

Home Weekly Parsha CHUKAT 5782

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Torah reading of this week deals with a ritual in the Temple – that of the Red Heifer – which is characterized as being a commandment beyond the ken of human understanding and rational interpretation. It remains a primary example of certain commandments that, at their very core, are not easily interpreted or made relevant to human behavior, nor to moral understanding and judgment. The Torah itself calls this commandment a chok, which must be obeyed without question or doubt, for it is beyond human comprehension and understanding to genuinely appreciate and value its essence and purpose. This is the reason the entire Torah reading of this week is called Chukat – the law and commandments of the Torah for which no explanation will be given.

If we review previous narrative portions of the Torah that we have read and studied over the past weeks, we can easily conclude that all the events that were described – the murmurings, rebellions, false reports and evil speech and the crimes against Moshe and Aaron also fit the category of being a chok – something irrational, inexplicable and beyond logical comprehension.

We all believe, somehow, that we live in a rational world, and that we can make rational decisions based upon knowledge, facts, experience, and history. However, the truth is that very few of our decisions are made rationally and are often based on other factors on a constant and recurring basis. Human behavior is almost by definition irrational and inexplicable. It is because of this truth that the Torah gives us laws and commandments that are rational and inexplicable, to match our human moods and decision-making processes.

We can easily understand that if it were not for the Torah itself guiding us through life, giving us daily support, guidance, and stability, certainly the national life of the Jewish people would be chaotic in the extreme. It is this chaos of irrational behavior which is universally present amongst all people in the world, which leads to the fall of empires and to catastrophic decisions brought about by irrational policies and a great deal of human arrogance.

It is noteworthy to see that in world history, almost all the major empires of the world collapsed and eventually fell because of internal pressures of the society rather than by actual external aggression. These pressures are caused by human nature, both emotionally and ideologically. Once the original basis and emphasis that brought about success and growth in the Empire dissipated, because of the irrational behavior of leaders of these empires, the collapse of those would not be long in coming.

I have always found it to be ironic that the most irrational of all creatures – human beings – have the temerity to criticize Jewish tradition as not being rational or easily

explained in so-called “factual” terms. It is the purpose of the Torah to instruct us, guide us, and constrain us. It is the purpose of the Torah to counter human irrationality with a form of heavenly certainty that is beyond our understanding. History has proven this assertion correct.

Shabbat shalom

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Anger Management

CHUKAT

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

There are some, say the Talmud, who acquire their world in an hour and others who lose it in an hour. No example of the latter is more arresting and bewildering than the famous episode in this week's parsha. The people have asked for water. God tells Moses to take a staff and speak to the rock and water will appear. This then follows:

He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?’ Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

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

Num. 20:10-12

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

Within the framework of this year's series, though, as we discuss the ethics of the Bible, it seems more appropriate to look at a different explanation, the one given by Maimonides in Shemoneh Perakim, the “Eight Chapters” that form the preface to his commentary to the Mishnah, Tractate Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers.

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

sufficient training it is possible for us to overcome our destructive emotions and reconfigure our affective life.

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

That, says Maimonides, is why Moses was punished: because he lost his temper with the people when he said, “Listen, you rebels.” To be sure, there were other occasions on which he lost his temper – or at least appeared to lose it. His reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf, which included smashing the Two Tablets, was hardly eirenic or relaxed. But that case was different. The Israelites had committed a sin. God Himself was threatening to destroy the people. Moses had to act decisively and with sufficient force to restore order to a people wildly out of control.

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

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

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

“The life of those who can’t control their anger is not a life,” they said. (Pesachim 113b)

Reish Lakish said, “When a person becomes angry, if he is a sage his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him.” (Pesachim 66b)

Maimonides said that when someone becomes angry it is as if he has become an idolater. (Hilchot Deot 2:3)

What is dangerous about anger is that it causes us to lose control. It activates the most primitive part of the human brain that bypasses the neural circuitry we use when we reflect and choose on rational grounds. While in the grip of

a hot temper, we lose the ability to step back and judge the possible consequences of our actions. The result is that in a moment of irascibility we can do or say things we may regret for the rest of our lives.

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

The Orchot Tzaddikim (a 15th century commentator) notes that anger destroys personal relationships.[2] Short-tempered people scare others, who therefore avoid coming close to them. Anger drives out the positive emotions – forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and sensitivity. The result is that irascible people end up lonely, shunned, and disappointed. Bad tempered people achieve nothing but their bad temper (Kiddushin 40b). They lose all else.

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

“I have a question to ask,” he said.

“Ask, my son,” replied Hillel.

He said, “Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?”

“My son, you ask a good question,” said Hillel. “The reason is that they have no skilled midwives.”

The man left, paused, then returned, crying out, “Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?”

Again, Hillel abandoned his bathing, robed, and came out, saying, “My son, what do you seek?”

“I have another question.”

“Ask, my son.”

“Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans bleared?”

Hillel replied, “My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in sandy places.”

He left, waited, then came back a third time, calling, “Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?”

Again, Hillel dressed and came out, saying, “My son, what do you seek?”

“I have another question.”

“Ask, my son.”

“Why are the feet of Africans wide?”

“My son, you ask a good question. The reason is that they live in watery marshes.”

“I have many questions to ask,” said the man, “but I am worried that you might become angry.”

Hillel then sat and said, “Ask all the questions you have to ask.”

“Are you the Hillel who is called the nasi [leader, prince] of Israel?”

“Yes,” said Hillel.

“In that case, said the man, “may there not be many like you in Israel.”

“Why so, my son?” he asked.

“Because I have just lost four hundred zuz because of you!”

“Be careful of your moods,” said Hillel. “You may lose four hundred zuz, and yet another four hundred zuz through Hillel, yet Hillel will not lose his temper.”

Shabbat 30b-31a.

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

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

The moral life is one in which we grapple with anger but never let it win. The verdict of Judaism is simple: either we defeat anger or anger will defeat us.

[1] The term was introduced by Peter Salovey and John Mayer. See Peter Salovey, Marc A. Brackett, and John D. Mayer, *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovey Model* (Port Chester, NY: Dude Pub., 2004), subsequently popularised by Daniel Goleman in, for instance, his book *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

[2] *Orchot Tzaddikim*, Shaar Kaas, “The Gate of Anger.”

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Chukat (Numbers 19:1-22:1) By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel — “And Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage [kehal] before the rock; and said to them, “Listen now, rebels, from this rock shall we extract water for you?” And Moses lifted his hand, struck the rock twice with his staff, and abundant water emerged to give drink to the community [eidah].” (Numbers 20:10–11)

Moses entered the stage of Jewish history by heroically striking an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an Israelite slave (Exodus 2:11-12). In contrast, his unfortunate striking of a rock in this week’s Biblical portion of Chukat precipitated his exit from the stage of Jewish history. His first act of striking was done out of love for his people and outreach to his brethren, an act of courage and self-sacrifice that forced him to flee the house of Pharaoh.

The striking of the rock, however – which in reality was directed at the People of Israel, whom he called “rebels” – was an expression of deep frustration with a nation that had defied his teachings and fomented rebellion after rebellion to undermine his and God’s authority. What had happened to cause Moses to lash out at his beloved nation?

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap (1883–1951), a close disciple and confidant of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, describes in his multi-volume *Mei Marom* the change in Moses’ mindset towards the People of Israel by distinguishing between two descriptive nouns for them, which are usually taken for synonyms: kehal and eidah, assemblage and community.

A kehal (“assemblage”) consists of the many individuals who gather together, the separate and disparate persons who make up a crowd.

An eidah (“community”) is guided by a specific purpose, which serves to unite and connotes individuals united by their commitment to historic continuity from generation to generation. Indeed, the very term eidah comes from the same Hebrew root as witness (eid) and testimony (eidut). The continued survival of the nation of Israel despite exile and persecution in accordance with the Divine covenant serves as eloquent testimony to the reality and truth of God’s presence and of Israel’s mission: humanity perfected in a world redeemed.

With this background, let us take a fresh look at our Biblical portion. Immediately following Miriam’s death, the desert wells dry up and the Israelites assemble as a crowd of disparate rabble (vayikahalu) in complaint against Moses and Aaron. In response, God addresses Moses: “Take the staff, and you and Aaron assemble the community (hak’hel et ha’eidah). Speak to the rock in their presence and it will give forth its water. You will thereby bring forth water from the rock and allow the community (ha’eidah) and their beasts to drink” (ibid., v.8).

Please take note that Moses is told by God to assemble the community (eidah). However, “Moses and Aaron assembled the assemblage (kahal) in front of the rock” (ibid., v.10)! They, the leaders, had lost the vision of Israel as an eidah, a witness-community!

What a literal reading is teaching us is that God wanted Moses to look at the motley crew of complainers and see that behind the façade of rabble were to be found witnesses (“eidim”) of the Divine. Moses was thereby supposed to appreciate the great potential of this people: that standing before him were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and the parents of Yishai, David, and the righteous Messiah.

God expected Moses to see through the angry mob and inspiringly extract from deep within them the faith of their forebears and the glory of their descendants. But Moses, disappointed and disgruntled, personally devastated by their “ingratitude,” can only see a congregation of kvetching individuals, a mass of fearful and immature

freedmen dancing before a Golden Calf; a Datan and an Aviram who refused to even meet with him; a disparate crowd of people who allowed themselves to become paralyzed in fear before the Canaanites.

He had lost sight of the community of Israel and could only see the assemblage of Israel; he spoke to what was in front of him instead of to their potential, the great moments and the noble individuals who comprised historic Israel and forged the Israelites in front of him. And so, he became incapable of speaking with love; he could only strike out in anger. Given this attitude, Moses cannot continue to lead the nation towards the fulfillment of its historical destiny.

Many years ago, I had the unique pleasure and privilege of spending an unforgettable Sabbath with one of the great scholars of the 20th century, Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel z"l. I could not resist asking him how, despite the fact that he served as a rabbi of a congregation, he nevertheless found the time to be so prolific in Jewish scholarship, producing special editions of and commentaries on Rashi and Nahmanides, as well as responses to difficult Talmudic questions asked by Rabbi Akiva Eiger.

"I always had small congregations," he told me, "small in number and sometimes even small in soul. After a difficult board meeting with Mr. Goldberg and Mrs. Schwartz, I yearned for the company of profound minds and deep perspectives. Who could be greater antidotes to small-minded and mean-spirited individuals than Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger?"

Rabbi Chavel understood the secret; he had the capacity to look beyond the assemblage and see the community. He realized that, in the final analysis, his "small congregations" were inspired and spawned by Nahmanides and Rabbi Akiva Eiger, by Moses and Aaron, by Abraham our Father and Sarah our Mother. This is the perspective with which we must, each of us, view our present-day Jewish communities, as well!

Shabbat Shalom!

Both parshiyos Balak (read this week in Eretz Yisrael) and Chukas (read in chutz la'aretz) discuss relationships with non-Jews, and therefore are appropriate parshiyos to discuss the mitzvah of tevilas keilim.

Must I Immerse a Candy Dish?

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question: A Sweet Saga

Avraham Sweet, the proprietor of Candy Andy, wants to know.

"I have a gift business in which I sell glass candy bowls filled with candies, fruits, and nuts. Must I toivel these dishes before I fill them?"

Introduction:

In Parshas Matos, the Torah teaches: Regarding the gold and the silver; the copper, the iron, the tin and the lead: any item that was used in fire needs to be placed in fire to become kosher, yet it must also be purified in mikveh water. In addition, that which was not used in fire must pass through water" (Bamidbar 31:22-23). From these verses we derive the mitzvah of tevilas keilim -- The mitzvah to immerse metal implements in a mikveh or spring

prior to using them for food. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 75b) notes that this immersion is required even if the vessel has never been used. In other words, this mitzvah is unrelated to the requirement of koshering equipment that was used for non-kosher food or to the laws related to purifying implements that became tamei.

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 75b) further states that in addition to metal items intended for food use, we are also required to immerse glass dishes, because both metal and glass share a similarity -- they are repairable by melting and reconstructing, or, as we would say, they are recyclable. This renders them different from vessels made of stone, bone, wood or earthenware, all of which cannot be repaired this way.

What types of dishes must be immersed?

The Gemara cites a highly instructive dialogue about the mitzvah of immersing vessels:

"Rav Nachman said in the name of Rabbah bar Avuha: 'One can derive from the verse that one must immerse even brand new items, because used vessels that were purged in fire are as kosher as those that are brand-new, and yet they require immersion.'

Rav Sheishes then asked him: 'If it is true that the mitzvah of immersing vessels is not because of kashrus concerns, maybe one is required to immerse even clothing shears?'

Rav Nachman responded: 'The Torah only mentions vessels that are used for meals (klei seudah)' [Avodah Zarah 75b].

Rav Sheishes suggested that if immersing utensils has nothing to do with kosherizing utensils used for non-kosher, perhaps this mitzvah applies to all paraphernalia -- even cameras, cellphones and clothing shears!

To this, Rav Nachman retorted that since the Torah mentions only implements used for a meal, the mitzvah of tevilas keilim applies only to utensils used for preparing and consuming food, not those intended for other purposes.

Klei seudah -- appliances used for meals

Rav Nachman did not require that all food preparation utensils be immersed, only klei seudah, items used for meals. Soon, we will see how this detail affects many of the halachos of tevilas keilim. But, what exactly are considered klei seudah, and how is this different from simply saying that all food preparation utensils must be immersed?

Klei sechorah -- "merchandise"

The halachic authorities note that a storekeeper is not required to immerse vessels he has for sale, since for him they are not utensils with which he intends to prepare food or eat. Later authorities coin a term "klei sechorah," utensils used as merchandise, ruling that these items do not require immersion until they are purchased by the end user (see Taz, Yoreh Deah 120:10). Furthermore, several halachic authorities contend that not only is the storekeeper not required to immerse the utensils prior to sale, if he immerses them, it is not valid, since there is, as yet, no requirement to immerse them (Shu"t Minchas Yitzchak 8:70). This is based on a comment of the Rama implying that tevilah performed before the obligation to immerse a utensil exists, such as while it is still owned by the non-Jew, does not fulfill the mitzvah, but must be repeated after the utensil becomes the property of a Jew (Rama 9). Thus, reciting a beracha on this too-early tevilah would be a beracha levatalah.

Based on this discussion, we can now address one of our above-mentioned questions:

"I have a gift business in which I sell candy bowls filled with candies, fruits, and nuts. Must I toivel these dishes before I fill them?"

This question is a modification of a situation in which I was once involved. We received a glass candy bowl as a gift from someone with a note that the proprietor had already toiveled the bowl. I called the owner of the business to inform him that, in my opinion, not only is he not required to toivel the dish, but I suspect that the tevilah does not help. My reasoning is that, although the proprietor fills the bowls with nuts and candies, from his perspective this is merchandise that he is selling. The dish therefore qualifies as *klei sechorah* that one need not immerse, and immersing them does not fulfill the mitzvah. As a result, not only is the proprietor not obligated to immerse the dishes, but doing so fulfills no mitzvah, and it is a *beracha levatalah* for him to recite a *beracha* on this tevilah. Including a note that the dish was toiveled is detrimental, since the recipient will assume that he has no requirement to toivel this dish, when the end-user is required to immerse it. For these reasons, I felt it incumbent on myself to bring this to the attention of the owner of the business.

The proprietor was very appreciative. He told me that, in truth, it was a big hassle for him to toivel the dishes, but he had been assuming that halacha required him to do so before he could fill them.

Shortly after writing these words, I received the following shaylah:

"I want to ask you whether one must toivel an item that is being given away as a present. When I studied the topic, I concluded that, even if I purchase a utensil that requires tevilah, but I am planning on giving it to someone, it does not have a *chiyuv tevilah* until it reaches the recipient's hands. Only then does it become *kli seudah*. This would also apply, for example, if someone gave a *shalach manos* bowl filled with candy, etc; the utensil wouldn't require tevilah until the person receives it. What do you think?"

To which I answered:

"It seems to me that since one is purchasing the item for someone's personal use, and not to sell, that it should have a *chiyuv tevilah* at this point. Only items meant to be merchandized are absolved from tevilah."

I received the following response:

"Who says that the recipient is going to use the utensil at his table? Indeed, I had the very same shaylah tonight. My wife took a small receptacle that was holding a plant, filled it with nuts and dried fruit, and brought it to someone as a present. Who said that the recipient will use it afterwards for food? Maybe it will be a candleholder, a decorative piece, etc. It doesn't become *kli seudah* until she decides what she will use it for."

The point the correspondent is making is that it may indeed be that this item will never be a food utensil, and therefore never be required to be immersed. Only the end user determines whether the item is indeed a food utensil, and therefore until he decides what to do with it, there is no requirement to immerse it.

Conclusion

According to Rav Hirsch, metal vessels, which require mankind's mining, extracting and processing, represent man's mastery over the earth and its materials. Whereas vessels made of earthenware or wood only involve man shaping the world's materials to fit his needs, the manufacture of metal demonstrates man's creative abilities to utilize natural mineral resources to fashion matter into

a usable form. Consuming food, on the other hand, serves man's most basic physical nature. Use of metal food vessels then represents the intellectual aspect of man serving his physical self, which, in a sense, is the opposite of why we were created, which is to use our physical self to assist our intellect to do Hashem's will. Specifically in this instance, the Torah requires that the items hereby produced be immersed in a *mikveh* before we use them to endow them with increased *kedusha* before they are put to food use. This demonstrates that although one may use one's intellect for physical purposes, when doing so one must first sanctify the item to focus on the spiritual.

Never Stop Trying to Avoid Conflict Moses' Super-Rational Attempt for Reconciliation

Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Mutiny

The narrative is dramatic, tragic, and unmistakably Jewish. Four individuals -- Korach, Dathan, Abiram, and On son of Peles -- lead a mass mutiny against Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, and his brother Aaron, the High Priest.

"They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron," the portion of Korach records (1), "and said to them, 'It is too much for you! The entire community is holy, and G-d dwells among them, why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of G-d?'"

Moses responds to Korach in brief and moving words. He attempts to persuade Korach, who happens to be his first cousin, that Aaron was appointed to his position by the instructions of G-d. Nepotism was not a factor.

"Then Moses sent word to summon Dathan and Abiram," the Torah records (1). "But they said, 'We won't come! Is it not enough that you [Moses] brought us out of [Egypt], a land flowing with milk and honey, just to kill us in the desert?! What right do you have to set yourselves above us? Even if you would gouge out our eyes, we shall not come!'"

These are bold and vicious words. Clearly, Dathan and Abiram won't surrender. They are determined, together with Korach, to overthrow Moses and Aaron.

As usual in the wilderness, G-d intervenes. He decides to wipe out the rebels who are attempting to invalidate Moses as the leader of the Jewish people and the communicator of G-d's law. G-d instructs Moses to announce to the entire community, "Withdraw from the pavilion of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram." A tragic fate awaits them.

But before Moses moves to execute G-d's instruction, the Torah inserts an unexpected scene in the narrative:

"Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram."

Why? Didn't G-d instruct him to ensure that everybody withdraws from their dwellings? What exactly did Moses do when he approached them? It seems as if Moses himself is disobeying what he was told to do!

The text leaves the answer to our imagination, but the message is clear. Moses was attempting, one last time, to persuade Dathan and Abiram to terminate their crusade. He

made one last attempt to save their lives. It was to no avail. They would not be moved.

The Talmud, commenting on this scene, states (2): "From here we learn that one should never keep up a quarrel."

Yet here is the simple question: Must we derive this noble injunction from this incident? Hasn't the Torah already stated explicitly (3), "You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall love your fellow as yourself!" Does this straightforward commandment not teach us already that we ought never to maintain a quarrel or perpetuate a dispute, but must always attempt to eradicate strife? Why would the Talmudic sages feel compelled to derive this injunction from the particular ambiguous verse, "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram"?

A Profile of Quarrelers

To understand this, we must examine the profiles of these two quarrelers, Dathan and Abiram. The Torah reports four incidents about these two men, sufficient material to capture the nature of their relationship with Moses.

Incident number one, at the beginning of Exodus, takes us back some 70 years, to Moses' youth (4).

"Now it came to pass in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brothers and looked at their burdens. He saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man of his brothers. He turned this way and that way, and he saw that there was no person present; so he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

He went out on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were quarreling, and he said to the wicked one, 'Why are you going to strike your friend?' And the man retorted, 'Who made you a man, a prince, and a judge over us? Do you plan to slay me as you have slain the Egyptian?' Moses became frightened and said, 'Indeed, the matter has become known!'"

Who were the two Hebrews quarreling with each other? The Talmud and the Midrash (5) deduce from the wording that they were Dathan and Abiram.

Incident number two occurs shortly after the Exodus when the heavenly Manna begins falling daily in the desert to nourish the wandering Jews (6):

"Moses said to them [the Jewish people], 'Let no one leave over any of it until morning.' But some men did not obey Moses and left over some of it until morning, and it bred worms and became putrid. Moses became angry with them."

Who were these men that betrayed Moses' instruction? The Midrash (7) deduces from the wording, yet again, that it was Dathan and Abiram.

Incident number three occurs one year later when the spies returned from the Holy Land and dissuaded their brethren from the motivation and willingness to conquer and settle the Land of Israel (8):

"The people wept that night. All the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the entire community said to them: 'If only we had died in the land of

Egypt... Why is G-d bringing us to this Land to die by the sword?'"

"And one man said to his brother, 'Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!'"

Who exactly was this man who spoke these words to his brother? Here again, tradition teaches (9) that it was a conversation between Dathan and Abiram.

Finally, the fourth incident recorded above, tells the story of how Dathan and Abiram not only rejected Moses' plea that they come to see him but went so far as to call him a killer.

Professional Rabble-Rousers

These four incidents paint a fairly accurate picture of Dathan and Abiram's characters. They were not idealistic adversaries, disputing Moses for ideological reasons: the fact is that they quarreled between themselves too, independent of Moses. Nor were they driven by envy, seeking the power and prestige possessed by Moses: the fact is that they fought Moses long before he became a leader.

Dathan and Abiram, it appears, were rabble-rousers who would not miss an opportunity to fight Moses, even if they stood to gain nothing. They were forever determined to undermine Moses and his authority. They even had the audacity of suggesting that Moses was a killer and that he would poke their eyes out, as though he were a sadist. Dathan and Abiram, it seems, despised Moses because he was their opposite: he stood for everything they loathed.

It is thus astonishing that after all of these incidents, after an animosity that persisted for close to 70 years, and even after G-d instructed Moses to ensure that everybody departs from their midst, "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram" to try and assuage their ire against him. This makes little sense. One could imagine some Jews suggesting to Moses that his behavior was humiliating and futile. "You know, Moses, that these guys loathe you. For seven decades they haven't missed an opportunity to campaign against you. Even as you invited them to discuss peace, they responded with nasty words. Moses! For the sake of your dignity and G-d's dignity, it is below you to approach them."

"Do not be kinder and wiser than G-d," they must have argued. "If G-d commanded you to stay away from them, just stay away." (10)

Boundless Dedication

Yet here we are allowed a glimpse into what made Moses the human being he was. Here we encounter the gigantic heart of Moses. His dedication, loyalty, and love to every single member of his people knew no bounds. Even as his fiercest and lifelong enemies were engaged in an intense battle against him, he would not give up on the chance of seeking peace with them and saving their lives.

Ultimately, it is this verse -- "Moses stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram" -- that demonstrates to us why the mutiny against Moses was so profoundly wrong. It was

Moses' uncompromising identification with his people, no matter to what depths they might have fallen, that made him qualified to have all the power he had. Only a human being so selfless and humble can be trusted with so much power. Moses' extraordinary dedication to his people turned him into the authentic and quintessential Jewish leader.

Only Peace

Now we can understand the Talmudic comment that "From here we that learn that one should never keep up a quarrel." The biblical instruction "You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall love your fellow as yourself" merely suggests that one should not foster animosity in one's heart; one must expose and deal with his or her grudges, and ultimately learn to love his fellow human being, since, on a deeper soul-level, we are children of one G-d (11).

But how about when you feel that somebody really has issues with you and is addicted to the hate? What about when you can justly assume that no matter what you will do, this person will never change? Why not just write him off and accept the quarrel as an immutable fact of life? Why not make peace with the state of war?

This is what Moses taught us at the moment when he "stood up and went over to Dathan and Abiram." "Never keep up a quarrel." Despite the fact that he could have rightly assumed that his adversaries would not change their position, he did not allow any assumptions based on past experiences to stop him from his peace efforts. Moses knew that fighting and animosity among Jews was a malignant disease, and he would not give up the slightest opportunity to stop it!

In his Tanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi states (12): "Each and every soul of the house of Israel contains within it something of the quality of our teacher Moses." This means that we, too, are empowered to emulate Moses' example at least in some small fashion. To become comfortable with disunity and fragmentation is a tragedy. We must never cease to confront our arrogance or insecurity and strive for peace even with people we can easily write off.

To be sure, if someone is endangering someone's life, or causing damage, you have to create the proper boundaries and stop the abuse and evil behavior at all costs. Never allow your idealism to allow innocent people to suffer. But whatever we can do to help people repent, and whatever we can do to generate peace and love, even if it requires extreme humility and sacrifice, it is well worth it.

(This essay is based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe -- whose yartzeit is this Shabbos, 3 Tamuz -- Shabbas Parshas Korach 5740, June 14, 1980 (13)).

1) Numbers Chapter 16. 2) Talmud Sanhedrin p. 110a. 3) Leviticus 19:17-18. 4) Exodus 2: 11-14. 5) Talmud Nedarim 64b; Targum Yonasan and Rashi to Exodus ibid 6) Exodus 16:19-20. 7) Midrash Rabah Shemos 1:29; 25:10 and Rashi to Exodus ibid. 8) Numbers 14: 1-4. 9) Rabanu

Bechayei to Exodus 2:13. 10) Moses Himself would ultimately call them "wicked" (Numbers 16:26.) 11) See Tanya chapter 32. 12) Chapter 42. 13) Published in Likkutei Sichos vol. 28 pp. 98-103.

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

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Use Your Words

Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of Bnei Yisroel, therefore you will not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them" (20:12).

In this week's parsha, the Torah relates that after the death of Miriam the miraculous well that had provided water for Bnei Yisroel throughout their sojourns in the desert ran dry. The people complained about the lack of water and Hashem ordered Moshe to take his staff and speak to "the rock." However, rather (at least according to Rashi's interpretation) than speak to it, Moshe struck the rock with the staff. Although this act was effective in producing water, Hashem declared that they (both Moshe and Aharon) had sinned (ibid).

That is to say, they defied Hashem by hitting instead of speaking to the rock. The resulting punishment was calamitous to Moshe and Aharon; they were forbidden from entering the land of Israel. How is this an appropriate punishment for their sin?

The harsh condemnation for hitting a rock is also difficult to understand. While it is true that Hashem had asked them to speak to the rock, not to strike it, they aren't castigated for not following Hashem's directive; they are scolded for not "sanctifying" Hashem's name. How did their action contribute to this issue? It is certainly a tremendous miracle for water to emerge from a rock, even if Moshe brought it forth through a strike. Why isn't that considered a sufficient kiddush Hashem?

Chazal lists this incident as one of the ten times when Bnei Yisroel tested Hashem. But why are they blamed for being concerned about their lack of a water source in the desert? Additionally, in Sefer Shemos, prior to the creation of the well of Miriam, Moshe was commanded to strike a rock and water would flow for Bnei Yisroel. Why is he punished for doing the same here?

In Sefer Shemos, the people stumbled into the desert with no water and were actually thirsty. Hashem thus instructed Moshe to hit the rock to create a water source for them. In this parsha, they still had water (Chazal discuss the rivers of water between the different encampments in the desert), they merely lacked a continuing source for the water. They weren't thirsty; they were worried about their future as the source of their water had dried up.

Hashem then instructed Moshe to speak to the rock. The purpose of speaking to the rock was to teach the people that

the land responds to the needs of Bnei Yisroel. By speaking to the rock, Moshe would have demonstrated that there is no need to force it to provide water, but rather that Hashem had created an entity that would respond to their needs.

The rock was meant to represent the attribute of Eretz Yisroel. Just as the rock was sensitive to their needs, they were to understand that Eretz Yisroel is unlike any other land. Eretz Yisroel has a symbiotic relationship with Bnei Yisroel – they take care of it and it takes care of them by responding to their every need. Because of this, Bnei Yisroel are later ousted from Eretz Yisroel for not keeping shemittah; they didn't keep their end of the bargain and the land literally vomited them out.

This is also why Moshe and Aharon are punished by being banished from Eretz Yisroel: they failed to show the greatness of Hashem and his care for them in creating a land that responds to their needs, not one that has to be forced to submit to their will.

Family Support

The entire congregation saw that Aharon had perished, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Israel (20:29).

This week's parsha records events that took place in the fortieth (and final) year of the Bnei Yisroel's desert sojourns. One of these unfortunate episodes is the death of Moshe Rabbeinu's brother – Aharon.

Chazal are puzzled by the Torah's curious comment that Aharon was mourned by the "entire House of Israel." Rashi (ad loc) explains that Aharon was mourned by even the women because Aharon's personality is described as one who pursues peace – "he would instill a love between quarreling parties and between a man and his wife."

The commentators (Mizrachi, Sifsei Chachamim) contrast the depiction of the mourning for Aharon to the mourning that took place when Moshe died: "Bnei Yisroel wept for Moshe [...]" (Devarim 34:8). Rashi (ad loc) explains that when Moshe died he was only mourned by the men, but when Aharon died he was mourned by both the men and the women. In other words, the women also felt the loss when Aharon died because Aharon contributed to their shalom bayis – maintaining a harmonious marriage.

Yet this disparity in the mourning is difficult to understand. The Gemara (Taanis 9a) explains that it was in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu that Bnei Yisroel received the miraculous manna bread for the forty years in the desert. Surely, the women could appreciate the benefit of the manna that Moshe Rabbeinu's merit brought directly to their lives as well. Why is it that they felt the death of Aharon so much more acutely than they openly mourned for him?

There is a great lesson here, one that is either lost or simply ignored by many in today's generation of Jews. The reason that they mourned Aharon was because he directly contributed to their shalom bayis, an ideal that they have a shared responsibility to maintain. In other words, real

shalom bayis is only achieved when both the husband and wife take responsibility for the health of their relationship.

By contrast, the obligation of being a breadwinner falls solely on the shoulders of the husband. It is his responsibility to make sure that his family is provided for. The burden of supporting the family is not a wife's obligation. While many women work to help support their families, the key word is "help" – they are helping their husband meet his obligations.

Many young men feel entitled and expect their wives to work to support the family. However, this isn't the Jewish view of marriage, and it should be obvious to every groom because the kesuvah (which is a unilaterally binding contract – only describing the obligations that the husband is accepting upon himself) outlines very clearly that he is the one responsible for supporting his wife; there is no quid pro quo.

Thus, when Moshe died the women weren't as sensitive to feeling a personal loss that would cause them to grieve. The manna that came on behalf of Moshe was a kindness directly to the men of the family whose responsibility it was to support their household. On the other hand, Aharon's death was a personal loss as it related to their shared responsibility of shalom bayis.

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For the week ending 2 July 2022 / 3 Tamuz 5782

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair -

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Parshat Chukat - A Divine Kiss

"This is the decree (chok) of the Torah..." (19:1)

It always amazes me that people professing to be atheists, when opening up their daily paper often go straight to the horoscope page. Up to a third of self-declared atheists in China believe in astrology. A quarter of Brazilian atheists believe in reincarnation, and a similar number of their Danish counterparts think some people have magical powers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, belief in séances, tarot, mesmerism, and other seemingly supernatural phenomena flourished, quite often independently of particular religious belief systems. One of the most rational minds of the time, or the creator of the most rational mind of the time, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, believed in fairies. The physicist Pierre Curie, a pioneer researcher into radioactivity, was "an atheist who had an enduring, somewhat scientific, interest in spiritualism."

I think that the reason for all this may be that being an atheist requires an awful lot of faith. Faith that the world just 'plopped' into existence; faith that the incredibly complex and wonderfully beautiful world that we live in just 'evolved' from some primordial slime in unspecified days of yore. Faith that love, courage, jealousy, avarice are all just chemical dances in our brains.

Instinctively, we know we come from somewhere and we are going somewhere. The soul intuitively feels its own immortality in spite of the body's determined arguments to the contrary.

"This is the decree (chok) of the Torah..."

There are three kinds of laws in the Torah: Mishpatim, Aidiut, and Chukim. A Mishpat is a law like "You shall not murder." It is a seemingly logical law that is shared by all the civilized world. An Aidiut is a testimony of faith, like Shabbat whose observance testifies that Hashem created the world and everything in it in six days. A chok is a mitzvah that is ostensibly self-contradictory, like the purifying process of the ashes of the red heifer. Its ashes purify those who are contaminated and contaminate those who prepare those ashes. Why? Go figure?

A basic concept of Judaism is that man's inability to understand Hashem's wisdom shows only man's limitations — and not Hashem's.

A chok is as self-contradicting as a soul inside a body. It is like a Divine kiss, only understood by the partners to its intimacy.

Sources: "Atheists & Agnostics Also Frequently Believe in the Supernatural - a New Study Shows;" *Religion*, June 13th, 2019;

Tosefot to Talmud Bavli in Avoda Zara 35a

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Chukat: What the world's cleverest person couldn't understand

What was the one thing that the cleverest person on earth couldn't understand?

According to our tradition, King Solomon, who was cleverer than anyone else, could not work out the logic behind the laws of the parah adumah, the red heifer, as presented to us in Parshat Chukat.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik beautifully describes the connection between Parshat Korach of the previous week followed by Parshat Chukat. According to our sages Korach challenged Moshe and Aharon claiming that the laws that they were presenting to the people in the name of Hashem just didn't make any sense! For example, Korach said, "If you have a four cornered garment which is blue, why are we required to have a 'ptil techeilet', one single blue cord on the tzitzit to enable us to wear the garment? Or similarly, if you have a house that is full of holy books, why is it necessary to have a mezuzah at the entrance to that home?"

The saga of the Korach rebellion is followed immediately by the laws of the red heifer because the red heifer is a quintessential example of a law which defies logic. The Kohen would administer the ashes of the heifer to somebody who was impure, enabling that person now to be

pure. However, because he was coming into contact with the ashes, the Kohen himself became impure.

How is it possible that these ashes could transform purity into impurity and impurity into purity all at the same time? I don't understand it and I'm sure you also don't, but that is the whole point. When we have a 'chok' – a law which comes from Hashem, Hashem knows best, and we don't always have to know the answer.

The vast majority of the mitzvot of the Torah are rational and reasonable and make so much sense to us. But even in an instance where the cleverest person on earth cannot work out why a law is given, nonetheless, we should embrace it, and appreciate it, because it comes from Hashem who knows best. By performing these laws we will enhance our lives and will have added meaning and joy on every single day of our existence.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Chukat 5782 - Discovering Inner Goodness

This week's parsha: Parashat Chukat begins with the parah adumah – red heifer – law that details how, during the time the Temple stood, a person could purify himself. After this, we read the story of mei merivah – the waters of contention, when Moses and Aaron hit the stone instead of speaking to it and, as a result, were punished with not being able to enter the Land of Israel. Aaron's death is described right afterwards

After we read of Aaron's death, the Torah describes the nation's reaction to the bad news:

The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days. (Numbers 20, 29)

The words "the entire house of Israel" emphasize that this was not something experienced by a specific group. The entire nation was swept up by grief and cried over Aaron's death.

The sages of the midrash noticed these words and explained the intensity of the grief with an explanation that can teach us all about leadership, love of others, and seeing the good.

What is said about Aaron is greater than what is said about Moses. For Moses, only the men cried. But for Aaron – both the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife and between a woman and her friend. And what would Aaron do? When two people quarreled Aharon went and sat down with one of them and said to him, "My son, know that your friend has said, 'I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aaron would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him, "Know that your friend is

saying, 'Woe is to me! How shall I raise my eyes and look at my friend? I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aharon would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. When the two friends later met, they embraced and kissed each other. Such was Aaron's life. And his virtue. When he would hear that there was a quarrel between a man and his wife, he would not leave them until they made peace. Therefore, both men and women cried for Aaron. (Midrash Aggadah for Parashat Chukat)

This description of a leader, of a high priest, who hears of a quarrel between two friends and tries to make peace between them and restore the love and friendship that had been shaken is indeed an amazing and moving description. We all read such a description and think – I wish there were more people like that in the world. Our lives would all look different. There is so much suffering as a result of polarization, tension, quarrels. How much better our lives would be if there were more incredible people like Aaron who set themselves the goal of restoring peace between friends and within couples.

And yet, there is something odd in this story. What were Aaron's tactics when restoring peace? Let us read that part again: When two people quarreled, Aharon went and sat down with one of them and said to him, "My son, know that your friend has said, 'I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aaron would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him, "Know that your friend is saying, 'Woe is to me! How shall I raise my eyes and look at my friend? I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aharon would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart.

Would Aaron lie to succeed in the sacred mission of restoring peace? It seems that he did. It is permissible to change the truth somewhat to bring about peace. But it seems it wasn't really a lie.

Aaron's motivation to restore peace stemmed from his great faith in people. Why do friends quarrel? Why is there tension between a couple? What is the reason for a social rift? Aaron believed that people are basically good-hearted. What leads them to quarrel are the external fears, suspicions, insults, and anger. But deep inside, people want peace. They want friendship and are prepared to invest in it. The imaginary story that Aaron would tell expressed the great truth he believed: People want to live in peace and to live well with others.

This is the secret that Aaron would reveal to people and to couples. He would reveal to them that the other, despite concerns and pain, is interested in peace. True, it is not easy, he needs help, but he really wants to live peacefully with you. This is the secret we all must learn. The person we're quarreling with isn't bad. Even if he's angry, afraid,

or even threatening, he is a good person. If we just believe in this goodness, it will reveal itself and change reality. The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Balak: Eliminating Idolatry

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

After failing to curse the people of Israel, Balaam devised another plan to make trouble for the Jewish people. He advised using Moabite and Midianite women to entice the Israelite men into worshipping Baal Peor.

How was this idol worshipped? The word 'Peor' means to 'open up' or 'disclose.' According to the Talmud, the worshippers would bare their backsides and defecate in honor of the idol. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 64a) illustrates the repulsive nature of this particular idolatry with the following two stories:

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed: "If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world." She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world.

When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, "How is this one worshipped?"

They told her, "One eats greens and drinks strong drink, and then defecates before the idol."

The woman responded, "I'd rather become ill again than worship an idol in such a [revolting] manner!"

Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired out a donkey to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, "Wait till I enter and come out again."

When she came out, he told her, "Now you wait for me until I go in and come out."

"But are you not a Jew [and do not worship idols]?" she asked.

"What does it concern you?" he replied. He then entered, [intending to insult the idol]. He uncovered himself before it and wiped himself on the idol's nose.

The acolytes praised him, saying, "No one has ever served this idol so consummately!"

Exposing the True Nature of Idolatry

What was the point of this most odious idolatrous practice? In truth, Peor was not an aberrant form of idolatry. On the contrary, Peor was the epitome of idolatry! Other forms of idolatry are more aesthetic, but they just cover up the true ugliness of idolatry. The Golden Calf was the opposite extreme, a beautiful, elegant form of idol worship. But Peor, as its name indicates, exposes the true nature of idolatry. All other forms of idolatry are just branches of Peor, with their inner vileness concealed to various extents. The repulsive service of Peor contains the key for abolishing idolatry. When the prophet Elijah fought against the idolatry of Baal, he taunted the people: "If Baal is God, then follow him." The people, in fact, were already worshippers of Baal. What was Elijah telling them?

Elijah's point was that Baal is just a sanitized version of Peor. If Baal is God, then go all the way. You should worship the source of this form of worship — Peor. Elijah's exposure of Baal as just a cleaner version of Peor convinced the people. They were truly revolted by the scatological practices of Peor, and instinctively responded, "Hashem is God! Hashem is God!" (I Kings 18:39)

Historically, the uprooting of idolatry will take place in stages. The allure of Peor, the purest form of idolatry, was shattered after Moses rooted out those who worshipped Peor at Shittim. That purge gave strength to the men of the Great Assembly who subdued the temptation of idolatry in the time of Ezra (Sanhedrin 64a). The final eradication of idolatry's last vestiges will take place in the end of days, through the spiritual power of Moses, whose burial place faces Beit Peor. This obliteration will occur as idolatry's innate foulness is exposed to all.

Why is idolatry so intrinsically vile?

The source of idolatry's appeal is in fact a holy one — an impassioned yearning for closeness to God. Ignorance and moral turpitude, however, prevent this closeness, blocking the divine light from the soul. The overwhelming desire for divine closeness, despite one's moral failings, leads to idol worship. Instead of correcting one's flaws, these spiritual yearnings are distorted into cravings for idolatry. The unholy alliance of spiritual yearnings together with immoral and decadent behavior produces the intrinsic foulness of idolatry. Instead of trying to elevate humanity and refine our desires, idolatry endeavors to debase our highest aspirations, lowering them to our coarsest physical aspects. This is the ultimate message of Peor's scatological practices.

True Victory over Idolatry

The Great Assembly in Ezra's time conquered the temptation of idolatry by generally diminishing spiritual yearnings in the world. They did not truly defeat idolatry; rather, they subdued its enticement. In the words of the Midrash, they cast the temptation of idolatry into a metal cauldron and sealed it with lead, "so that its call may not be heard." Thus we find that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b) records a dream of Rav Ashi, the fifth century Talmudic sage. In his dream, Rav Ashi asked the idolatrous King Menasseh, "Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?" To which Menasseh replied, "Were you there, you would have lifted up the hems of your garment and sped after me."

The true cure for this perilous attraction, however, is through greatness of Torah. The highest goal of Torah is the appearance of inner light in the human soul, as divine wisdom is applied to all the spheres that the soul is capable of assimilating — be it in thought, emotion, desires, and character traits.

Even nowadays, poverty in Torah knowledge results in a weakness of spirit, similar to the spiritual darkness caused by idolatry. The world awaits redemption through

greatness of Torah. Then idolatry will be truly defeated, and not merely subdued in a sealed metal cauldron.

(*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 271-273. Adapted from *Shemonah Kevatzim VIII: 132; IV: 56*)

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Balak

פרשת בלק תשפ"ב

ויגר מואב מפני העם מאד כי רב הוא ויקץ מואב מפני בני ישראל

Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of Bnei Yisrael. (22:3)

The Torah uses two terms to refer to *Klal Yisrael*: *Am*, people/nation, *Bnei Yisrael*, children of *Yisrael*. Moav was frightened of the nation due to their numbers, which imply a physical battle, a physical victory for the Jewish nation. Concerning the children of *Yisrael*, which is the term most often used to describe our People, Moav was disgusted. Fear means that one is afraid, but he still has hope for victory. A change of tactics might be necessary in order to quash the Jewish threat. Disgusted, the term which is used in a confrontation with the children of *Yisrael*, sounds more like resignation, despair, giving up without a fight. How do we understand this, and what is the Torah's message?

Horav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer, zl (Rav of Prague, pre-World War II) quotes David *Hamelech* (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:3), *Mipi olelim v'yonkim Yisadeta oze*, "Out of the mouth of babes and suckling's You have established strength." David asserts that our nation's strength, its ability to survive, is predicated on the Torah study of Jewish children. Their Torah is pure, untainted by sin. He cites *Midrash Eichah* (*Pesichta Rabbasi*, 2), which records the statement of Rabbi Abba *bar* Kahana, "There have never risen wise men among the non-Jewish nations like Bilaam and Avnimus *HaGardi*." (The latter was a Greek philosopher who was an acquaintance of Rabbi Meir.)

The nations of the world asked these two (Bilaam and Avnimus), "Will we be successful in engaging them (go to war against the Jews)?" They replied, "Go to their synagogues and study halls; if the children are vocally chirping in Torah study, you will not emerge victorious. If, however, you do not hear the sounds of Torah being studied, you will be successful against them. Thus, their Patriarch, Yaakov, assured them, 'Any time that the voice of Yaakov is chirping in the synagogues and study halls, there is no validity in Eisav's hands. (He cannot vanquish them.) If the sound has been stilled, then Eisav's hands will rule.'"

Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam. Hence, the Torah writes that Balak was frightened of the Jews due to their numbers. Nonetheless, he did not despair; he was not yet miserable and disgusted. He would have to work harder, have better strategy. It was doable. When he saw

that the *Bnei Yisrael*, the children of *Yisrael*, were devoted to their learning, however, he became outraged, repulsed by the reality that had set in. He would be unable to triumph over the Jews because their children were learning.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, observes that, throughout the Torah, we see that *nashim tzidkaniyos*, righteous women, did everything in their power to ensure that their children would be availed a strong, uncompromising Torah education, devoid of any negative influence. Sarah *Imeinu* wanted Yishmael to be away from Yitzchak. Chana gave birth to Shmuel *HaNavi*, and she immediately dedicated him to spend his life in the Sanctuary. When Shimshon was born, his mother dedicated him to be a *nazir*. All these women conceived by miraculous intervention. They each understood that her son was a gift; thus, they each sought to ensure that the child grow up pious and a credit to his people. Sadly, so many of us take our children for granted. They are a gift – a miracle from Hashem.

The *Mashgiach (Kaminitz, Yerushalayim)* points out that in contradiction to the women cited above, the *Shunamis* that Elisha blessed, also gave birth miraculously. Instead of his being sanctified to Torah, however, he went out and worked in the fields. His life came to an untimely end, after which Elisha miraculously resurrected him. The *Navi* instructed the *Shunamis*, “Lift up your son!” (*Melachim* 4:36). He meant elevate him, sanctify him, teach him Torah and give him the opportunity to grow spiritually. She listened, and the boy ultimately grew up to be the *Navi Chavakuk*.

לא אוכל לעבור את פי ד' אלקי לעשות קטנה או גדולה

I cannot transgress the word of Hashem, my G-d, to do anything small or great. (22:18)

In *Kuntres Divrei Sofrim* (24), *Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl*, notes that Bilaam *ha'rashah* said that he would not transgress Hashem's word to him – Hashem's *tzivui*, command. He did not think that he could act in a manner counter-intuitive to Hashem's *ratzon*, will. He was acutely aware that Hashem did not want him to curse *Klal Yisrael*, but, if Hashem had not expressly said so, Bilaam could have gone along his merry way to carry out his evil intentions. The *pasuk* (22:22) relates that Hashem's anger flared because Bilaam was going to Balak. Why was Hashem angry? Did the Almighty not give Bilaam permission to go to Balak? Apparently, Bilaam knew that Hashem's *ratzon* was that he not curse the Jews. Going to Balak was an affront to Hashem. Bilaam did not care. If he did not receive a clear cut “no,” as far as he was concerned, it was a “yes.” What about Hashem's will? Did Hashem really want him to go? Clearly not, but this did not concern Bilaam.

This, explains *Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita*, best characterizes Bilaam. He knew Hashem, but did not care. He only listened to what Hashem expressively told him, and, even then, only when he could not avoid

complying. He served Hashem because he was compelled to do so. This is unlike *Klal Yisrael* who serve Hashem as a son serves his father. He wants to serve. He wants to carry out his father's will, so that he can make his father happy.

Rav Shternbuch cites the *Ramchal* in *Mesillas Yesharim* (18, *Middah HaChassidus*) who explains that a *chassid*, pious individual, seeks to make his Father in Heaven happy. His love for Hashem is such that he does not aim to absolve himself of his obligations to Him merely by complying with the obligatory minimum of a *mitzvah*. Like a good son, he seeks every opportunity to provide *nachas*, satisfaction, for his Father. *Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita*, offers an example: If a father tells his son that the room is cold, an uncaring son will reply, “So, turn on the heat.” A decent son will personally turn the heater on for his father. A loving son will immediately turn on the heater, bring his father a warm blanket or a sweater, and then offer him a hot drink – all out of his love for his father, which impels him to do whatever will make his father feel well.

The term *chassid* in present-day vernacular is not as “generic” as that of *Ramchal*, who translates it as pious. The basic ideas of present-day (last two centuries) *chassidus*, however, do not digress from their focus on piety and closeness to Hashem. *Chassidic* thought stresses: joy; song and dance in *mitzvah* performance, and service to Hashem; the centrality of *davening* and all forms of prayer (*Tehillim*); the appreciation of every *Yid/amcha*, the simple, ordinary Jew who is not a scholar; attachment to a *Rebbe*; and being partial to one's Jewish identity (connecting cumulatively with *Klal Yisrael*) as opposed to focusing on one's selfhood. We are part of the larger family unit of *Am Yisrael*. To encapsulate *Chassidic* thought: *Chassidus* remains focused completely on Hashem (*Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl*). The *Baal HaTanya* would say (in speaking to Hashem), “I want not Your *Gan Eden*; I want not Your *Olam Habba*; I seek only to be attached to You.”

The *Manchester Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Yehudah Zev Segal, zl*, was the consummate *eved Hashem*, servant of Hashem. His life was about performing *mitzvos*: elevating any given situation to determine which *mitzvos* were inherent in it. He would view helping a parent as the fulfillment of both *Kibbud av v'eim* and *gemillas chassadim*. Indeed, he prefaced every *mitzvah* (even *d'Rabbanan*) with a verbal declaration of *Hineni muchan u'mezuman*, expressing his intent to carry out a *mitzvah*. He recognized no degrees or levels of importance in observance. Every *mitzvah* was a *tzivui*, command, from Hashem, and, as such, had supreme significance. Likewise, his devotion to absolute *emes* was his criterion for *mitzvah* observance. In his view, not to execute the *mitzvah* to its fullest with all the *halachic* minutiae indicated a lack of *emes*, spiritual integrity.

While the *Rosh Yeshivah* was very demanding concerning his *avodas HaKodesh*, sacred service; he

neither imposed his personal *chumros*, stringencies, on others, nor caused his personal practices to be an inconvenience to others. An example of this sensitivity to others is the following vignette. The *Rosh Yeshivah* visited Bournemouth, England. During the time he spent there, a man offered to drive the *Rosh Yeshivah* to *shul* in the morning and pick him up at the conclusion of *davening*. Aware that this man had to be at work at a certain time and not wanting to take advantage of his kindness, the *Rosh Yeshivah* recited parts of *davening* only after he returned to his place of lodging.

He was once a guest in someone's home and was served *leben* with his breakfast. He was meticulous not to eat anything which he felt was a delicacy. He adhered to a diet of necessities. He recited the appropriate *berachah acharonah*, after-meal blessing, then sat meditating for a moment before making a new blessing on the *leben* and partaking from it. He later explained that he did this in order not to hurt the feelings of the hostess who went out of her way to do everything just right for him. He added, "To eat *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, is also a *mitzvah*."

When one serves Hashem as a son should serve his father, he jumps at every single opportunity that presents itself during which he is able to honor his father. Indeed, practices which we might push aside, even ignore, were for him activities of profound love for Hashem. I could fill pages concerning the various *mitzvos* he undertook and the manner in which he performed them. He did something about which we are complacent, and, in many instances, we ignore. What inspired me was his attitude towards kissing the *mezuzah*. Whenever entering a room, he would touch the *mezuzah* and pause long enough to concentrate on love of Hashem and His Oneness. He did this even when hurrying from room to room to answer the phone – pause, concentrate, kiss. How often do we complacently touch the *mezuzah*, give it a peck with our fingers and move on? When one cares – one stops to think what kissing the *mezuzah* represents. After all, Hashem is our Father.

ויאמר בלעם אל בלק... היכל אוכל דבר מאמה הדבר אשר אלקים ישים
בפי אתו אדבר

Bilaam said to Balak... "Am I empowered to say anything? Whatever words G-d puts into my mouth, that shall I speak." (22:38)

Bilaam is a lesson in stark contrasts. On the one hand, he personifies evil and depravity at their nadir. Arrogant, condescending, avaricious and profligate, he was the consummate symbol of unmitigated evil. Yet, this same person spoke to Hashem and was able to maintain a dialogue on subjects that were of the loftiest esoterical and spiritual nature. How do these two polar opposites exist in one person? *Horav Eliezer HaLevi Turk, Shlita*, quotes from *Horav Chudah Kletzki, zl*, a student of the *Radin Yeshivah*, who, in his old age, made his domicile in Lakewood. He related that there was a man in Radin who

was strange. He did things his way, regardless of how others perceived him. Additionally, he thrived on garnering attention for himself. As a result, he taught his dog to understand *Yiddish*! Even those Jews who felt the "need" to raise a dog "conversed" with it in Polish – never *Yiddish*. But, as I prefaced above, this man was not the run-of-the-mill, ordinary member of the community. The children of the community would follow the dog, attempting to get its attention. They pulled on his tail, his ears. After all, a dog that understood *Yiddish* was a novelty for them, and, thus, an opportunity for some fun.

Even a dog loses its patience, and one day after numerous assaults by the fun-loving children, the intelligent dog lost it and bit one of the young boys. They were shocked. How could such a "refined" dog act so viciously? He was acting like a dog! *Rav Chudah* explained, "A dog remains a dog regardless of its ability to speak *Yiddish*! The same idea applies to serving Hashem." Continued *Rav Chudah*, "One who is deficient in his *middos*, his character traits, leaves much to be desired, does not change until he expunges these deficiencies and cleanses himself of his ethical and moral impurities. He will remain the same lowlife as before – despite his exposure to G-dliness.

This was Bilaam's life story. A man who personified every ethical and moral shortcoming – yet received prophecies from Hashem. His comfortable relationship with -- and access to -- the highest spiritual spheres, notwithstanding, Bilaam remained Bilaam – a dog remains a dog – even if he is taught to speak *Yiddish*. In fact, he employed his unique knowledge of what angers Hashem – moral depravity – to cause the Jews to sin with the Midyanite women. He knew that Hashem loves us for our moral chastity. He sought to undermine that relationship.

I think this is why Bilaam could not come to grips with *mussar*, rebuke, his donkey issued to him. Bilaam was acutely aware that his moral hypocrisy was so blatant that even his donkey understood what he was. This was too much for him to grapple with. Nothing shatters arrogance like the rebuke of a donkey.

מראש צרים אראנו ומגבעות אשור

From its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. (23:9)

Bilaam was looking for every way to render *Klal Yisrael* a death blow. His power was in his tongue, his ability to deliver a curse that would be effective and lethal. He begins his litany by acknowledging that it is difficult to curse a nation whose origins are likened to craggy rocks (Patriarchs) and hills (Matriarchs). He intimated that when he looked back at the roots of the Jews, he saw them as firmly established as rocks and hills. The loyalty to their forebears is what distinguishes them and makes them that more difficult to curse. I would like to employ my writer's license to embellish this idea and suggest a powerful lesson

to be derived about the predominance of the Jew, specifically as a result of his ancestry.

Horav Yechezkel Tzucker, Shlita, relates a story that took place in the winter of 2016. *Horav Avraham Altman, Shlita (Rosh Yeshivas Ateres Tzvi)*, and his son, *Horav Eliyahu Meir*, take an annual trip to Argentina on behalf of their *yeshivah*. They spend a few weeks meeting members of the community, speaking in the various *shuls* and raising badly-needed funds for the *yeshivah*. It was *Shabbos* morning after *Musaf*, and *Rav Altman* had delivered a powerful speech that shook up the congregation. Everyone was impressed and complimented him. As he was leaving, he was approached by a middle-aged Jew who said that he, together with his partner, owned a large factory which produced trousers. He offered to invite the *Rav* and his distinguished son to visit the factory. He would make it worth their while. They visited the next day and, as the owner had promised, he gave them a check that made the trip worth their while. Suddenly, in the midst of the conversation, the man broke down in bitter weeping. He explained that he had a partner who was dealing with a female client. One thing had led to another, and the relationship between him and the client had breached the parameters of pure business, and a not-so-platonic relationship ensued. He was now bent on marrying her. She was a gentile, and he was now prepared to turn his back on *Yahadus*, on the religion for which his ancestors had died. The man continued to weep.

Rav Altman asked to meet the partner. The man was a bit nervous to meet a *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael*, but his partner came out and graciously received the *Rosh Yeshivah*. *Rav Altman* said, “Your partner gave me a generous check from the business. I would like to thank you since it is a joint account. Perhaps we could all go out to lunch tomorrow before we fly back to the Holy Land.” The partners agreed to meet at a restaurant for lunch.

During lunch, *Rav Altman* interrupted the conversation twice to express his fascination with the partner. He said he did not know why, but something about his visage had impressed him. Clearly, receiving such compliments made the partner feel very good. It was not every day that he was complimented so much. “Tell me, are you married?” the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked. “No, not yet,” was his response. “I give you a blessing that this year should be the year that you find your *bashert*, Heavenly-designated spouse. Indeed, I will attend the wedding and dance with you!”

The partner was clueless that *Rav Altman* was aware that he was about to marry out of the faith. “What will I do?” he mused to himself. “The *Rosh Yeshivah* will dance with me in a church and the priest will be ‘*mesader kiddushin*,’ perform the service?” A few months passed, and the religious partner received a call from his partner. He was weeping bitterly, “I cannot go through with it! How

can I, a distinguished Jew with whom the *Rosh Yeshivah* from *Eretz Yisrael* is fascinated, marry a gentile? I am breaking the engagement!” A few months passed, and he was engaged again – only this time to a *frum*, observant girl. What happened? How did someone who had fallen to such a nadir arise from the pits of spirituality and return to normative observance?

Rav Tzucker explains this with an incident recorded in *Midrash Eichah* (1:9). A wise man from Athens came to Yerushalayim and chanced upon a young *Yerushalmi* boy. The Athenian considered himself wise, but he failed to perceive the wisdom of young Jewish boys. He told the boy, “Here are some coins. Please purchase some cheese and eggs for me.” The boy returned with the cheese and eggs. The Athenian then asked the boy, “Can you tell me which brick of cheese came from a white goat and which came from a black goat?” The boy countered, “You are a grown man, so it is only proper for you to first show me which egg is the egg of a white chicken and which is from a black one.”

The *Tiferes Zion* understands the exchange between the Athenian and the young boy as a metaphor for the Jewish People’s unique relationship with Hashem, Who favors us because of our Patriarchal ancestry. As a result, we, too, take immense pride in our illustrious lineage. This pride should be a cornerstone of our observance.

The Athenian asserted that ancestry had no enduring value, since progeny do not necessarily resemble their ancestors. He presented as proof positive that the Jews do not look any different than anyone else, regardless of their religion. This is the message he intimated when he asked the boy to identify the source of the cheeses. He alluded thereby that, just as two types of goats produce identical cheeses, it makes no difference whether one descends from righteous, virtuous individuals or average lineage.

The young boy oppugned to the Athenian, asking him to show which egg had come from a black hen and which had come from a white one. He implied that just because no external differences appeared between the two eggs, it does not mean that internally no differences existed. Indeed, place the eggs under a hen to incubate, and the chicks that emerge will have the color of its mother. Likewise, the Jewish People may externally appear to be similar to everyone else; when given the opportunity, however, they will manifest a clear, abiding relationship with the *Avos*, Patriarchs. This is the same metamorphosis that took place with the partner. *Rav Altman* made him feel a sense of relief in knowing that they are, by virtue of being *Bnei Avraham*, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov*, on a higher spiritual plateau. Come what may, we are not like them. The Jew is always welcomed back home, because he actually has never left.

Va’ani Tefillah

סורו ממני כל פעלי און – *Suru mimeni kol poalei aven*. **Depart from me, all evil doers.**

David *Hamelech* pleads with Hashem to remove him from those who seek him harm, who want nothing more than to see him fall. David suffered much in his life, pursued by enemies from all walks of life. He was beset with troubles. It is almost unreal that he had the ability to concentrate. His faith in Hashem was his anchor and served as his shield to protect him from adversity. His faith led to emotion-filled prayer, beseeching Hashem to grant him salvation, so that he could rise above the *tzaros*, troubles, to which he was subjected. David's enemies were Hashem's enemies, who did not want to see the *Bais Hamikdash* built. They knew that Shlomo was the heir designate who was to build the *Bais Hamikdash*. This could only occur if his father, David, would bestow this privilege on him. They sought to prevent this from happening.

Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, observes that under normal circumstances, the reservoir of tears ends. One does not cry forever, as he reconciles himself with his grief. When one sheds his tears *l'chvod Shomayim*, for the glory of Heaven, however, they are limitless.

Sponsored in loving memory of our dear mother, grandmother and great grandmother on her yahrzeit

Mrs. Hindy Herskowitz - מרת הינדא בת ר' יוסף צבי הלוי ע"ה - נפ' י"ז תמוז תשע"ד

Avi Herskowitz and family

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Ohr Somayach Insights into Halacha

For the week ending 19 June 2021 / 9 Tamuz 5781

Forgotten Fast Days: Zos Chukas HaTorah

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

On Motzai Shabbos Korach 5774, our dear, close family friend, Reb Chaim Daskal a"h, was niftar, after a prolonged and painful battle with cancer R"L. Never one to complain, Reb Chaim M'Yerushalayim (as he was commonly known) still exuded Simchas Hachaim and gratitude to Hashem even in his weakened and pain-filled state, the last time this author had the zechus to see him, merely a week and a half prior to his untimely passing. In fact, his tza'ava, will, reflected this as well, including how he wanted his own levaya, kevura, and shiva to be held.

One of the maspidim (eulogizers) at the levaya (at 1:45 A.M.!), Elimelech Lepon, mentioned that Reb Chaim passed away only after Shabbos was over, averring that the Malach HaMaves could not take have taken him on a Shabbos. You see, with an open house and a multitude of guests weekly, Shabbos was truly Reb Chaim's special day. In fact, Mr. Lepon revealed that it was exclusively due to the merit of Reb Chaim's extraordinary and warm Shabbos hospitality that won him over to personally begin keeping Shabbos properly.

When my father, renowned Kashrus expert Rabbi Manish Spitz, heard the tragic news of the passing of his Yedid Nefesh of almost 40 years, he enigmatically exclaimed 'Zos Chukas HaTorah'! His intent was that the week of Parashas Chukas is 'mesugal l'puraniyos', a time that has seen much hardship and tragedy for our nation. Therefore, it was fitting that only after Shabbos of Parashas Korach had ended and the week of Parashas Chukas officially began, that such an incredible man, in the prime of his life, passed away.

Yet, there is no mention in the Gemara of the week of Parashas Chukas being one of tragedy, nor is it mentioned by the Rambam, Tur, or Shulchan Aruch! Not even in the Siman where tragedies and proper days to fast are mentioned, Orach Chaim 580! In fact, most are wholly unfamiliar with anything specifically attributed to this week. Yet, the Magen Avraham, citing the Sefer HaTanya[1] (referring to Sefer Tanya Rabbasi; a far earlier source that the famous Kabbalistic work of the Shulchan Aruch Harav), tells of a terrible, albeit fascinating, historical tragedy.

Friday of Fire

The Magen Avraham prefaces his terrible tale by quoting certain writings[2] explaining that it is "worthwhile for every Jew to cry for the burning of the Torah". He then proceeds to tell of a customary annual fast specifically for this purpose, on Erev Shabbos Parashas Chukas. On that day, in the year 1242, twenty wagonloads (however the original versions state 24 wagonloads)[3] filled with Gemaros and Talmudic literature (including many works of the Baalei Tosafos), were burned in Paris by agents of the Church and King Louis IX of France.

Talmud on Trial

The pretext to this mass burning was a public debate (later known as "The Disputation of Paris") beginning in 1240 featuring Nicholas Donin, an apostate-Jew-turned-Franciscan-monk who petitioned Pope Gregory IX to prosecute the Talmud for 35 purported affronts to Christianity. The Pope ordered the banning and confiscation of all known manuscripts of the Talmud. King Louis IX, nicknamed "the monk king" due to his religious zeal, and later leader of the failed Seventh and Eighth Crusades, decided to put the Talmud 'on trial,' with Donin as the prosecutor.

Several of the most eminent rabbinical authorities in France were tasked to defend the Talmud: Rabbeinu Yechiel M'Paris, Rav Moshe M'Coucy (the SMA"G), Rav Shmuel M'Falaise, and Rav Yehuda M'Melun; the official verdict against them a foregone conclusion.[4] King Louis gleefully executed the "judgment" by publicly burning the 24 wagonloads of confiscated Talmudic literature on this "Friday of Fire." [5]

The impact and importance of this loss was tremendous. Keep in mind that this occurred over 200 years before the printing press was invented, and each of these volumes was

a priceless, handwritten manuscript.[6] In fact, this was considered such an enormous loss for Klal Yisrael, that the famed Maharam M'Rothenburg,[7] an eyewitness, composed an elegy for our loss, 'Sha'ali Serufa Ba'Aish', deemed so essential, that it is incorporated into the Kinot recited every Tisha B'Av (Kinah 41).[8]

I Had a Dream...

The great rabbis at the time, at a loss to understand the extent of the tragedy, inquired of Heaven by means of a dream (known as a she'elas chalom) to discover whether this terrible event had been so decreed by Hashem. The heavenly reply was a succinct three words 'Da Gezeiras Oraysa'. This is the Aramaic translation (see Targum Onkelos) of the opening verses to Parashas Chukas, "Zos Chukas HaTorah, These are the decrees of the Torah" (Bamidbar Ch. 19:2). The Rabbanim understood from this cryptic reply that the burning of the Talmud was indeed Heavenly decreed. Moreover, they gleaned that it was due to the proximity of the Parasha that the tragedy transpired, and not the day of the month.[9]

Therefore, and as opposed to every other fast on the Jewish calendar, instead of a specific day established as a fast day, this one, designated a Taanis for Yechidim (fast for individuals), was set annually on the Erev Shabbos preceding Parashas Chukas. For those fasting, Asarah B'Teves would not be the only Taanis Tzibbur that practically occurs on a Friday.[10]

Retribution for the Rambam?

Rav Hillel of Verona, a talmid of Rabbeinu Yonah, and another eyewitness to these events, wrote a famous letter[11] in which he considered the burning of the Talmud as a clear sign of Divine anger and retribution for the burning of the works of the Rambam, in the exact same place in Paris not even forty days prior!

After the Rambam's passing (in 1204), many great scholars who did not agree with his philosophical observations in his 'Moreh Nevuchim' and 'Sefer HaMada' banned his sefarim, with a tremendous controversy erupting throughout the Torah world.[12] Eventually, a number of his detractors submitted copies of his work to the monks of the Dominican Order to determine whether the Rambam's works contained heretical ideas.

The Dominican Friars, naturally, summarily concluded that the Rambam's writings were not only false, but blasphemous. In 1234, in Montpellier, France, they publicly collected and burned all copies they found of 'Moreh Nevuchim' and 'Sefer HaMada'. Similarly, in 1242, a fanatical mob burned many of the Rambam's writings in Paris. Less than 40 days later, at the exact same site, the 24 wagonloads of the Talmud were burned, on Erev Shabbos Parashas Chukas.[13]

According to Rav Hillel's letter, the famed Rabbeinu Yonah, one of the Rambam's primary opponents, took the Talmud burning as a Divine sign, and publicly and vociferously denounced his former position and opposition

against the Rambam's writings and instead emphatically concluded "Moshe Emes V'Toras Emes, V'Kulanu Bada'in! - Moshe and his Torah are true (here referring to the Rambam), while we all are liars".[14] He planned on traveling to the Rambam's grave (in Teverya) and begging forgiveness. Some say this tragic incident was the catalyst of Rabbeinu Yonah's writing what came to be known as his Magnum Opus, 'Shaarei Teshuva'.

Further Grounds for Fasting

After discussing the burning of the Talmud, the Magen Avraham offers another reason for fasting. On this very day, Erev Shabbos Chukas, two entire cities of Jews were brutally decimated, as part of the Gezeiras Ta'ch V'Ta't, the Cossack massacres led by Bogdan Chmielnitsky ym"sh[15] in 1648-1649, as recorded by the Shach.

Although most know of the Shach as one of the preeminent halachic authorities due to his extensive and authoritative commentary and rulings on the Shulchan Aruch, yet, few know that he also wrote a sefer titled 'Megillas Eifa',[16] detailing the horrific and barbaric slaughter of tens of thousands (he puts the total at over one hundred thousand!) of Jews, and hundreds of entire communities during these terrifying years. Among his entries he relates (in graphic detail) how two cities were totally wiped out on this same day in the year 1648 (5408). Hence, the Magen Avraham avers, that it is proper to fast (Taanis Yachid) on Erev Shabbos Chukas, due to both of these tragedies happening on this same day in history.

20th of Sivan

However, that was not the first of the tragedies of Gezeiras Ta'ch V'Ta't. That occurred on the 20th of Sivan, 1648 (5408), when the Cossacks attacked Nemirov (Nemyriv), in the Ukraine, and destroyed the Jewish community, numbering over 6,000. Several hundred Jews were drowned; other burned alive. The shuls were ransacked and destroyed, with even the Torah parchments desecrated and used as shoes. Since this horrifying catastrophe was unfortunately the first of many to come in the following years, the Shach, at the conclusion of his 'Megillas Eifa', declared a personal fast on the 20th of Sivan for himself and his descendants.[17]

This was soon codified as public fast by the Vaad Arba Ha'Aratzos, the halachic and legislative body of all Lithuanian and Polish Jewry.[18] Indeed, the Magen Avraham concludes his passage that in many places in Poland, the custom is to fast on the 20th of Sivan for this reason. Additionally, the Shach, the Tosafos Yom Tov, and Rav Shabsi Sheftel Horowitz,[19] as well as several other Rabbanim of the time, composed specific Selichos to be recited on this day annually.

The First Blood Libel and Massacre

However, the 20th of Sivan was not chosen as a fast day exclusively due to the annihilation of the hundreds of Jewish communities during Gezeiras Ta'ch V'Ta't. It actually held the ignominious distinction as being the date

of one of the very first blood libels,[20] in Blois, France, almost 500 years prior, in 1171(4931)!

According to one of the Selichos recited on that day, 'Emunei Shelumei Yisrael', attributed to Hillel ben Yaakov, which lists the place and year of the tragedy, the King offered the 31 innocent Jewish prisoners (some listed by first name in the Selicha!), including several Gedolim and Baalei Tosafos, the chance to convert. When they refused, he ordered them burned alive! The martyrs recited Aleinu L'Shabayach in unison as the decree was being executed. Although, as detailed in the Selichah, as well as recorded by an eyewitness to the atrocities, Rabbi Efraim of Bonn in his 'Sefer HaZechira', which was later appended to Rabbi Yosef Hakohen HaRofei of Avignon's sixteenth century 'Emek HaBacha', a chronicle of the terrible devastation of the Crusades (starting in 1096/4856; known as Gezeiras Tatn"u),[21] the martyrs' bodies did not burn, still, this tragedy foreshadowed and portended future cataclysmic events for the Jewish people. In fact, this terrible libel was a major factor in the expulsion order of Jews from France a mere ten years later.

The great Rabbeinu Tam and the Rabbanim of the time instituted the 20th of Sivan as a fast day, even exclaiming that this fast is 'akin to Yom Kippur!'[22] The Selichos established for 20 Sivan, aside for the one mentioned previously which actually describes the horrendous pyre in Blois, were authored by the Gedolim of the previous generations regarding the destruction of many Jewish communities during the Crusades (known as Gezeiras Tatn"u; many Kinot of Tisha B'Av are recited in commemoration of these tragedies as well), including Rav Shlomo HaBavli,[23] Rabbeinu Gershom (Me'or Hagolah), and Rav Meir ben Rav Yitzchak, the author of Akdomus. Interestingly, several of the Selichos, especially the one titled "Elokim Al Dami L'Dami", strongly reference and invoke the idea and essence of Korbanos in their theme; comparing the self-sacrifice of the Kedoshim of these decimated communities who gave up their lives Al Kiddush Hashem, to Korbanos offered in the Beis Hamikdash.

Re-Establishing the Fast

In fact, it is due to the dual tragedies that occurred on this day that the Shach declared the 20th of Sivan a fast day.[24] In other words, he didn't actually set a new fast day; rather, he re-established the 20th of Sivan as a fast day, as it already had the distinction of a day that went 'down in infamy' almost 500 years previously. Therefore, it was only fitting to commemorate the unspeakable Cossack atrocities with a fast, on this very same day, the day that the first Jewish community was destroyed as part of Gezeiras Ta"ch V'Ta"t.

Chronicles of the disastrous occurrences of this day do exist and can still be found. Aside for the Shach's 'Megillas Eifa', there is also Rav Nosson Nota of Hanover's 'Yavein Metzulah', Rav Avraham ben Rav

Shmuel Ashkenazi's 'Tzar Bas Rabbim', Rav Gavriel ben Yehoshua of Shusberg's 'Pesach Teshuva', and Rav Meir ben Shmuel of Sheburshen's 'Tzok HaHaim', all written by eyewitnesses to the carnage and wanton destruction.[25] [26]

Although nowadays it seems not widely commemorated or even known about,[27] nevertheless, the 20th of Sivan is still observed among several Chassidic communities, mostly of Hungarian origin. During the Holocaust, Hungarian Jewry was R"l decimated mainly over the span of the months of Iyar, Sivan, and Tamuz in 1944. Therefore, Rabbanim of Hungary re-established the 20th of Sivan as a fast day for Hungarian Jewry.[28] Recent events have proven to us the timelessness of the dictum of 'Zos Chukas HaTorah' - where tragedies beyond our understanding happen to the Jewish people in exile. Our pain and tears over the years have driven home the point to us that throughout our long and protracted exile there have been no dearth of reasons to fast. May we soon welcome Moshiach, and have no further need for fast days.

The author wishes to thank Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz for his assistance in clarifying much of the historical content of this article.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author:

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[1] Magen Avraham (O.C. 580, end 9), quoting the Sefer Tanya Rabbasi (end 58, Inyan Arba Tzomos pg. 63b). This version of the tragic events is also later cited by the Elya Rabba (ad loc. 4), Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 4), Mishna Berura (ad loc. 16), and Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. 31). The Tanya Rabbasi is an early halachic work written anonymously by a Ritshon who was a colleague of the Shibolei Haleket and Maharam M'Rothenburg. Nowadays, it is generally attributed to Rav Yechiel ben Rav Yekusiel M'Mishpachas Ha'Anavim, of the Chachmei Rome (see the recent Mossad Rav Kook edition of the sefer). Interestingly, the Tanya Rabbasi was merely quoting the Shibolei Haleket's account; ergo, it is unclear how slight variations creep into the Magen Avraham's retelling.

[2] The Oz V'Hadar Mishna Berura (ad loc. 16) references this to be referring to the teachings of the Arizal (Shaar HaKavannos of Rav Chaim Vital, Drushei Tikkun Chatzos 1 and Pri Eitz Chaim, Shaar Tikkun Chatzos Ch. 3).

[3] Indeed, the Burei Maharsha"h (on the Tanya Rabbasi ad loc. 8) points out that there must have been a ta'us sofer in the Magen Avraham's writing, as in original he writes, it explicitly states 24 wagonloads and not 20.

[4] The full proceedings of this debate were recorded by one of the Rabbanim who defended the Talmud, Rabbeinu Yechiel ben Yosef, the Rosh Yeshiva in Paris and father-in-law of Rav Yitzchak M'Corbeil, author of the SMA"K, in a sefer titled 'Vikuach Rabbeinu Yechiel M'Paris.' For more background on this tragedy, see ArtScroll's Kinot and Tefillos for Tisha B'Av (Introduction to Kinah 41).

[5] For his leading role in this pivotal event amid a lifetime of royally advancing the banner of Catholicism, Louis IX is the only French king to have been posthumously canonized as a "saint." [Hence, there are many cities named after him around the world, including one with a famous "Gateway Arch" in Missouri.] The papal edict against the Talmud was overturned by Gregory IX's more tolerant successor, Pope Innocent IV in 1247. Disapproval from his peers notwithstanding, Innocent IV wrote letters to King Louis IX effectively ordering that henceforth the Talmud should be censored rather than burned.

[6] See Shu"t Menachem Meishiv (vol. 2, pg. 262, 62; part of the sefer Tziyon L'Menachem) who cites that approximately 12,000 individual volumes were burned!

[7] Aside for the Kinah he wrote, the Maharam referenced this great loss in his responsa (Teshuvos Maharam M'Rothenburg 250), citing the reaction of Rav Shmuel M'Falaise, one of the Rabbanim who unsuccessfully attempted to defend the Talmud from being burned. On a historical sidenote, the Maharam M'Rothenburg was niftar in captivity after being unjustly imprisoned for seven years in Ensisheim Fortress, in order to force the resident Jews to pay an exorbitant ransom to fill the king's (Rudolf I of Germany) depleted coffers. The Maharam refused to allow himself to be ransomed, fearing that it would set a dangerous precedent of rulers holding Rabbanim captive and forcing the unfortunate Jews to pay the price. Indeed, a short while after his passing, the king attempted to do the same for the Maharam's prized pupil, the Rosh, who only narrowly avoided capture, escaping to Spain. Tragically, the Maharam's body was only allowed to be buried fourteen years later, when a ransom was paid by Alexander ben Shlomo Wimpfen, who was subsequently laid to rest beside the Maharam, in the Jewish cemetery of Worms, Germany (also known as "Heiliger Sand"), nowadays commonly considered the oldest surviving Jewish cemetery in Europe.

[8] In an interesting side point, the Goren Dovid (Shu"t O.C. 41) utilizes this tragedy as a reason to explain why nowadays Yom Tov Sheini is still observed. Unfortunately, throughout our long and bitter Golus we never know when a government might make a gezeira ra'ah and all halachic literature lost. How then will we be able to properly calculate the months and years to know when are the correct days to observe? He explains that this was a fulfillment of the Gemara's warning (Beitzah 4b) to keep Yom Tov Sheini "Hicharu B'Minhag Avoseichem B'Yadeichem", "You should still be vigilant with the custom of your forefathers that has been handed down to you because there might be times when the local government will issue a decree and it will cause confusion". For more on this topic see recent articles titled 'Rosh Hashana: The Universal Two Day Yom Tov (and Why Yom Kippur is Not)' and 'One Day or Two? What is a Chutznik in Eretz Yisrael to Do?'

[9] The Shibolei Haleket (263, Ha'arugah HaTishi'is Seder Taanis, Din Arba Tzomos; whom other sources are ostensibly based on) cites this as well, albeit with slight variations. First of all, from his writing it seems that he was also an eyewitness. Second, he refers to it as 24 (and not 20) wagonloads filled with 'Sifrei Talmud, V'Halachos V'Hagados', similar to the Maharam M'Rothenburg's version. Third, according to his version, the heavenly response received was "V'Da Gezeiras Oraysa", "And these are the decrees of the Torah". Accordingly, the Rabbanim understood the response to mean that Yom Vav (the sixth day) of

Parashas Chukas specifically was the gezeira. This 'vav' is understandably not present in our Targum Onkelos on the pasuk of 'Zos Chukas HaTorah', as the pasuk does not state 'V'Zos'. As mentioned previously, this account is also the version in the original Tanya Rabbasi, as he was citing the Shibolei Haleket. Other variations include the Sefer HaTadir (52, Hilchos Taaniyos pg. 233-234) who cites that 24 wagonloads were burned like the other Rishonim, but writes that the Heavenly response was 'Da Gezeiras Oraysa' (without the 'vav') similar to the Magen Avraham's version, and the Korei HaDoros (pg. 23a-b s.v. ukaf) who writes that 21 wagonloads were burned, but places the date of the Talmud burning 62 years later, right before the Jews were actually expelled from France. Interestingly, the Maharam M'Rothenburg makes no mention of the she'eilaschalom in his Kinah dedicated to this tragedy. Neither does the Mishna Berura (ibid.), who summarized the reasons for the fast. However, in a different vein, in his recently published manuscript, Rav Chaim Paltiel, a Rishon and talmid chaver of the Maharam M'Rothenburg writes (Perushei HaTorah L'Rabi Chaim Paltiel, Introduction to Parashas Chukas, pg. 527; thanks are due to Rabbi Avrohom Goldstone of England for pointing out this source) that the minhag in France was to fast annually on the 6th of Tammuz, as that was the date that the Talmud was burned. And a siman for this is 'Zos Chukas HaTorah,' which the Targum is 'Da Gezeirasa D'Oraysa,' meaning that on that date there was a gezeira on/against the Torah. It seems that both the Maharam, as well as Rav Paltiel were unaware of the she'eilaschalom, and Rav Paltiel understood that the fast to commemorate this tragedy was set as an actual date and not on the Erev Shabbos preceding Parashas Chukas. Since his manuscript was only first published some 30-odd years ago (5741), it is understandable why none of the Acharonim quoted his version of the events. For more on the topic of She'eilosChalomos in general, see Rabbi Eliezer Brod's 'Lekutei Eliezer' (pg. 59-63) and Rabbi Mordechai Zev Trenek's recent Magic, Mysteries, and Mysticism: Illuminating Insights on Esoteric Torah Topics (pg. 76-78 and 235-239).

[10] For more on this topic and why Asarah B'Teves is the only Taanis Tzibbur that can fall out on a Friday, as well as the halachos of a Friday fast, see article titled 'Fasting on Friday? – Asarah B'Teves: Not Your Ordinary Fast Day.'

[11] This letter is brought in Chemdah Genuzah (pg. 18), as well as Otzar HaGedolim (vol. 7, pg. 105), and cited in Torah L'Daas (vol. 2, Parashas Chukas pg. 280-281) and Kuntress Peninei Gevuros Akiva (Parashas Chukas pg. 3). Perhaps somewhat apocryphal, but certainly evocative, Rav Hillel mentions that the ashes of the burnt sefarim of the Rambam mixed together with the ashes of the burnt Talmud.

[12] These letters, back and forth between the great scholars of the time, have been collected as the third volume of Kovetz Teshuvos HaRambam V'Igrosav, titled 'Igrosh HaKina os.'

[13] For more on the historical aspects of this see Rabbi Avraham Meir Weiss's recent Mishnas Chachamim (pg. 265, Joannot 50) and the ArtScroll Kinot and Tefillos for Tisha B'Av (Introduction to Kinah 41).

[14] This is a paraphrase of the quote Chazal attribute to Korach after he was swallowed up by the earth at the conclusion of his ill-fated rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu! See Gemara Bava Basra (74a), Midrash Rabba (Parashas Korach Ch. 18, end 20), Midrash Tanchuma (Parashas Korach 11), and Kli Yakar (Parashas Korach Ch. 16, 34 s.v. nasu).

[15] A genocidal and bloodthirsty mass murderer who could have given Adolf Hitler ym"sh a run as most notorious Anti-Semite in history, Chmielnitsky ym"sh is nevertheless still considered a national hero in Ukraine for being the father of Ukrainian nationalistic aspirations. The Cossacks' sheer brutality and scale of their atrocities was unsurpassed until the Nazis. According to noted historian Rabbi Berel Wein, the only reason why the Cossacks did not manage to kill as many Jews as did the Nazis ym"sh, was that there were no mechanized weapons to enable easy mass murder back in the 1600s. It was not due to lack of trying, R"l.

[16] Although this author could not find this sefer among the works of the Shach, I was able to locate it annexed to the back of Rav Shlomo Ibn Varga's Shevet Yehuda, a fascinating (and unfortunately horrifying) work detailing the trials and tribulations Klal Yisrael has gone through in different lands over the millennia of our prolonged exile. Although Rav Varga died over a hundred years prior to Gezeiras Ta"ch V'Ta"l, the Shach's shocking account and vivid descriptions of the massacres were later included in this important work. Essential reading on Tisha B'Av!

[17] The Shach added an additional reason why he chose this date (also cited in Shaarei Teshuva - O.C. 580, end 9): 20 Sivan cannot fall out on a Shabbos in our calendar, ensuring and enabling fasters to be able to do so on that day every year. The Shach (as well as later the Yaavetz in his Siddur Beis Yaakov and as mentioned in the special aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' recited on that day for the Harugei Kehillos T"ach [V'Ta"l]; reprinted from an old manuscript that was printed in the Shach's lifetime) especially mourned the loss of the city's Chief Rabbi, Rav Yechiel Michel, a tremendous Talmid Chacham. Interestingly, a few short years earlier, the famed Tosafos Yom Tov, Rav Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, served as the town's Rav.

[18] Pinkas Vaad Arba Ha'Aratzos; cited by the Taz (O.C. 566, 3; although he quotes it as the Vaad Shalosh Ha'Aratzos) and Shaarei Teshuva (O.C. 580, end 9), as well as Rav Nossou Nota of Hanover's 'Yavein Metzulah', Rav Avraham ben Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi's 'Tzar Bas Rabbim' (Reshumos vol. 3, pg. 279), and the Tosafos Yom Tov's Hakdama to his 'Selichos L'Kaf Sivan'. See also Yad Shaul (Y"D 228, end 136), Daas Torah (O.C. 580, 4), Siddur HaShlah, Siddur Bais Yaakov (of the Yaavetz), Siddur Derech Hachaim (of the Chavas Daas), Yesod VeShores HaAvodah (Shaar 9, Ch. 11) and the introduction to sefer 'Yesh Manchilin'. This fast is also mentioned by several other authorities including the Magen Avraham (ibid. and in O.C. 568, 10), Elya Rabba (O.C. 566, 3), Maadanei Yom Tov (ad loc. 1; aside for the Selichos he wrote), Pri Megadim (ad loc. M.Z. 3), Eshel Avraham (Butchatch, O.C. 580; at length), Mishna Berura (ibid.), and Kaf Hachaim (ibid.).

[19] He was the son of the Shlah and Av Bais Din of Prague, as well as the author of Yavei Ha'Amudim. His Selicha was printed in the Siddur HaShlah. In the aftermath of these tragedies, the Tosafos Yom Tov (cited in the end of Shaarei Efraim, Hilchos Krias HaTorah) also composed a famous Tefillah against talking in Shul.

[20] The ignominious distinction of very first blood libel seems to have occurred in 1144, Norwich, England, after a boy, William of Norwich, was found dead with stab wounds in the woods. Although his death was unsolved, the local community of Norwich attributed the boy's death to the Jews. William was shortly thereafter proclaimed as a saint in Norwich, with 'miracles' attributed to him, with a cult established in his name. However, in this case, the local authorities did not convict the Jews due to lack of proof and of legal jurisdiction. Although this sordid affair marked the first official 'Blood Libel', on the other hand, Blois in 1171 was the first recorded time and place such baseless accusations were actually acted upon, concluding with a gruesome massacre of the town's Jews. HY"D. Thanks are due to Stephen Posen for pointing out these details.

[21] For this reason alone, the Taz (O.C. 493, 2), although maintaining that one need only keep the restrictions of Sefirah only until Lag B'Omer, nonetheless, exhorts us to continue with the prohibition on weddings even after Lag B'Omer until shortly before Shavuos due to the horrific tragedies perpetrated by the Crusaders to many Ashkenazic communities during the second half of Sefirah (Gezeiras Tam"u). See previous article titled 'Switching Sefirahs? - Understanding Your Minhag and its Ramifications'.

[22] In fact, according to this source, the tragic events in Blois distressed Rabbeinu Tam so much that he passed away a mere 14 days later, 4 Tamuz 1171 (4931). However, Rav Shmuel Ashkenazi (Alpha Beta Tineysa D'Shmuel Zeira vol. 1, pg. 391) posits that this was not referring to the famous Rabbeinu Tam who was Rashi's grandson, but rather his talmid, Rav Yaakov of Orleans who was called Rabbeinu Tam M'Orleans. He adds, citing that Oheiv Yisrael of Apta (end Parashas Mattos) that although not mentioning the terrible pyre on that day, related an astounding drush that the 20th of Sivan is the beginning of Yom Kippur. He adds a Biblical allusion to this from Parashas Ki Sisa (Shemos Ch. 17:16): "Ki Yad ad Keis Kah" - Keis (Kaf-Samach) stands for Kaf (20) Sivan and Kah (Yud - Hei) stands for Yom Kippurim.

[23] Rav Shlomo HaBavli is referred to by the Rishonim with great veneration. For example, he is quoted by Rashi (Parashas Terumah Ch. 26:15 s.v. v'asisa) and the Rosh (Yoma Ch. 8, 19). The Maharshal (Shu"t Maharshal 29) writes that Rabbeinu Gershon, teacher of all Ashkenazic Jewry, learned Torah and received his mesorah from Rav Shlomo HaBavli.

[24] Shach, in the conclusion of his 'Megillas Eifa', also cited by the Shaarei Teshuva (O.C. 580, end 9) and Kaf Hachaim (ad loc. end 31). This double catastrophe on the same day as part of the cheshbon to renew the fast of the 20th of Sivan is also mentioned by the Tosafos Yom Tov in his Hakdama to his Selichos L'Kaf Sivan, and in Rav Meir ben Shmuel Sheburnshen's 'Tzok Haltim'.

[25] Be forewarned: Much of the content is quite graphic and gruesome in its explicitness. The Cossacks' sheer depravity, cruelty, brutality, and bloodlust, was simply unprecedented in scale and scope, R"l.

[26] Many of these works were collected and reprinted together around a hundred years ago in 'Lekoros HaGezeiros al Yisrael' (vol. 4). Additionally, there are several contemporary sefarim that give a summary of the tragedies of Gezeiras Tach V'Tat and the 20th of Sivan, including Sefer HaTodaah (vol. 2, Chodesh Sivan, Kaf B'Sivan, pg. 357-360), and Nitei Gavriel (on Hilchos Shavuos, Chelek HaBirurim 6, pg. 282-299). Especially of interest is Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff's recent article titled 'The Twentieth of Sivan'.

[27] There are several theories raised to explain this. See Yad Shaul (Y"D 228, end 136), and the Maharshal's Daas Torah (O.C. 580, 4). One supposition is that the original decree from the Vaad Arba Ha'Aratzos to fast on the 20th of Sivan was only for a hundred years. Another theory is that the decree was only on Jewry who lived in those lands. In fact, the lashon of the Magen Avraham (O.C. 580, end 9), as well as the Mishna Berura (ad loc. 16), bears this out, as they only mention the fast as a 'minhag Poland'. Moreover, the Tosafos Yom Tov himself, in his Hakdama to his Selichos L'Kaf Sivan, writes that the fast was incumbent upon all throughout the Arba Ha'Aratzos; implying that it was never accepted in other outlying lands. Nowadays, there are not many Jewish kehillos left in Poland or Ukraine to uphold this. Indeed, Rav Moshe Feinstein (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Y"D vol. 4, 57, 11 s.v. v'lo) and Rav Yitzchak Isaac Halevi Herzog (Shu"t Heichel Yitzchak O.C. 61, 3) [and although disagreeing in psak about the main inyan in their respective responsa] both wrote that the takana to fast on the 20th of Sivan was only observed in those lands.

[28] See Nitei Gavriel (ibid. pg. 297-299), citing the Pinkas Minhagim of Kehal Yereim of Budapest from 5706/1946 and the Mishnas Yaakov (O.C. 580). For example, the Belz minhag is to be very makpid with reciting the Selichos of the 20th of Sivan, including the later additions of special aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' recited on that day for the Harugei Kehillos T"ach [V'Ta"l] (reprinted from an old manuscript that was printed in the Shach's lifetime) as well as a more recent, albeit unfortunately similar, aleph-beis acrostic 'Keil Malei Rachamim' for the Kedeshei HaShoah (Ta"sh-Tash"h).

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'ily Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda, and I'zchus for Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam and her children for a yeshua teikef v'miyad!

This article is dedicated L'Ily Nishmasam shel R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi and Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaar, and Eyal Yifrach Hy"d.

L'ily Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Chukas

Seeking Honest Advice is Key to Avoiding Monumental Mistakes

Using "We" Was Anything But a "Wee" Mistake

One of the major topics in Parshas Chukas is the incident of Mei Merivah. It begins with the death of Miriam: "And the Children of Israel, the entire congregation, came to Midbar Tzin in the first month, and the nation resided in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there." (Bamidbar 20:1) Chazal say that the miraculous "Well" (Be'er) which provided water for the Jewish people during their forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness was present in the merit of the righteous Miriam. When Miriam died, the Be'er ceased, the people didn't have water, and they complained to Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moshe's response to this request somehow contained within it an aveyra (sin), which—based on Moshe's high level of righteousness—triggered Divine Punishment that prevented him from going into Eretz Yisrael. The exact nature of the "Sin of Mei Merivah" is the subject of a tremendous dispute among the classic Chumash commentaries. The most widely-quoted interpretation is that Moshe Rabbeinu hit the Rock rather than speaking to it. There are a wide variety of other interpretations as well.

The Ramban, in his Chumash commentary, quotes an interpretation from Rabbeinu Chananel, one of the earliest commentaries, who says that Moshe's aveyra was that he said "...Do you think we will extract for you water from this Rock?" (Bamidbar 20:10). The aveyra was basically one word (or in Hebrew a single letter prefix) – "we". Rabbeinu Chananel says that Moshe's rhetorical question should have been "Do you think Hashem will extract for you water from this Rock?" By using the first-person

plural, Moshe gave the impression that “we are going to be the water givers.” This minor grammatical slip might cause the people to mistakenly think that Moshe and Aharon would be able to extract water from the Rock through their own wisdom. According to Rabbeinu Chananel, this carelessness, in this crucial theological matter, was the aveyra which caused Moshe and Aharon to die before reaching Eretz Yisrael. The pasuk alludes to this when writing “...Since you did not sanctify My Name in the midst of Bnei Yisrael” (Devorim 32:51). They could have made a kiddush Hashem by attributing the miracle to G-d, but they forfeited that opportunity by implying that they would be responsible for extracting the water from the Rock.

Rabbeinu Chananel’s interpretation is quite shocking. Remember, this event took place forty years post the Exodus from Egypt. The Jewish people witnessed Moshe’s leadership style for forty years, during which he always attributed their miraculous emergence from slavery and survival in the Wilderness to the direct intervention of the Ribono shel Olam. Not only that, even within this particular pasuk, the Torah begins by stating: “Moshe and Aharon gathered the Congregation in front of the Rock...” (Bamidbar 20:10). Rashi here notes that this is one of the places in Chumash where a small area miraculously held a huge number of people. There were a couple of million people, and Chazal say that everyone was right in front of the Rock. Obviously, such a thing is not physically possible under normal circumstances. There was no denying that this was a miracle, and that the Ribono shel Olam was 100% responsible for all that was transpiring at this moment.

If that is the case, how could it be that Moshe’s use of the expression “Notzi lachem mayim” (we will extract water) would cause anyone to think that he was referring to his own skill and knowledge? No one would have thought that! Rav Simcha Zissel Brody (the Head of the Chevron Yeshiva) says that we see from here that a person can always make a mistake, regardless of the circumstances. Something can be as clear as the nose on my face, but if I want to make a mistake, indeed, I can make a mistake. Someone who wants to deny the Almighty’s intervention in

his life, as obvious as that may be, can deny it. This is what the Navi says: “...for the ways of Hashem are straight, and the righteous will walk on them, and the sinners will stumble on them.” (Hoshea 14:10). Hashem placed in creation something called “Bechira” (Freedom of Choice). A person always has the ability to make choices. He can make the right choice or he can make a choice which is irrational, but the option to choose belongs to man. Moshe Rabbeinu, by using the word “Notzee” (We will bring forth), opened the door for them to this opportunity to think the wrong thing.

This can help explain an interesting Rashi. Rashi quotes the words in this very pasuk “...Hear ye, you rebellious ones...” (Shim’u nah ha’morim) and interprets the word “morim” to be “sarbonim” (stubborn ones), people who refuse. Then Rashi brings a second interpretation, based on Greek etymology: “Shotim” (Fools), those who are “morim es moreihem” (try to teach their own teachers).

It is not clear whether Rashi is offering three interpretations, or only two. Rashi mentions Sarbonim, shotim, and morim es moreihem. This could be three different interpretations. However, the Imrei Emes writes that there are only two interpretations here. “Morim es moreihem” is an elaboration of “Shotim”. A person who does not listen to the advice and guidance of his teachers and elders, but rather tries to teach them a thing or two—such a person is a fool!

Since it is always possible for a person to make a mistake, how can he ever be sure that what he is doing is correct? The answer is “Aseh lecha Rav” – Make for yourself a teacher (Avos 1:6). Everyone needs a Rebbe, a mentor, a guide—someone who can give him frank and honest advice and tell him, when necessary, “You are making a mistake here.”

The people Moshe gathered by the Rock did not fully accept upon themselves such a teacher. As a result, they were vulnerable to making such a colossal mistake as to think that it was Moshe and Aharon who were giving them the water.

לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה