake around his neck – what does that have to do with me? Let him become frum. Why should I change my lifestyle? What do you want from me?”

Now, you might think that if someone witnesses such an event, it should have a personal impact on him. He should react. He should say “Look at this!” The answer is that if someone wants to deny, he can be staring at a miracle and still deny. A person can see two million people in a small area, a person can see water coming out of stones, a person can believe in the power of prayer like Amalek did – but if a person wants to continue living the life that he has been living, then he will

continue to do so no matter what.

This is the ultimate battle between the Sechel and the Lev. Our job is to see to it that our Sechel overpowers our Lev.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

The key to finding our way through the maze of life...

What’s the point of a precept if we don’t have a reason for it? This is a dilemma we face when reading the commencement of Parashat Chukat which introduces us to the concept of a ‘chok’. Our ‘chukim’ are a small proportion of the mitzvot of the Torah for which no reason is given – and the example at the beginning of our parasha is ‘parah adumah’ – the Red Heifer. If someone was ‘tammei’ (impure), in order to become ‘tahor’ (pure), the ashes of the Red Heifer which had been ‘shechted’ (slaughtered) in an appropriate way, were administered – and as a result, that person became pure. However, the person who administered the ashes became impure – it doesn’t make sense! Yet, it’s a law from Hashem, and it’s one which we carried out, with great passion!

My appreciation of the chukim is inspired by one of the most wonderful parables I’ve come across, which is found in the book ‘Mesillat Yesharim’ (The

Path of the Just) – and I’m going to modernise it somewhat.

A man once walked into a maze, and on the other side there was a tower. The aim of the game was to make one’s way through the paths of the maze in order to reach that tower. But though people would try their best, the paths would take them to this side, or that side; to an angle or backward – and people would become completely lost!

Straight after walking into this maze the person hears a sound. It’s a voice, and it says “I am a man standing on the top of the tower, I can see you with my binoculars and through this megaphone I am guiding you. The man is listening to the instructions – he would love to follow them to reach the tower, but he’s got a problem – they don’t make sense! Why is he being instructed to walk backwards, in order to reach the tower which is ahead of him?

So either he can say: “that person on the top of the tower can see far more than I will ever know or see – I’ll put my trust in him” – and as a result he will follow the instructions and he will find that the path that goes backwards actually leads him to the connecting path which will take him all the way to the tower.

Or he could say “no, I reject that

– the sounds I’m hearing that can’t be authentic, this ancient form of communication is irrelevant to me – I’ll find my own way”. Perhaps he might still get there by chance or he might become totally lost, or he could find a point somewhere within the maze which he will presume is the tower and from which he will get some form of fulfilment – and that’s very much like our lives. Soon after coming into this world we discover that it’s a maze. We’re hedged in. There are doubts. There are problems. There are challenges. We are looking for the tower of happiness, of meaning and fulfilment. We are so privileged because Hashem can see everything that we cannot, he knows all and through His Torah which is the megaphone, He addresses us and gives us instructions.

Sometimes the instructions make sense, sometimes they don’t. But if we follow the laws of Hashem we will be on the highway to that tower of meaning, fulfilment, hope, and joy in life.

Yes, this world can sometimes be a maze, but the laws of Hashem are amazing.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel
Encyclopedia of Jewish
Values*

The Underlying Concepts of Mitzvot

The very first words of our Parsha "*Zot Chukat Hatorah*—This is the *Chok* of the Torah" refer to the unique Mitzvah-commandment of the Red Heifer. But these words are problematic. Assuming the word "Chok" signifies a Mitzvah-commandment that man cannot comprehend, then why does the Torah seem to tell us that this is the only Chok? And Rashi's explanation (Rashi commentary to Numbers 19:2) why this specific Mitzvah is called a Chok is similarly questionable.. He says that the non-Jews will make fun of the Jews for a such a strange Mitzvah. But by calling it a Chok, it will satisfy them. Why should that make a difference to a non-Jew? And for a Jew, if a Mitzvah, then it is a commandment from God that must be obeyed, no matter what the underlying reason. So, what is the difference to the Jew if a Mitzvah is called a Chok or not? There are many non-Chok Mitzvot that also seem incomprehensible to most Jews. Why are these not called Chok? Should a Jew ever try to investigate reasons for commandments at all, since once a reason is assigned to a Mitzvah, there is clear danger that some Jews will now claim that the Mitzvah is not

applicable to them. Thus, we have to ask: what exactly is a Mitzvah? What is a Chok? And should Jews try to find the deeper reasons why they perform that which God commands?

The main reason for the performance of Mitzvot-commandments by Jews is not because they are good, moral, or noble deeds or actions, but rather, because they are commanded by the Almighty. These actions are the backbone of Judaism, one of the primary means by which a Jew relates to God. What is the ultimate purpose of performing these commandments given by God?

The Mishna describes the three pillars on which the world stands: Torah Learning, Worship of God, and Kind Deeds (Pirkei Avot 1:1-2). Each of these may be seen as a means by which finite man relates to the infinite God: by Torah learning, by animal sacrifice in Temple times and through prayer today, and by performing man-to-man positive actions-commandments. While the sources seem to say that although all three are legitimate paths to God, it is the performance of commandments that supersedes the other two paths. For example, the Talmud (Sukkah 49b) states that the act of giving Tzedaka (Jewish charity) is more important than

the bringing of all the sacrifices. Especially today, after the Temple's destruction, when sacrifices are longer brought for sin, the performance of Mitzvot has an added component of achieving atonement for sin, as alluded to in the Talmud (Berachot 55a). Maimonides stresses this idea when he states that the Jew should perform the commandment of giving charity immediately prior to prayer (Maimonides, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:15), so that the prayer should more readily be accepted because of the performance of a commandment.

When Torah learning and Mitzvot are in conflict and only one may be fulfilled, the performance of the Mitzvah takes precedence over the learning of Torah (Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:4). The Mishna (Pirkei Avot 1:17) informs us that the main goal in life should be the action, the performance of Mitzvot, and not the learning of Torah. It is true that Torah learning is the means that brings one to proper action —Mitzvot (Kiddushin 40b), the Jew's purpose in the world is the performance, not merely the learning. A person who only learns Torah, without the performance of Mitzvot, is compared to a person without a God (Avodah Zara 17b). Thus, of all the paths to God, the performance of Mitzvot is

primary. This is reflected in the interpretation of the verse "This is my God, and I will beautify Him (Exodus 15:2)." How does the Jew beautify God? By performing Mitzvot in a beautiful manner, such as using a beautiful Shofar, Lulav, etc. (Shabbat 133b).

Belief vs. Action in Judaism -

Like all religions, Judaism possesses some numerous beliefs (Maimonides, Thirteen Principles of Faith, Albo's book of basic Jewish beliefs, and others). However, unlike most other religions, the beliefs in Judaism take a secondary role to actions -- Mitzvot. Even the most basic belief -- the belief in God Himself -- takes a back seat to the performance of Mitzvot. The Jerusalem Talmud states (Jerusalem Talmud, Chagigah 6b) that while God desires both belief and performance of Mitzvot, He prefers if the Jewish people were to abandon Him, as long as they continued to observe the Torah. In most religions, the ultimate goal, the ultimate religious "high" achieved occurs when man is in the presence of God Almighty. In the Torah itself, however, Abraham excuses himself from the Divine Presence, after God came to visit him following his Brit Milah operation, in order to tend to his three guests whom Abraham thought (at the time) were Arab travelers (they were really angels). Thus, performing

the Mitzvah of welcoming strangers to one's house was more important to Abraham than staying in the presence of God Himself. Abraham only rejoins God when these guests have left (Genesis 18:1-22). From this Biblical story, the Rabbis derive that in Judaism, the Mitzvah of welcoming guests is of greater importance even than being in the presence of God (Shevuot 35b).

A further demonstration that it is the performance of the Mitzvot that is the ultimate goal of the Jew can be seen from the tragic end of the greatest prophet in Jewish history, Moses. Despite his greatness, Moses was denied his ardent desire -- to enter the Land of Israel. Moses pleads with God to enter but is rejected. The Rabbis ask why it was so important for Moses to reach the Land. They answer that only in Israel could Moses perform more commandments -- those commandments indigenous to living in the Land (Sotah 14a). Thus, it is his desire to perform Mitzvot, and not merely his love for the Land of Israel, which caused Moses' great desire to enter Israel. A similar idea can be seen in relation to another great Jewish leader, Rabbi Judah the Prince, who was frequently compared to Moses in his pre-eminence and love of the people (Ketuvot 103b). When his students entered Rabbi Judah on his

deathbed and saw that he was weeping, they asked him why he was crying. He answered that his greatest fear of dying was that he would no longer be able to perform Mitzvot (Ketuvot 103b).

The Purpose Of Mitzvot - Why does God want the Jews to perform all of the 613 commandments? On a certain level, we can never truly understand God's motives.

There are numerous sources that tell us that, by definition, man cannot possibly understand God. Nevertheless, we can begin to understand certain motives of God through the Scriptures themselves that give us some clues. In addition, some the great commentaries of the past speak about certain "reasons" of God, and through their insight, we can gain an understanding as to the reasons for the performance of Mitzvot in general. The Torah states that the performance of Mitzvot will benefit each person (Deuteronomy 10:13). Though they may not understand the nature of this advantage and even how it works, Jews trust the Torah that they do profit in some way and these rituals are not frivolous. Like the written complex guide to an automobile, the driver may not understand why he or she is instructed to do certain maintenance features, but trusts

that the creator of the car knew how to keep maintain it or make it better than the driver does. The Midrash (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 13:3) states that the purpose of the commandments is to purify the Jewish people, which is also reflected in the Mishna (Mishna Makkot 3:16). Just as the purification of any element involves extracting the harmful and extraneous matter to be left with the highest form of that element, Jews can, in a spiritual sense, look at the commandments in the same manner.

Through the commandments, Jews become better people, since the commandments help them eliminate spiritual imperfections in their personalities and behavior. Again, they may not understand how this works precisely. But they can readily comprehend that the person who is constantly doing good deeds (Mitzvot) for his fellow man will have to eventually become a good person, even if that is not his nature. In fact, even if a person did not believe in God, yet still performed all of the commandments, this person would be an admired human being who was a good and giving person. This idea can be demonstrated by those who observe the details of the commandments to visit the sick (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:1-3), help the poor

(Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 247-259), return lost objects (Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 659-671) and the general emphasis (mentioned 36 times in the Torah [Bava Metzia 59b]) to assist the downtrodden such as stranger, orphan and widow.

A third possible purpose for the commandments may be simply to honor God. This is expressed in the Mishna (Avot 6:11) as the purpose of the Jew. It is also the manner in which the Jew beautifies God (Exodus 15:4) according to one opinion in the Talmud, as noted above. Finally, the function of the commandments today, in addition to all the other purposes, is to protect the individual from harm (Nachmanides, commentary on Deuteronomy 22:6) and to achieve atonement for the sins of each Jew (Berachot 55a).

Underlying Reasons For Commandments - There has been much debate as to whether or not there are individual reasons for each commandment. Even if there are reasons, many question if man should seek out these reasons to give the Mitzvot more personal and individual meaning. Clearly, the main reason to perform any commandment is simply because God commanded these actions. This is reflected in the verse in Leviticus (Leviticus

18:4) and in the name "commandment" itself. Even though many commentaries have given explanations and reasons for individual commandments, it is important to note, however, that each of these commentaries has also stressed that a reason alone cannot be the motivation for the performance. Rather, it is God's word and command in the Torah that compels the Jew to do the Mitzvot. The reasons offered are only to give man more meaning once he has decided to obey and practice God's commandments.

The Torah itself did not give individual explanations for commandments, precisely because man would then decide to practice each commandment depending on whether that person would identify with that particular reason. Thus, no justification was given in the Torah, in order to ensure that performance would not be tied to personal interpretations or meanings. The most famous example of this notion in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) records that King Solomon, the wisest of all men, attempted to determine the particular reasons why a king may not have too many wives and horses (Deuteronomy 17:16-17), and why Solomon determined that this commandment was inapplicable in his case. Of course, after violating these commandments, Solomon paid

dearly and was punished, as even his superior powers of reasoning turned out to be mere rationalization. The Midrash (Midrash Shemot Rabbah 6:1) records that, later on, King Solomon himself realized his error in trying to interpret the precise intention of the Torah. This Talmudic passage shows us that, if performance were left to our individual interpretation, each of us would rationalize that the reasons for many Mitzvot were inapplicable to us (i.e., we do not need a Shabbat today as a day of rest as we have Sunday for rest), when, in reality, the Mitzvot do apply and have meaning for all of us today (see chapter about "Shabbat" (vol. 4) for the "reasons" behind its observance today. In fact, all Mitzvot have so many different meanings on so many different levels, suited for different types and levels of Jews, and no one individual reason should be the justification to perform or not perform a particular Mitzvah. As people change and mature, the meaning and reasons they find in each Mitzvah also change.

And yet, for the people committed to practicing Mitzvot, finding a basis and rationale give the performance so much more meaning. That is why Maimonides stated that the practicing Jew should indeed search for the meaning of commandments (Maimonides,

Hilchot Me-ilah 8:8). Maimonides strongly believed that each Mitzvah does indeed have a foundation, and it is man's goal to try to find meaning (as long as the performance is not tied to the meaning). For some Mitzvot, their intent seems more apparent than others, Saadia Gaon divided commandments into *Sichliot*, which are logical, and *Shimiyot*, which are not logical. Others explain the *Mishpatim* to be those commandments that are within human grasp while *Chukim* are beyond human comprehension. Maimonides claims that all the commandments can be understood, and man has the ability to grasp them, but the *Chukim* are more difficult to comprehend (Maimonides, Hilchot Temurah 4:13). Other commentaries do not agree with Maimonides' assessment. Nachmanides (Nachmanides on Leviticus 19:19 and Numbers 19:1), for example, believes that though the commandments do have reasons (they are not whims of God), but that man cannot possibly hope to understand God's intentions, as they are beyond human comprehension. Rashi (Rashi commentary Leviticus 18:4), following the Midrash says that says that reasons do not really exist for each Mitzvah. God simply wants us to obey these commandments.

***This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at nachum@jewishdestiny.com**

OTS Dvar Torah

Faith in the Unclear and the Unknown

“There are things that are hidden, we won’t understand and we won’t know/ we will also do things, seemingly without reason/ there’s no need to ask and investigate into everything/ sometimes, it’s fine not to know everything”

This is the refrain of Zohar Argov’s well-known song, “There are things that are hidden.” Parshat Chukat is best known for its mystery; it purifies the impure, but as it does so, it also defiles those who perform the purification.

We are lucky – particularly in today’s day and age with the boundless knowledge Google puts at our fingertips – that there is a parsha that reminds us that there are still some things we can’t understand, and we should find this humbling. The answer to some questions is “because”, or, as we find in Tehillim,

“Happy are the people who have it so.”

Sometimes, it’s OK not to know everything, and to simply do what Hashem commands because he commanded it, as innocently as a child who accepts the authority of others even when he or she doesn’t understand the reasons. The Torah, and Hashem’s limitless wisdom are beyond us, and beyond our understanding. We should be honored that we don’t understand everything, that we’re part of something so great that it can’t be understood through human reasoning.

The heifer’s ashes purify. The Mishna (Tractate Parah 3:5) tells us of the seven red heifers identified throughout the history of the Jewish people. The last red heifer in our region was burned over two thousand years ago, during the time of the second Temple. Are we then doomed to remain impure until the end of time?

Maimonides, in his book, *Sefer Tehara*, The Laws of Ritual Baths 11-12, shows us one way to purify ourselves today without the red heifer – by purifying our souls of evil thoughts and opinions. Here, he means correcting our ways and our thoughts through the “waters of knowledge”.

It is obviously clear that the laws concerning defilements and purities are biblical decrees, and not things which the human mind can determine; they are classified as divine statutes... but is a matter of biblical decree; it depends on the heart’s intent... just as one who sets his mind on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, even though nothing new is produced in his physical being, so one who sets his mind on purifying himself from all the spiritual defilements, namely wrongful thoughts and evil traits, becomes clean as soon as he made up his mind to abstain from those notions, and brought his soul into the waters of reason...

Parshat Chukat doesn’t deal just with the red heifer. This parsha recounts many events – 13 in total – perhaps more than any other Parsha in the Torah: The case of the red heifer 2. The laws of purity and impurity 3. The death of Miriam 4. The waters of contention – Moses strikes the rock 5. Moses and Aaron are punished 6. Emissaries are sent to the king of Edom, and the king turns down their request. 7. The death of Aaron 8. The war against the Canaanites dwelling in Arad 9. Complaints, snakes, and the copper serpent 10. The list of desert journeys 11. The song at the well 12. The war against

Sihon 13. The war against Og, the king of Bashan.

In other words, this parsha contains three wars, death from the bites of snakes and serpents, and the demise of three leaders of the Jewish people (Aaron and Miriam die, and Moses is forbidden from entering the Holy Land). All of this makes Chukat one of the saddest chapters of our history. All of our great leaders are affected: Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron, the kindly grandfather figure who creates peace between man and fellow man, and Moses, our great teacher. All are affected (Moses died 8 months after his brother).

What is to become of us? Have the Jewish people's legendary leaders faded away? No! Israel is not bereft of its God. The phrase "everyone can be replaced" is even relevant to the greatest leaders in Jewish history, and even such figures as Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Beyond this, Parshat Chukat also contains a crucial chronological transition – the transition from the first year since the exodus from Egypt to the fortieth year of Israel's desert journeys. Chapter 20, verse 1 states: "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon..." The Ibn Ezra provides the following exegesis:

"In the first month – in the fortieth year. For the Torah includes no incident or prophecy that was not either in the first year or the fortieth year. And the meaning of 'and the People of Israel came, the entire congregation' is that the entire generation of the desert had died, and now, the people were approaching the Land of Canaan."

What an incredible jump! In just one verse, we've advanced 38 years, without even noticing!

Thirty-eight years accounts for most of the lifetime of an adult, and lo and behold, no mention of anything happening during those years. Is it true that nothing had happened, nothing of consequence for future generations, during those 38 years?

We can learn two lessons from this, one on a personal level, and another on a national level. The national lesson is that it would seem that 38 years in the lifetime of a nation aren't necessarily significant. This teaches us that we must be extremely patient concerning national processes occurring before our very eyes, and this is usually rather challenging, since we all want peace, here and now, and we all desire 'Mashiach now!' We must do what we can for our redemption to occur earlier, yet keep our

sights on the long term, even if it will take many years for anything to happen. We will be like the man who planted a fig tree and is asked why he planted the tree, if he knows he will never eat its fruit? He responded that he was planting the tree for his children and grandchildren, for they will be the ones who will eat the fruit.

This is the personal lesson: during those 38 years, millions of Jews had lived their lives, and no mention is made of that time. Nothing they did was important enough to be documented for all eternity in the Torah. At times, people bicker and fight over issues that seem important and fundamental to them, but we can learn that they aren't all that important, when looking into the future, and that there is no need to quarrel or yell about them. We are taught of Rabbi Natan, the disciple of R. Nahman of Breslav, who was scorned and attacked for having spread his rabbi's teachings. His disciples asked him whether he was aware of this, and whether he was offended. R. Natan responded as follows: "I see that a hundred years from now, someone will be walking beside my grave, and muttering that once, a man named Rabbi Natan had lived, but he has been dead for a long time." Those who see far into the future and embrace a broad-minded philosophy don't

argue and get caught up in things that may only seem important to those who only live in the here and now.

The waters of contention – Mei Merivah.

There were two crises in the Torah involving water: one occurred after the exodus from Egypt, and the other, just before the people entered the Holy Land, when their faith faltered: “Because you did not have faith in Me”

After the exodus, at Refidim – the location is called “Massa and Merivah”, and Moses was commended to strike the rock.

Here, on the 40th year – the location is called Mei Merivah, the waters of contention, where Moses was commanded to speak to the rock.

Water also served to strengthen the people’s faith during the exodus and at the doorstep to the Holy Land:

The parting of the Red Sea during the exodus, and its aftermath: “... and they had faith in Hashem and his servant, Moses”

At the entrance to the Holy Land, Joshua parts the waters of the Jordan river so that “you shall know that a living God is among you” (Joshua 3:10). Consequently, “on that day God exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, so that they revered him all his days as they had revered Moses.” (ibid., 4:14)

Interestingly, faith was bolstered through miracles involving water, and water was also involved in the rebellion and attempts to undermine that faith. This carries an important message: everything in the world and in life can be used to either strengthen or weaken our faith. It all depends on us, and our perspective. We have the power to draw strength from what we see; it depends on us. According to the Kuzari, these are the roots of faith and apostasy.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg For the Love of Torah

"This is the Torah (the teaching) regarding a man who dies in a tent..." (Chukas 19:14). Chazal (Brachos 63b) interpret this posuk homiletically to mean that words of Torah make a lasting impression only on one who figuratively "kills" himself in the tent of study. The Taz (Orach Chaim 46:1) explains that this refers to someone who exerts much effort and toil (ameilus) to understand the depths of Torah. At first glance, this statement of Chazal seems puzzling. Studying Torah with extraordinary ameilus is certainly praiseworthy. But why should investing effort to understand the Torah automatically lead to a better retention of the Torah that is studied?

The Mishna (Avos 6:1) states, "Reb Meir says that one who engages in the study of Torah for its own sake (lishma) merits many things." The first of these is that he is called a rei'ah ahuv (beloved friend) of Hashem and the Torah. What does it mean to be a "beloved friend"? Reb Chaim of Volozhin (Ruach Chaim, ibid) suggests that there are two types of friendships. Some friendships are formed out of selfish considerations. A person might want to benefit from another's wealth, services, or position of prominence, or he might simply want to feel the honor of being the friend of such a distinguished individual. Such a friendship is not deeply rooted and sincere; it is superficial and utilitarian, and will last only as long as it remains beneficial for the parties involved. About such a relationship Shlomo HaMelech warns, "Do not frequent your friend's home too often lest he become satiated with you and he will hate you" (Mishlei 25:17). When a friendship is pursued for the sake of convenience, there is always the concern that the other individual might feel that he is being taken advantage of, and the relationship might sour. Maintaining a healthy distance is key to preserving such a relationship.

But there is a second type of friendship, and that is one which

is based on mutual respect and admiration. Such a relationship is enduring because it is motivated not by selfish concerns but by an appreciation of the character and the inherent qualities of the other person. Friends of this type enjoy each other's company and the more time they spend together the stronger the bonds between them become. This is what Reb Meir refers to as a "beloved friend". When someone appreciates the value of his friend and he cherishes their relationship for its own sake, he becomes beloved in the eyes of his friend, and the friend will reciprocate that love in return.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin explains that this is why a chosson and kallah are referred to as reiyim ahuvim (beloved friends) because the ideal marriage relationship is one in which the husband and wife are not looking to advance their own interests, but rather are willing to sacrifice of themselves for the benefit of the other. Such a relationship which is based on mutual respect and selflessness will only strengthen over time and will make each person more beloved in the eyes of the other. Similarly, one who engages in Torah study not to receive honor or to make a living, but rather for the sake of the Torah itself is called a "beloved friend" of the Torah and of Hashem because through his learning he

demonstrates his unconditional love for the Torah, and in return the Torah and Hashem love him as well.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning behind the statement of Chazal that words of Torah make a lasting impression only if one "kills" himself in studying them. The more effort a person invests in Torah study and the more he is willing to sacrifice in order to learn Torah, the more he demonstrates his love for the Torah, and that emotional bond which he develops with the Torah will cause him to remember the Torah that he studied. Moreover, when a person shows his love for the Torah, the Torah and Hashem reciprocate that love, and the individual is blessed with extra special powers of retention. As Chazal comment (Eiruvin 54a) on a later posuk in Parshas Chukas (21:18) "'And a gift from the desert' - one who makes himself ownerless (hefker) like a desert...will remember his Torah." One who sacrifices his own needs and selflessly pursues the study of Torah receives an extra gift of Torah. He is blessed with additional siyata dishmaya (divine assistance), and that enables him to retain his Torah more easily.

Hard work and effort are necessary prerequisites to acquire any type of knowledge.

But when it comes to the study of Torah these ingredients pay extra dividends.

**Torah.Org Dvar Torah
by Rabbi Label Lam**

**The Sacred Opportunity to
Serve Greatness**

And HASHEM spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying: This is the statute (CHOK) of the Torah which HASHEM commanded, saying, 'Speak to the Children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid.'" (Bamidbar 19:1-2)

This is the statute (CHOK) 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! — [Yoma 67b] – Rashi

A CHOK by definition has no apparent rational basis by which one can agree or disagree with it. The bottom line is that it is a Commandment by HASHEM. That alone is sufficient grounds for obedience. It seems though, that according to Rashi, the Torah adjusted its language here only so the nations of the world and the opposing forces cannot ridicule this commandment, of the Par Aduma with any legitimacy. Even though it can't be understood according to the

cognitive faculties of the outside observer it does possess deep deposits of spiritual vitamins that are beyond our ken. Does that mean that a CHOK cannot be understood at all? Ever?! No! That's not what a CHOK means at all! Actually a CHOK can be understood! How so?

A story is told about an elder Rebbe and his son who were working hard to break through the thick ice on a frozen lake so they could use the frigid waters below as a Mikvah and gain some extra holiness. The young son broke through first and he jumped into the freezing cold waters shouting, "Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" When he exited and was now standing on the surface of the ice with icicles in his black beard, he began to exclaim, "OOOOOOH, AHHHHH!" with pure delight and relief.

The elder Rebbe, his father, realized that this is a teachable moment, so he told his son, "This is how it goes with Mitzvos! They start out OUCH! OUCH! OUCH! And end up OOOOOOOH, AHHHHHHH! However, with Aveiros, it's just the opposite. They start out, OOOOOOOOH, AHHHHHHH, and end up OUCH! OUCH!"

The Sefas Emes explains that Mitzvos, even in the category of CHOK can be understood once they have been performed. Beforehand they are much less

inviting to the external senses. It's no mistake that the same Hebrew letters that spell the word MITZVOS, MEM – TZADI – VUV-SOF also spells out MATZOS!

Matzos are famous for their blandness and ultra-simplicity. They may not be a big sale item in any other market except by Jews who have acquired a profound appetite for their rich spiritual flavor.

Once they are consumed in the context of a Mitzvah that taste is known and understood. MATZOS spell MITZVOS! Once they are performed their taste is known and understood.

Just like when the Jewish Nation accepted the Torah and they declared, "NAASE v NISHMAH, We will do and we will hear!" They were committing to do and then to understand through the doing. The appetite for MITZVOS and even a CHOK is an acquired taste!

The second part of the Rebbe's lesson is also calling out for an explanation. Many things look attractive and inviting to the eyes but they may be ultimately no good for the person. Eating a gallon of ice cream can make a big belly ache. That's simple enough.

The first cigarette to the addicted smoker was filled with charm but later on when he realized the harm, it was too late. It starts out with a TAAM (Literally flavor, but figuratively reason) and ends up as a CHOK! Mitzvos, however start out with as a CHOK and end up with a TAAM.

The Mishne in Pirke Avos says it all, "The reward for a Mitzvah is a Mitzvah!" One basic approach is that there is a spiritual momentum with Mitzvos. One paves the way for another! The Nefesh HaChaim explains that the reward of the Mitzvah is actual Mitzvah itself. If I would be called to give Reb Chaim Kanievsky Shlita a ride home from the airport and he gave me \$100 for the fare, the real reward is not in the monetary remuneration but in the sacred opportunity to serve greatness.