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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Chukat

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ALL PAIN, NO GAIN

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It is not so easy having a brother like Esav. We ask one little favor, it wouldn't cost him a dime. We wanted to pass through his land on the way to Canaan. In fact, he would be able to make some money off the venture. But he says no. And he does not just say no the way they tell you to just say no, this no is a resounding exclamation that warns of war. If you follow the chain of events, it is important to note that the Jewish pleas for mercy and understanding were met with such vociferous antagonism.

Moshe first sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom – “So said your brother Israel – You know all the hardship that has befallen us. Our forefathers descended to Egypt and we dwelled in Egypt many years, and the Egyptians did evil to us and to our forefathers. We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice; He sent an emissary and took us out of Egypt. Now behold! we are in Kadesh, a city at the edge of your border” (Numbers 20:15-17).

After Moshe defines the hardships and trials that the Jews endured he makes one small request. “Let us pass through your land; we shall not pass through field or vineyard, and we shall not drink well water; on the king’s road shall we travel — we shall not veer right or left — until we pass through your border.”

The commentaries explain that Moshe promised not to use the water from the miraculous well, rather they would purchase water from the Edomites. In fact, Moshe was willing to pay for any amenity that the Jews used. But it did not help. Edom was not satisfied and turned his back on his cousins. More so, he responded with a threat. “The king of Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through me — lest I come against you with the sword!” (ibid v.18) The Children of Israel said to him, “We shall go up on the highway, and if we drink your water — I or my flock — I shall pay their price. Only nothing will happen; let me pass through on foot.” Edom replied, “You shall not pass through! Then Edom went out against him with a massive throng and a strong hand.” The Torah concludes that Edom refused to permit Israel to pass through his border, and Israel turned away from near him. Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma Beshalach Esav was irked by that detail of the Jew’s narrative, “We prayed to Hashem and he heard.” And so he responded: You pride yourselves on the “voice” which your father bequeathed you as a blessing, saying, “And we cried unto the Lord and He heard our voice” (cf Rashi on v 16); I, therefore, will come out against you with that which my father bequeathed me when he said, (Gen :27:40) “And by thy sword shall thou live.” It seems that despite the story of oppression, once the Jews mention their spiritual proficiency, Esav balks. Why is there a vehemence directed at Yaakov’s declaration? What irked Esav when he heard about Yaakov’s successful supplications?

I heard this Soviet Union story during the height of Brezhnev’s reign back in the 1970s:

After a two month hiatus, the monthly potato shipment to Moscow was supposed to finally arrive the next morning. Two hours before dawn, a throng of people began queuing up in the Russian winter’s frostiness, in front of the market. After half an hour the official stepped out of the shop. I am sorry we will not be getting enough potatoes to service all of you. All Jewish comrades must return home. There will be none for you. The rest of the crowd smirked as they continued waiting in the bitter cold for the anticipated delivery. Two hours later, the proprietor emerged. “One of the trucks broke down. All non-communist party members should go home. They too trudged off into the cold. It was only another three hours later when the storekeeper emerged again, this time breaking the news to the remaining party faithful. “I apologize, but the trucks have broken down and will not be delivering potatoes this month. All of you should go home. This time there was only frustration, “Those cursed Jews have all the privileges!”

The Torah tells us how Edom reacts to Yaakov’s misfortune. When the Jews talk about their long captivity, there is no emotion. When they mention the torture and affliction there is no compassion. But the minute the Jews allude to even a minor success, one that alleviated their torture and pain, “we prayed to G-d and he stopped the oppression,” Edom snarls. He retorts, “Jew, are you boasting about your spirituality. I, too, have my talents I live by the sword and I will greet you with it!” He forgets that our prayers did not advance our position. It did not cause us to inflict undue harm on other nations. It just let true justice be served on our tormentors. One thing our enemies ought to learn. If you don’t appreciate our pains, at least admire our gains!

Balancing Act

By Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Perhaps the greatest and most discussed mystery of the Torah is the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, the Red Heifer, described at the beginning of Parashas Chukas, the first of this week's two parshiyos. Indeed, Chazal, our Sages, tell us ([Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6](#)) that aside from Moshe, no one has ever fully understood the reasoning behind the Parah Adumah. Even Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) – wisest of all men – said of the Parah (Koheles/[Ecclesiastes 7:23](#)), “I said, ‘I will become wise,’ yet it is beyond me.” ([Yoma 14a](#))

There are many aspects of the Parah Adumah which need to be examined. Most mefarshim (commentators) understand that its greatest mystery is the fact that it renders pure one who is impure, yet it imparts tum’ah (impurity) to one who was previously tahor (pure). Namely, one who has been defiled by contact with a corpse must be twice sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer, mixed with water, after which his tum’ah leaves him. (Actually, it’s not quite so simple, see Rambam, Laws of Parah Adumah for full details.) On the other hand, if the same mixture happened to be sprinkled inadvertently on one who was non-tamei, he is rendered ritually impure, and requires immersion in a mikvah. How can the same mixture have such contradictory effects?

The K’li Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Efrayim of Luntshitz, [5310-5379; 1550- 1619]) however, offers a brilliant explanation as to how this works. The law is that fruits, grains, and produce can receive tum’ah (ritual defilement) only after having coming in contact with water (or certain other liquids related to water – see Vayikra/[Leviticus 11:38](#), Rambam, Laws of Food-Related Defilement, Ch. 1). If a fruit has not come into contact with water since being harvested, it is not susceptible to tum’ah and cannot be rendered impure. Isn’t this strange? We normally think of water as the source of all purity! When our hands are impure, we wash them with water. When our bodies are tam’eh, we immerse them in a mikvah or open body of water. Even the ashes of the Red Heifer were ineffective until mixed with water. So how is it that contact with water is a prerequisite to tum’ah acceptance?

This can be understood, he explains, by understanding the scientific principle that all matter lies in a dormant state until it is “awakened” by an opposing force. A frozen object can only be rendered molecularly active by its opposing force – heat. A motionless object can only be jostled into movement by the thrust of something moving. The greater the opposing force, the more powerful the awakening becomes. This is why fruits are only susceptible to tum’ah after contact with water: Water is indeed the source of taharah/purity. Yet in order for tum’ah to “awaken” an object and render it impure, the object must be its opposite; it must have first been in a state of purity in order for the tum’ah to have its full effect.

Seen in this light, we can look at the Parah Adumah mixture as possessing two opposite forces. The water is the source of all taharah. The ashes of the slaughtered cow represent death, sin (of the Golden Calf – see Rashi), and impurity. Depending on what the mixture comes into contact with, one of the two forces will be awakened. If the mixture touches the body of one who has been defiled, the water is awakened and counteracts the tum’ah with its taharah, thereby rendering the person/object ritually pure. If, on the other hand, the mixture contacts someone tahor, the ashes are awakened, and render him impure. This amazing explanation, however, “arouses” the question: So what’s the mystery? We have given a rational explanation for the contradictory forces of the Parah Adumah. What is it that defies all rhyme and reason?

The “law of opposing forces” holds true with regard to personal growth and interpersonal relationships as well. We all, to some extent, are subject to the obstacle of dormancy and complacency. While ideally we should be in a constant state of forward movement and growth, in fact we go through periods of stagnation and apathy. Often, it is only when we are acted upon by an “opposing force” – when our character and our beliefs are challenged and tested – that we are jostled into a state of new growth and action. Even Avraham Avinu had to go through ten tests in order to attain his maximum spiritual potential.

Yet therein lies the conundrum. As a rule we seek to distance ourselves from undue challenges and tests, for one can never know when the challenge will perhaps prove too difficult. Yet if we are not challenged, we will cease to grow, and will degenerate into a constant state of spiritual slumber. How do we find the perfect mixture – the Parah Adumah waters – wherein the tum’ah awakens the taharah, the challenges arousing the best in us and driving us to heights unreachable by those spiritually-unchallenged?

Perhaps this is the mystery of the Parah Adumah. Ultimately, we are destined to spend our whole lives looking for the Parah-Adumah perfect-balance. Life is not – and will never be – a straight and unswerving line. We must, at times, pull back in order to go forward, much as the archer must first draw backwards in order to achieve the maximum forward momentum. (This is referred to in sifrei Kabbalah as the concept of Ratzo ve-Shov, the constant fluctuation between forward movement and pullbacks.) We search for the perfect balance, yet it alludes us. If, however, we remember that it is only through the setbacks and challenges with which life presents us, that we ultimately attain our greatest growth, then perhaps we will embrace life’s obstacles and challenges, instead of shunning them.

DVAR TORAH: based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

When the Cohen used the ashes of the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) to purify someone who came in contact with the dead, the Torah states, "And the Cohen is impure until evening." Rabbi Yitzhak of Vorki commented that "The essence of the Parah Adumah is "Love Your Neighbor." How are we to understand his comment?

By the Cohen becoming impure through the same process which purified the person who came to him, he loses out himself in order to help another person -- this is the ultimate expression of love for one's fellow man.

To help others takes time, energy and money. When you love someone, you feel pleasure in all of the sacrifices you make. The greater the love, the more sacrifices you are willing to make. If you are not willing to sacrifice for others, you don't really love them.

Anger: Avoid it at all Costs!

By Rabbi Berel Wein

Moshe is finally done in by the requests of the Jewish people in the desert – this time again for their water supply. In his exasperation about their constant litany of complaints and grumblings, he transgresses over God's commandment to speak to the rock and instead he strikes the rock with his staff. His punishment for this act is swift and dramatic. He will not step into the Land of Israel but only be able to glimpse it from afar.

There are many questions and difficulties raised regarding the narrative of this incident in the Torah. Firstly, complaints about the lack of water are certainly legitimate complaints. Human beings cannot survive without water and now that the miraculous well of Miriam disappeared with her passing, the pressing need for a replacement water supply was obvious.

So, why does Moshe become so angry with them and describe them as a rebellious mob? And another perhaps greater and more difficult question is why this sin is the one that seals Moshe's fate? Does the punishment really seem to be commensurate with the crime? All of the commentators to Torah over the ages have dealt with these two questions and have advanced a wide variety of insights and explanations regarding the issues raised. It is apparent that the Torah somehow wished these issues to be further explored and studied and therefore it left its own description of the matter somewhat vague and mysterious – hiding in the narrative more than it was willing to reveal.

Maimonides and other scholars throughout the ages see the events of this week's parsha as the concluding part of a continuing and cumulative pattern of behavior, both on the part of the people of Israel in the desert and of Moshe as well. Moshe realizes, as do the people, that they require water to sustain them. But this request and the manner that it is presented to Moshe is part of their long- running, nagging behavior pattern in the desert. For the Jewish people, there is still a vestige of resentment against God for redeeming them from Egypt. There they had water in abundance, and it was natural not miraculous water. Miraculous water binds them to a commitment to God and His Torah – a commitment that a portion of the people is always attempting to wriggle out from.

With their seemingly reasonable request for water, Moshe senses all of this background music. They really want to opt out of the entire mission of Sinai, which results in Moshe's extreme display of displeasure. And Moshe's anger again undoes him. There is an entire literature of rabbinic study about the moments and causes of Moshe's anger that appear throughout the Torah.

For Moshe, the greatest of all human beings, it is agreed that this is his one failing. And, therefore, Moshe unwittingly becomes the model and example of the dangers involved in falling into the pit of emotional anger. The incidents of his anger – past and present – were now cumulatively

This is the statute of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a perfectly red cow, which has no blemish, upon which a yoke has not come" (19:2)

Why is the law of the Parah Adumah introduced as the “statute of the Torah” rather than the “statute of the red heifer?” R’ Dovid Feinstein answers that there are parts of the Torah that do not seem to be applicable in daily life or focused on how a person can grow spiritually. Despite this, studying any part of the Torah makes a person better and changes him. The Parah Adumah is the “statute of the Torah” because it cleansed people and made them pure, even though the workings behind all of its laws are, for the most part, inscrutable. So, too, Torah study will improve our character and refine us, regardless of whether it is practical learning with an obvious application to our daily lives or not. This is a basic principle of the Torah that is embodied in the mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, the epitome of a mitzvah whose reasons are beyond our comprehension.

“And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer” (19:6)

The kohen takes a piece of cedar wood, the highest of all trees, and a bundle of hyssop, the lowest of all trees, and a string of red wool, whose Hebrew name is derived from the name of the worm from which the red dye comes and the worm is lowliest of all creatures. These items are thrown into the pyre upon which the red heifer is burned. Rashi explains: “This is a sign that the arrogant one who acted haughtily and sinned should lower himself like the hyssop and the worm so that it will atone for him.” Why is their one symbol of arrogance and two symbols of humility? The answer is that one should strive to become exceedingly humble, as the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (4:4) teaches us. Rambam emphasizes that this is unique among all character traits. He writes (Hilchos Dei’os 2:3): “There are certain character traits that a person is forbidden to use in moderation, but which from which he should distance himself as far as possible. Specifically arrogance, for the good way to act is not to merely be humble, but to have a lowly spirit and be exceedingly modest... Therefore, Chazal said: “Be very, very low of spirit.”

“This is the law when a man dies in a tent. Everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean seven days” (19:14)

Chazal (Berachos 43b) teach that Torah only stays in a person who dies for it. This lesson comes from our parsha which states: “This is the Torah of a person who dies in a tent.” Although the plain meaning of the posuk is very different, describing the laws of impurity under the same roof as a corpse, Chazal found a homiletic interpretation which contains a great lesson for us. What does it mean to die for Torah? This means that Torah is only found in a person who is willing to give up some of the luxuries of life in order to focus on studying Torah and observing its mitzvos. One who is “living it up” or focusing on worldly pleasures will not be able to find the time for Torah. If a person wants to grow in Torah, he must make a commitment of time and effort and that is not achievable without some measure of sacrifice. This is not only expected of the greatest sages and the most pious among us. It is something that every person is expected to take on for themselves. Each individual can find something that he or she can forego in order to have more time or headspace to focus on Torah and mitzvos.

“There was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moshe and against Aharon. The people strove with Moshe, and spoke, saying: We wish that we had died when our brothers died before Hashem!” (20:2-3)

First the Torah says that the people gathered against Moshe and Aharon, but then it says that they quarreled with Moshe alone. What happened to Aharon? It seems that the people did not bother to actually argue with him because they knew that he would not respond. Aharon was the one who loved peace and pursued peace. He would not have taken the bait and entered into an argument with the unhappy people, so they did not actually address him directly when they were complaining. We should all strive to have a reputation for not getting involved in fights. Another understanding of Aharon’s disappearance is that he deferred completely to Moshe. He recognized that Moshe was the leader of the people and that he would handle this situation. When there is a communal issue that comes up, we should defer to the rabbi and communal leaders who fully understand the situation rather than insert ourselves into the discussion as if we are their equals.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Miriam - The Life Giver

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In Chukat the Torah tells us about the death of the righteous Miriam. Immediately after her death, we are told that suddenly there was no water for anyone to drink. The Talmud teaches us that we learn from here that the well which provided the Jewish people with water throughout their tenure in the desert was in Miriam's merit. What is the connection between Miriam and the water that kept the Jewish people alive for forty years?

The Kli Yakar explains that Miriam excelled in the trait of *gemilut chasadim* (bestowing kindness), as will be demonstrated below. As a result of this trait Miriam merited to be the source of the well (named *Be'er Miriam* after her) that provided the people with water, the most basic necessity that humans need to survive.

It is possible to expand on the Kli Yakar's explanation: Miriam's kindness was specifically directed towards the saving and maintaining of the lives of the Jewish people. This trait was expressed by Miriam from a very young age. For example, the Midrash tells us that after Pharaoh decreed to kill every Jewish newborn baby, Miriam's father, Amram decided to separate from his wife, Yocheved, in order to prevent the inevitable death of any future sons. As Amram was the leader of the Jewish people, the other men followed his example and separated from their wives. Upon hearing this, the five year old Miriam rebuked her father, saying: "your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh for he only decreed on the boys, but you have done so to the boys and girls." Amram accepted the rebuke and publicly remarried Yocheved and in turn everyone else followed their example and remarried. In this sense Miriam was the ultimate creator of life. If not for her, then untold numbers of Jewish children would never have been born, and Moshe Rabbeinu himself could never have come to life. As a result, Miriam is given an alternative name in Divrei HaYamim (Chronicles); that of Ephrath, (whose root form is "peru" which means being fruitful) because, the Midrash tells us; "the people of Israel multiplied because of her."

A further example of her remarkable efforts at saving lives is her brave refusal to obey Pharaoh's commands to kill the newborn baby boys. Instead, along with her mother, she did not kill the babies, in fact they assisted the mothers in giving birth to healthy children, and provided them with food and water. The Torah gives her another name, that of Puah, which, the Midrash also tells us, was in recognition of her great life-saving achievements; it is connected to the word "nofar", "for she gave wine and restored (*mafiya*) the babies to life when they appeared to be dead." Thus we have seen that Miriam's greatness lay in her incredible kindness, and particularly with regard to the most fundamental gift, that of life. This is why the life-giving waters of the *Be'er Miriam* (the well of Miriam) were in her merit. Because she risked so much to provide life to others, she was rewarded with her desire being fulfilled through the miraculous supply of water that sustained the Jewish people in the desert for forty years.

Miriam's appreciation of the value of life is all the more remarkable given the world that she was born into. The Yalkut Shimoni tells us that her name is connected to the word, 'mar' which means bitter because at the time of her birth the Egyptians embittered the lives of the Jewish people. It is a well-known tenet of Jewish thought that the name of any person or item teaches a great deal about their essence. Evidently, the fact that Miriam was born during such a terrible period in Jewish history played a central role in defining the person that she became. She could easily have been bitter, unhappy about the desperate situation that she was born into. It certainly would have been understandable if she did not develop a great love of life given the pain and suffering that life seemed to offer. Yet her opposite reaction to her situation teaches us a new dimension in her greatness. She recognized the inherent value of life and kept faith in God that He would save the Jewish people from their dire situation. It was this persistent optimism that enabled her to persuade her parents to remarry, and the resultant birth of the Jewish people's savior, Moses.

The example of Miriam teaches us a pertinent lesson: There is an increasingly popular perception that it is wrong to bring 'too many' children into a world that is full of pain and suffering. According to the proponents of this outlook, life is not something that is of intrinsic value rather it is dependent on the 'life satisfaction' that a living being can derive. Given the numerous challenges that face the world such as the dire economic situation, these people believe that it is morally wrong to bring yet another mouth to feed into life. Needless to say, this view is diametrically opposed to the Torah approach epitomized by Miriam. She saw life as indeed being inherently valuable. Accordingly, the most horrific situations did not justify giving up on bringing more life into the world, and on sustaining the already living. May we learn from Miriam's incredible appreciation for the value of life and emulate her achievements in bringing life to the world.

No One to Blame(But Ourselves)

By Sheldon Stern

Growing up in the 60's it was a constant question, perhaps not at the forefront of my mind, but nonetheless prominent, "Should we blame the German people for the Holocaust, or were they simply following the madman's orders?" In the wake of October 7th, a parallel question emerged, "Is there such a thing as an innocent Palestinian?" I think we can answer both of these queries from our Parsha.

After forty years in the Midbar, the Jewish nation was ready to begin its conquest of the Promised Land. Verse 20:14 relates that Moshe sent a message to the King of Edom, informing him that Israel wanted to pass through his land on the way to Canaan. He made it clear that the Jews had no designs on his territory, and they would act in complete decorum as they made the trek. Moreover, Israel was prepared to pay top price for any provisions provided by the natives. Finally. Moshe appealed to the king's sense of decency, reminding him that the Jews had borne the suffering in Egypt that was also intended for the descendants of Eisav as foretold to Avraham in the Bris Bein Habesarim. Not surprisingly, our leader's petition fell on deaf ears, but what's noteworthy is that when Verse 20:18 presents the response it's not from the king rather it was the nation of Edom who turned down the request. I would suggest that the Torah is teaching us, Derech Agav, that a king and his country are one. So, we look at Hitler, and yes, he instituted his anti-Semitic orders in short order, but he astutely noted that each enactment was well received; to say the least, and this emboldened him to push the envelope further. Similarly, we consider the poor, Palestinian civilians. Abba Eban said that the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Well, the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to celebrate a terrorist act. As Martha and the Vandellas sang in 1964, whenever there's an atrocity these "innocents" are seen dancing in the streets. And let's not forget that Hamas was duly elected. The Gemara in Avodah Zarah describes the "Final Judgment" of the nations. It relates that to save themselves they will have the temerity to claim that all their actions were intended for the benefit of Klal Yisroel and the Torah. Their pleas will be dismissed just as summarily as the Edomites turned a cold shoulder on our ancestors.

But there's a point that can't be lost. The Torah was meant, first and foremost, for the Jewish people and so whatever it teaches is meant as a lesson for us. Near the end of his illustrious life the Chofetz Chaim wrote a Kuntres in which he presented the following scenario. A husband and wife are in the Olam Haemes awaiting their final judgment. They're ushered into a room and the husband is asked why he didn't learn Torah. He taps into his inner Adam Harishon and says that it was his wife's fault. She made constant demands on him to keep up with the Schwartzes, so he had to take side jobs. Then they turn to the wife, and she pins the blame on her spouse, "Even on Shabbos I could barely get him out of the house to go to shul." Tomorrow (Sunday) morning will be the men's final at Wimbledon, but this tennis match will be played in Heaven with each contestant serving barrages at the other. So how does Hashem decide who's at fault? Right after the first Mishna in the second Perek of Bava Kamma, Ravina pointed out a contradiction between the first Mishna's of each Perek. Rava then resolved the contradiction in the Mesechta's first Mishna. This led Ravina to ask, "But there's still a difficulty in the first Mishna of the second Perek." The Gemara noted that Rava answered jokingly, "I explained my Mishna, you explain yours." Mishna and Neshama have the same letters. Each of us is responsible for his Mishna/Neshama so if you want to place the blame for your shortcomings, don't look any further than the mirror.