

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Chukas

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

WISDOM OF TRUST

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"This is the chok (statute) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying, 'Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and they shall take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it.'" (19:2)

Regarding the *chukim* - Hashem's incomprehensible statutes, the Torah tells us that the nations of the world will praise the wisdom of the Jewish People for keeping them (Devarim 4:6 with Rashi). This seems strange; if the statutes are by definition impossible to understand, and we only keep them because we consider it a commandment from Hashem which one does not have the right to question (Rashi), then why are we specifically receiving praise for our "wisdom" by keeping them? How is following a rule that we do not understand considered the quintessential example of the Jewish People's wisdom?

Let us answer with a parable: There are three patients who require medicine for their life-threatening illness; two fools and one wise man. The first fool says to the doctor, "I refuse to take this medicine until I understand precisely how it was made and how it works." Since his medical knowledge is almost non-existent, and he does not have the tools to comprehend the science behind the medicine, this man refuses to take the remedy and soon dies. The second fool is happy to take the medicine but does not even inquire whether the person offering the medicine is a real doctor. Since someone referred to him as "doctor," reasons the man, whatever he gives me, I'll take. The "doctor," however, is a fraud, his medicine is worthless, and he too dies. The wise man, on the other hand, ascertains with certainty that this man is a qualified and knowledgeable doctor, and only then agrees to take the medicine despite not knowing anything about it. After all, the doctor has all the knowledge necessary to create and serve the medicine, and trusting him, therefore, is the wise thing to do.

The same is true with the concept of statutes. Although they are incomprehensible, once we have ascertained that Hashem - the Creator of everything - has given them, and we know with certainty that He understands everything to the minutest detail, then it is specifically with "wisdom" that we listen to Him and follow whatever He says to do.

As such, it is most appropriate that the Jewish People receive praise for their wisdom in following these incomprehensible statutes, for our decision is not based on the statutes themselves, but on the One commanding them.

WORTHY PURCHASE

Chiddushei HaRim

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it.'" (19:2)

It should be perfect regarding its redness, so that even if there are only two black hairs on it, it is unfit. (Rashi)

The Sages (Kiddushin 31) relate the story of Dama ben Nethina who incurred terrible financial loss as a result of having fulfilled the commandment to honor his father. G-d rewarded him by causing a red heifer to be born in his household, for which he received a significant amount of money so that his loss was more than offset.

Why should Dama ben Nethina have received his reward through, of all things, a red heifer? When a heathen sustained such awful financial loss as the result of having fulfilled the commandment to honor his father, a grave accusation was raised in Heaven against the Jews. To refute this charge, G-d sought to prove that while heathens may spend money on a commandment that follows the dictates of common sense, the Jews would spend immense amounts to perform a commandment completely contrary to ordinary reason and whose purpose is unknown, such as the statute pertaining to the red heifer.

CONSTANT DUALITY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"This is the chok (statute) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying, 'Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and they shall take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it.'" (19:2)

When introducing the laws of Parah Adumah (red heifer) that purify those who are contaminated, the Torah uses the phrase "This is the state of the Torah..." (19:2). Would it not make more sense to introduce these laws more specifically as those of the Parah Adumah?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein suggests that this language is meant to teach us that the entire Torah is similar to the laws of the red cow in its duality. For example, humility is good for ourselves, but we should be proud of others' traits and accomplishments and honor them. We should be generous with our own money by giving to charity but be more mindful when dealing with others' money. This duality is a constant in our lives, and the Torah is here to serve as our best navigator.

BALANCING ACT

Baal Shem Tov

"This is the chok (statute) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying, 'Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and they shall take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it.'" (19:2)

The word *parah*, cow, also means to increase or proliferate. *Adumah*, red, is symbolic of *kelipah*, the forces of evil. Taken together, the term *parah adumah* (red cow) alludes to inappropriate inflation of self-worth that results in the evil trait of arrogance.

A puzzling feature of the laws governing *parah adumah* is that the process purifies the ritually impure but transmits impurity to the pure. In spiritual terms, arrogance can bring purity to those who need spiritual cleansing, but it is destructive to those who are advanced in the service of G-d.

We should not serve G-d for personal gain or considerations, however subtle; we should do what G-d desires simply because that is His will. Studying or doing a mitzvah to earn reward in heaven is considered self-serving for those who are advanced in their service. It is arrogant, disqualifies their service, and introduces spiritual impurity to the pure.

The reverse is true of those unfamiliar with G-d's service. They cannot ignore all enticements, such as heavenly rewards, because they may otherwise be unmotivated to serve G-d. They must invite a measure of haughtiness - a self-serving motivation - to facilitate the move from impurity to purity.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Chanukas HaTorah

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it." (19:2)

To be sure, there are reasons for the commandment concerning the red heifer. But no man besides Moshe was told the true reason for this Divine enactment.

At one time, Shlomo HaMelech, having divined the reasons for all the commandments, believed that he had succeeded in discovering their deeper purpose. But at the section in the Torah dealing with the red heifer, Shlomo HaMelech realized that while he knew many superficial reasons for this law he was still unable to fathom its basic purpose, which had been revealed to no one.

Then he said to himself. "If this is so, couldn't it be that other commandments, whose reasons I thought I had discovered, may have profound and mysterious purposes that have eluded my grasp?"

Therefore, he said: "I said I had acquired wisdom" - I thought I had become wise enough to understand the reason for all the Torah's commandments, but now, studying the parshah in the Torah dealing with the red heifer, I see - "but it is far from me" - that, indeed, the entire Torah is still quite far from my understanding, and just as I don't know the reason for the commandment concerning the red heifer, so, too, I still do not know all the reasons for the other commandments.

REPLACED WITH PRAYERS

Rebbe Nachman

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it." (19:2)

The Red Heifer purified the Jews from the worst impurities. After the destruction of the Temple, the service of the Red Heifer was annulled. Today, we are able to gain forgiveness through our prayers.

The cow in particular represents prayer, as it is written (Hoshea 14:3), "we will offer [the words of] our lips instead of cows." Thus, the purification ceremony of the Red Heifer is reflected today in our prayers.

NOBODY IS PERFECT

Chozeh of Lublin

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it." (19:2)

For one who considers himself without blemish, the yoke of Heaven has not come upon him - for if a person would have the yoke of Heaven upon him, he would know that there is no person who does not have a blemish.

BECAUSE HE SAID SO

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

"This is the statute of the Torah..." (19:2)

The underlying principle here is as follows: The true reasons behind the Torah's teachings and behind G-d's mitzvos are concealed from everyone. Consequently, a person must perform and observe the entire Torah simply because it is the command of G-d to perform and to fulfill it.

This idea is alluded to in the phrase "This is the statute of the Torah," indicating that we should consider the entire Torah and its mitzvos as unfathomable statutes, since none of the reasons for the mitzvos have been disclosed to us. Rather, the principal motive for observing the Torah and its mitzvos must be because "G-d commanded, saying," meaning, because G-d commanded us to observe them, we are obligated to perform them and to keep them.

Our intellect compels us to perform some of the commandments. As such, when a person performs them, it is not apparent that he does so because they are G-d's commandments. For this reason, G-d also gave us mitzvos whose reasons the intellect cannot comprehend at all. When a person performs these suprarational mitzvos, it is obvious that he does so only because they are the commandments of G-d.

This idea is alluded to in the phrase "This is the statute of the Torah," implying that G-d gave us those mitzvos that are statutes, which our intelligence does not oblige us to observe, so that it should be clear that we observe them only because "G-d commanded to do them." Their observance demonstrates that we perform these commandments only because they have been commanded by G-d.

NEVER TOO LATE

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it." (19:2)

The Sifsei Tzadik (54) taught that the following is the central lesson of the laws of Parah Adumah:

You would have thought that after the cow is burned to ashes, it would be useless. Yet, it is precisely at this point when it has the power to purify those that are tamei. Thousands of Jews can now be elevated from their impurity by these ashes.

This is a lesson for us. If one chas v'shalom has stumbled in their relationship with Hashem and feels that they have nothing left to them spiritually, they must not give up. Remember that there is always a path out from a place of darkness.

NO RESPONSE NECESSARY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"...take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it." (19:2)

Regarding the mitzvah of the Red Heifer, Rashi writes: "Since the Accusing Angel and the nations of the world aggrieve Israel by saying 'What is this commandment? And what reason is there to it?' Therefore, it is written as a 'statute,' which implies that 'it is a decree from Me, and you do not have permission to reflect upon it (to question it).'"

Rashi is telling us that the Accusing Angel and the nations of the world seek to provoke the Jewish People by mockingly asking them the reason behind the law of the Red Heifer; namely, its contradictory nature that the ashes of the cow purify those who had become contaminated, yet at the same time, those who are involved in its preparation themselves become contaminated.

What is it about this Mitzvah in particular that causes the Heavenly Accuser and the nations of the world to raise such questions against the Jewish People; there are many other statutes that we were given to observe without any ability to fathom its reasons - why specifically regarding the Red Heifer will we be challenged?

Rebbe Yechiel Mechel Rabinowitz, the famous Maggid of Zlotchov, answers that this Mitzvah, unlike any other, was given to atone for the terrible sin of serving the Golden Calf. (Rashi [19:22] metaphorically describes this phenomenon, saying "let the mother cow come and atone for the calf.") Therefore, by focusing on this Mitzvah, the nations of the world are constantly hinting at, and making reference to, that very dark moment in the history of the Jewish People; trying to remind us of our errors, and more significantly, remind Hashem how unworthy His people really are.

As such, because their question is not asked as a genuine search for an answer, Hashem tells us "this is a statute" and you should not reflect upon this law to answer them - for they are not really seeking an answer.

BEYOND COMPREHENSION

Reb Noson of Breslov

"This is the statute of the Torah..." (19:2)

A chok (statute) is a law whose reason is not revealed to us (e.g., the laws of the Red Heifer, sha'atnez, and keeping kosher). Although the reasons for all the mitzvot are beyond our understanding, some reasons for some mitzvot were revealed while others were not. Thus, we find that the mitzvah of the Red Heifer purifies the impure while at the same time defiles the pure. This is certainly impossible to understand and teaches us that all the mitzvot are beyond our comprehension.

FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“This is the chok (statute) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying, ‘Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and they shall take a completely red cow...’” (19:2)

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Darash Moshe) asks why the Torah begins with the words *Zos chukas haTorah* - “This is the *chok* of the Torah,” and not *Zos chukas haparah adumah* - “This is the *chok* of the *parah adumah*,” which would be more specific.

Rav Moshe explains that the Torah is communicating an important element in our avodas Hashem. We need to approach every mitzvah of the Torah as though it were a *chok* (statute). We need to perform each mitzvah as if there was no reason for it other than fulfilling the will of Hashem. It is for this reason that the Torah uses the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, which is a *chok*, to teach us how we are to observe all the mitzvos. This is why the Torah states, *Zos chukas haTorah* and not *Zos chukas haparah adumah*.

In life, we often feel connected to those mitzvos that we understand and have a harder time passionately fulfilling the mitzvos that we can’t fully comprehend. Rav Moshe is sharing an idea based on this pasuk: We should do all the mitzvos for the sole purpose of serving Hashem, irrespective of whether they resonate with us personally or not. If we treat each mitzvah with this mindset, there is no doubt that they will serve as a conduit to strengthen our relationship with Hashem.

COMBINING LOGIC AND SELF-SACRIFICE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“This is the statute of the Torah...” (19:2)

There is a necessity for the Chukim, the mitzvot whose rationale defies human intelligence. To permit everyone to understand the entire Torah by way of reason would permit man to rely on his own understanding and not allow for the challenge of developing spiritual commitment. There would be a desire to follow one’s longing and to rationalize one’s conduct.

Specifically, the sacrifice of the red heifer is unique in that it completely transcends human comprehension, making the pure impure and the impure pure. In I Melachim 5:11 we read that Shlomo HaMelech, who was the personification of reason and wisdom, said that he was able to comprehend every difficult passage in the Torah but that of the red heifer, which was “far from me.”

However, to allow for performing the will of Hashem, the entire Torah could not be written above human intelligence. We know that Moshe did understand the laws of the red heifer because Hashem gave him the explanation. He permitted the rationale for the red heifer to be intertwined with Divine input.

Moshe was a medium for the expression of Hashem’s truth. Since in the Torah there are aspects of comprehension and aspects beyond understanding, one needs both reason and mesiras nefesh - self-sacrifice - to grasp all of Torah.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Premishlaner Rebbe

“This is the chok (statute) of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying, ‘Speak to Bnei Yisrael, and they shall take a completely red cow, without a blemish and that had no yoke laid upon it.’” (19:2)

Rashi says: “Since the Accusing Angel and the nations of the world aggrieve Israel by saying ‘What is this commandment? And what reason is there to it?’ Therefore, it is written as a ‘statute,’ which implies that ‘it is a decree from Me, and you do not have permission to reflect upon it.’”

The evil inclination does all it can to dissuade a person who is ready to do a mitzvah and it will taunt the person after the performance of a mitzvah. First it will say that the mitzvah has no meaning. After the mitzvah is done, it will say how deep and significant was its performance, which will bring out the arrogance of the individual.

Therefore, one should say before doing a mitzvah that it is a decree from Hashem. After the mitzvah, one should not give it further thought.

NEVER DESPAIR

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Give it to Elazar the Kohen. He should take it outside the camp, and someone should slaughter it in his presence...” (19:3)

In contrast to all other sacrifices, which must be offered up inside the Tabernacle precincts, the red cow is offered up outside. This is because most other sacrifices atone for inadvertent sins, which happen when our animal nature makes us careless about spiritual concerns. Since our animal nature can be refined and co-opted into holiness, we can offer up the sacrifices that accomplish this inside the Tabernacle.

The red cow, in contrast, is brought to purify us from the defilement of death. Death cannot be refined or elevated - it must be totally annihilated, and in the Messianic future, it will indeed cease to exist. The red cow is therefore entirely reduced to ashes.

Psychological “death” - the antithesis of life - is the sense of utter hopelessness. It has no place in our lives and must be repudiated entirely; only then can we be free to lead optimistic and productive lives. (Likutei Torah 3:58c; Igeret HaKodesh 28; Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, p. 1058) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

DRAWING CLOSER

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Give it to Elazar the Kohen. He should take it outside the camp, and someone should slaughter it in his presence." (19:3)

All the devotions related to the Red Heifer, which purifies a person from even the worst impurities, were performed outside the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple, opposite the entrance to the Sanctuary. From this, we learn that even if a person finds himself completely outside the camp of holiness, he can still return to G-d and attain purity. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 28)

The devotions relating to the Red Heifer, which purified a person from the worst of impurities, were performed outside the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple, opposite the entrance to the Sanctuary. Conceptually, these devotions refer to the actions of the tzaddik, who at times leaves the "sanctuary" in which he performs his own devotions to G-d and interacts with the common folk. Using a simplistic approach, he draws these people close to G-d. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 6a-b)

"Slaughtering" refers to Pesach, when the Jewish people brought the Paschal lamb. "Burning" corresponds to Shavuot, when we received the Torah in fire. "Gathering the ashes" corresponds to Sukkot, the Festival of Ingathering. By celebrating the Three Festivals, we draw upon ourselves the purity of the Red Heifer. (Likutey Halakhot IV, p. 224)

BOUND TO THE TZADDIK

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The Kohen should take cedar wood, hyssop and crimson wool, and throw it into the burning ash of the cow." (19:6)

The cedar, a tall tree, reflects great intellect, *Chokhmah* and the tzaddik. The hyssop, a small plant, reflects the lower intellect, *Malkhut* and the average person. Only by tying these plants together can a person achieve purification from impurity. The only way to receive great intellect is by binding oneself to it.

HOLY TRANSFORMATION

Reb Noson of Breslov

"This is the Torah, a man..." (19:6)

Just as a person can write the letters of the Torah on a piece of parchment, turning that parchment into a Torah scroll, so too, one can transform himself into a Torah scroll. By inscribing the letters of Torah upon himself - i.e., by continually speaking words of Torah and holiness - a person can turn his body into a receptacle of Torah and holiness! (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 470)

PURIFYING THE IMPURE

Chasam Sofer

"Then the kohen shall wash his clothes..." (19:7)

While the red heifer served to purify the impure, it also defiled any clean individual who came into contact with it. This was because the red heifer served to atone for the sin the Jews committed when they worshipped the Golden Calf. The Sages point out (Avodah Zarah 4) that it certainly did not behoove the Jews of that generation to sin. But in order that it could demonstrate to future generations a way in which they could repent their sins, that generation alone was punished, and it was through this impure generation that a means was given to future generations to cleanse themselves by repentance.

The same principle holds true for the red heifer, which atones for the worship of the Golden Calf. It serves as a means to purify the impure, but it is impure in itself so that a kohen must wash his garments after contact with it.

ANTIDOTE TO THE VENOM

Sefas Emes

"He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be pure." (19:12)

It is known that the transgression committed by Adam and Chava concerning the Tree of Knowledge brought death and the impurity of death to the world. That was because the snake convinced them that if they would eat from the tree "you will be as a G-d, knowing good and evil" (Bereishis 3:5). He convinced them that they must heed their common sense and nullify the sense of the command of Hashem.

Therefore, the red heifer, which is a decree without reason, requires that one should nullify his reasoning to the Will of Hashem, a redemption of the transgression of the Tree of Knowledge that therefore purifies the impurity of death.

MAN OF TORAH

Rebbe Nachman

"This is the Torah when a man dies in his tent..." (19:14)

The Torah remains only with someone who "kills himself" over it. (Berachot 63b)

Atzmo (עצמו, himself) alludes to *Atzmiyuto* (עצמיותו, his essence) - i.e., his evil traits and evil desires, the source of all the blemishes etched onto *Atzmotav* (עצמותיו, his bones).

A person who "kills" his material lusts in order to attain Torah will attain the light of Torah wisdom, which purges the evil traits etched onto his bones. (See Likutey Moharan I, 101:3)

Zot HaTorah adam (This is the law [when] a man) may be translated more literally as “This is the Torah, a man.”

Man corresponds to the Torah. The Hebrew word for “man,” Adam (אָדָם), is composed of the letters aleph, dalet, mem.

Aleph (א) means “study,” indicating the Torah.

Dalet (ד) has the numerical value of 4, referring to the four elements of fire, air, water and earth. These constitute the material composition of man, which can be subjugated to the soul.

The final mem (מ) corresponds to the World to Come, because the final mem is a closed letter, indicating the unseen Future.

With Torah, a person can transcend his physicality and attain the World to Come. (See Likutey Moharan I, 37:3)

Just as mankind consists of various types - e.g., wealthy and poor - so too, the Torah has all sorts of applications, lenient and strict. Only when a person fulfills all of the mitzvot of the Torah is he called a complete “man.” (See Likutey Moharan I, 13:5)

HUMAN TORAH

Reb Yaakov Yisroel of Tcherkas

“This is the Torah regarding a man...” (19:14)

When a person keeps healthy and holy every part of his body - namely, the two hundred forty-eight organs that are equivalent to the two hundred forty-eight positive commandments, and the three hundred sixty-five blood vessels that are equivalent to the three hundred sixty-five negative commandments - such a person is called “a Torah.”

PROPER BALANCE

Chiddushei HaRim

“They shall take for the impure person some of the ashes of the burnt purification offering, and he shall put on it living water in a vessel.” (19:17)

A person is called adam because he was created from adamah, earth. He is also compared to adamah l’elyon, “the heavenly earth.”

Though a person should consider himself as humble as the earth, he must also strive by his deeds to emulate the characteristics of Hashem, as our Sages noted (Shabbos 133b): “As He is merciful so shall you be merciful.” He should remember that he has a Divine soul and therefore must constantly say, “Because of me was the world created” (Sanhedrin 37).

Therefore, we have to purify the impure from the “ashes of the burnt purification” and put “living water” to be humble as dust, but also know that we have a living soul.

ALTRUISTIC PURIFICATION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“This will be for them a perpetual rule. Anyone who carries the sprinkling water must immerse his clothing, and one who touches the sprinkling water remains defiled until the night.” (19:21)

Although the rite purifies the defiled, it also defiles the pure. Thus, the priests who prepared the materials used for the purification rite had to be prepared to become temporarily ritually defiled - and thus excluded from all things holy - in order to purify their fellow Jews. It was the priests’ willingness to overlook their personal interest that “inspired” G-d to “overlook” the bounds of nature and logic in order to wipe away the negativity and depression that threatened the person in need of ritual purification.

To be sure, the priests knew that G-d would reward them for putting aside their own purity and troubling themselves to purify their ritually defiled brethren. But in order for the ritual to work, they could not have this in mind; their motives had to be pure and selfless.

From this example, we can learn first of all how willing we should be to help another person reenter the dominion of purity and holiness, even if doing so requires us to become temporarily sullied ourselves. Secondly, we can learn how much care we must take to ensure that our motives are pure. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, p. 1059) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

HOLY DEFILEMENT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Anyone who carries the sprinkling water must immerse his clothing, and one who touches the sprinkling water remains defiled until the night.” (19:21)

In our dedication to helping others, we can sometimes forget that we, too, can need help overcoming our own challenges - sometimes even the same challenges that we are helping others to overcome. Moreover, when we help others, our role of benefactor can give us delusions of grandeur, which, besides being a spiritual malady in its own right, can make us susceptible to all sorts of other spiritual maladies. Finally, when we “defile” ourselves for others - i.e., temporarily leave a holy environment in order to seek out and rescue someone in an unholy environment - we must be careful not to lower our standards of purity in other areas.

For all these reasons, a portion of the ashes of the red cow is set aside not for use, but simply as a reminder - for those of us who accept the mission to help purify our defiled brethren - that although we may indeed be helping them, figuratively “sprinkling the ashes of the red cow on them,” we must not forget to tend to our own spiritual health, “to have the ashes of the red cow sprinkled on us,” when necessary, too. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, p. 1060) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

INFLUENTIAL POSITIVITY

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

“And the congregation had no water, so they assembled against Moshe and Aharon...” (20:2)

Parshas Chukas describes the Jews complaining about a lack of water as they arrived at a place named Kadesh (20:1-14). Between the people’s arrival and complaining, we are briefly told that Miriam dies and is buried in Kadesh (20:1). The pasuk immediately following Miriam’s death starts with “And the congregation had no water...” which makes it seem that the shortage of water was a direct result of Miriam’s passing. Why is Miriam’s death relevant to this water shortage?

Rabbi David Forman explains that Miriam’s strength lay in her faith: when Moshe was placed in the river, Miriam watched from a distance to ensure that things worked out. Miriam’s faith was thenceforth associated with water, such that the rock that traveled with them and supplied the Jewish people with water stopped providing water when Miriam died.

Miriam’s positive energy benefited everyone around her, and when she died, it highlighted just how important a positive attitude is to one’s well-being. The association between Miriam, water, and positivity helps us understand that life can be as good as our attitude and mindset.

COME TO THEIR AID

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“And the congregation had no water, so they assembled against Moshe and Aharon...” (20:2)

Food nourishes the body, but the body needs water in order to absorb the nutrients in the food. Similarly, the “food” of the soul is the Torah and its “water” is the Torah’s ability to influence all facets of our personalities, all types of people, and all aspects of life.

When the Jewish people’s existence was threatened in Egypt, Miriam was the one who ensured that there would be a new generation of Jews to carry on G-d’s mission. She both encouraged the Jewish people to continue having children and saved their newborns from Pharaoh’s decree. On account of her efforts to ensure that the Torah would continue to “flow” into the next generation, the well existed in her merit.

With her passing, Moshe had to assume her role. This teaches us that when other Jews are in physical or spiritual danger we should come to their aid, even if offering this type of assistance is not our forte. When we help others, G-d in turn will help us with all our own needs. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 2, p. 335) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

THE LITTLE THINGS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And why did you bring us up from Egypt to this evil place? Not a place of seed or fig tree, or grapevine or pomegranate tree and there is no water to drink...” (20:5)

The Torah records the complaint that the Jewish people had; they were thirsty and had no water. They declared that they wished they had remained in Mitzrayim instead of being brought to the desert to die. They included that they also had no access to figs, grapes and pomegranates.

Rav Yisrael Meir Druck (Eish Tamid) asks why the Jewish people complained about menial things, such as not having a grapevine or fig tree, which don’t seem to have any connection or relevance to the greater concern of not having water.

Rav Druck explains that when a person ascends to a level where they are able to recognize that everything comes from Hashem, they should daven for the small things in life in the same way a person davens for the bigger things because Hashem controls everything. Klal Yisrael realized that since Hashem determines it all, they should daven not only for water but for the less significant concerns as well.

Rav Druck is teaching a very powerful lesson. We are often focused on only davening for the big-ticket items, and, at times, we feel uncomfortable davening for things that seem less important. The Torah is teaching us that if we believe Hashem is fully in control, we should push ourselves to daven for everything and anything that we are worried about. This recognition will not only help foster a dependence on Hashem, but it will also solidify an unbreakable bond with Hashem.

SOUL SEARCHING

Reb Noson of Breslov

“Moshe and Aharon moved away from the congregation towards the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and fell upon their faces. G-d’s glory appeared to them...” (20:6)

The tzaddikim prostrate themselves upon the ground - i.e., they throw themselves into the lowest of levels in order to search for lost souls and save them. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 210)

THE INNER WELLSPRING

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aharon, and speak in their presence to the rock, so it will give forth its water. You will bring forth water for them from the rock and give the congregation and their livestock to drink.” (20:8)

This verse is addressed to each and every one of us, by virtue of the inner “Moshe” that resides within our psyches. We all possess an inner wellspring of spiritual inspiration that we can access and use to give an entire congregation to drink - that is, to inspire them to believe in G-d, love Him, be in awe of Him, pray to Him, and fulfill His commandments. Moreover, we can give “their livestock” to drink as well, meaning that we can inspire them to lead not only their spiritual lives but also their material lives - their pursuit of livelihood and leisure - in accordance with G-d’s will as expressed in the Torah.

Since we all possess this inner wellspring, and it is the nature of a wellspring to overflow and spread its water outward, it is both the key to our own self-fulfillment and our sacred duty to use all our G-d-given potentials for this purpose. (Hitva’aduyot 5711, vol. 2, p. 305) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

TENDING TO OTHERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Take the staff and assemble the congregation... speak in their presence to the rock, so it will give forth its water. You will bring forth water for them from the rock and give the congregation and their livestock to drink.” (20:8)

(On 10 Nisan 2487, Moshe’s sister Miriam died. As soon as she died, the Jewish people’s source of water - the miraculous well that had followed them in the desert - disappeared, for it had existed in her merit. G-d instructed Moshe to restore the well by speaking to the rock from which the water had previously flowed.)

When G-d restored the well that had existed in Miriam’s merit, He did so through Moshe, for the leaders of the Jewish people are responsible not only for guiding them spiritually and leading them politically but for providing for their physical needs as well.

We are all leaders, or potential leaders. The lesson of Miriam’s well teaches us to assume responsibility for both the spiritual and material needs of our charges - or prepare to do so when our turn as leaders comes. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 18, p. 260) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

“Speak to the rock in their presence... since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel...” (20:8, 12)

Rashi and the Ramban argue over Moshe’s sin. The Ramban explains (on Bamidbar 20:8, in the name of the Rambam) that Moshe sinned when he told the Jewish people, “Listen now, you rebels...” Rashi (Bamidbar 20:12), on the other hand, explains that Moshe sinned when he hit the rock. To me, it seems that these two reasons are one and the same, since the former caused the latter.

Now, there are two ways of admonishing the Jewish people to perform the will of G-d. One way is by speaking positively, telling every Jew about his great virtue and from where his soul was originally hewn. In truth, the souls of the Jewish people are hewn up Above, from the Throne of Glory (Zohar 3:29b). The admonisher explains the great satisfaction that G-d receives, as it were, through the observance of mitzvos by each and every Jew. He explains the great joy that all the worlds experience when a Jew performs the mitzvos of G-d. With such “reproof,” the admonisher cajoles the Jewish people to carry out the will of G-d, accepting upon themselves the Heavenly yoke. The second way to admonish the Jewish people is by using strident and humiliating terms, until they feel compelled to fulfill G-d’s will.

The difference between these two approaches is that when a person admonishes in a positive way, the soul of the Jewish person is uplifted higher and higher. The admonisher recounts constantly the uprightness and the greatness of the Jewish people, and their tremendous influence Above. A person who admonishes in this way is worthy to be a Jewish leader. By contrast, the one who reprimands the Jewish people with harsh words is not of the same caliber.

When one motivates the Jewish people in a positive way, always praising their greatness and righteousness, all creation will want, on their own, to cater to the Jewish people, in order to carry out the purpose for which they were created “for the sake of Yisrael” (Rashi on Bereishis 1:1; Vayikra Rabbah 36:4). However, when one does not recount and promote the righteousness of the Jewish people, each created entity has to be forced to fulfill the purpose for which it was created - that is, to carry out the will of the Jewish people.

Now, when Moshe said, “Listen now, you rebels,” he scolded the Jewish people with harsh words. Therefore, to make the rock do what it was created for, he was compelled to hit it. However, had Moshe uplifted the stature of the Jewish people with his words, as described above, as was G-d’s intention when He said, “You shall speak to the rock,” Moshe would have spoken to the rock, telling it: “You were created for the sake of the Jewish people, who are very exalted; therefore, you must carry out the reason for which you were created: to produce water for the Jewish people,” and the rock would have complied. However, since Moshe reprimanded the Jewish people, speaking harshly to them, saying, “Listen now, you rebels...,” Moshe was forced to hit the rock in order to compel it to serve the Jewish people. Thus, one mistake led to the other, and both opinions, i.e., of the Ramban and Rashi, are the same.

This is alluded to in the verse “Since you did not have enough faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel.” When someone inspires the Jewish people to improve by pointing out their goodness and potential, as described above, they will more readily absorb and internalize his message.

PLEADING, NOT DEMANDING

Reb Noson of Breslov

"Then Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice..." (20:11)

Pray to G-d in a supplicating manner, not a demanding one. If G-d grants your requests, good. If not, then not. (Likutey Moharan I, 20:5)

The Jews brought Moshe to anger by demanding water in the desert. Moshe responded by demanding action - striking the rock - rather than pleading before G-d and "speaking softly" to the rock with supplications.

Being demanding is like stealing, as one seeks to take something by force. And forcing an issue always leads to error. However, Moshe learned his lesson and did not err again. When the Jews sinned with the golden calf and again with the spies, he pleaded and prayed before G-d to forgive them. (Likutey Halakhot VIII, p. 222a)

IT'S ONLY NATURAL

Maharil

"Then Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice..." (20:11)

The Torah consistently records for us the faults and transgressions of even the greatest of our ancestors. This is to console us and teach us an important lesson: No matter how high a level a person may be on, he has natural tendencies that try to bring him down. It is normal to have faults.

CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon, 'Since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel...' (20:12)

(G-d instructed Moshe to restore the well by speaking to the rock from which the water had previously flowed. However, Moshe mistook another rock for the correct one, so when he spoke to it, nothing happened. Moshe and Aharon thought that perhaps G-d intended them to strike the rock, as He had when He first provided the people with water. They acted on this conjecture without consulting with G-d. By Divine providence, Moshe struck the original rock, and it indeed gave forth water. G-d had intended for the people to learn reverence for Him from Moshe's speaking to the rock: "If an undiscerning, self-sufficient rock obeys G-d's will, how much more so should we, who can understand why we ought to obey Him and need His assistance." But since Moshe struck the rock, this lesson was no longer self-evident. So G-d had to teach the Jewish people the same lesson by punishing Moshe and Aharon for their disobedience. He decreed that they would die in the desert, never to enter the Land of Israel.)

Whatever rationalizations may justify their conduct, Jewish leaders must decide how to act based on whether their actions will inspire the public to greater devotion to the Torah and its ways.

Similarly, when interacting with others, we should always consider the potential impact that our words or actions may have on their attitudes toward the Jewish people in general and toward the Torah's message in particular. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 28, pp. 127-128) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

PURPOSEFUL STRIFE

Rebbe Nachman

"These are the Waters of Strife, where the Israelites argued with G-d and He was sanctified through them." (20:13)

"Waters" refers to strife. (Sanhedrin 7a)

When employed properly, arguments can serve as a means for coming to recognize G-d. Every series of questions and answers can result in teachings on how to serve G-d. (See Likutey Moharan I, 61:5)

UTILIZING TEMPTATION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, [saying,] 'So says Yisrael, your brother...' (20:14)

The Jewish people are descended from Yaakov; the kingdom of Edom descended from Yaakov's brother Esav.

There are two general paths to spiritual self-refinement: that of the naturally pious, who are not tempted by evil, and that of those who behave righteously despite their attraction to materiality. Yaakov personified the naturally pious type, while Esav personified the type challenged by an inborn attraction to materiality. Esav's Divine mission was to demonstrate that even a person strongly drawn toward material indulgence can overcome temptation, using the physical world for holy purposes and thereby transforming it into G-d's home.

We, too, are given Esav's task of making the physical world into a home for G-d. But before we emulate Esav, we must first emulate Yaakov, immersing ourselves in the study of the Torah and the fulfillment of G-d's commandments. The spiritual strength we thereby garner enables us to go on to transform material reality. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, pp. 108-114) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

POWER OF PRAYER

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"We cried out to G-d, and He heard our voice; He sent an emissary and took us out of Egypt." (20:16)

It was only when the Jewish people's suffering in Egypt became unbearable that they finally turned to G-d, asking Him to save them from it (see Shemos 2:23). Although they had suffered terribly before that point, it did not occur to them to seek G-d's help.

G-d relates to us as we relate to Him, so as soon as they remembered Him, crying out to Him as their father, He took note of them by evincing His fatherly love for His children.

Similarly, we can sometimes neglect to ask G-d to help us in times of need, either because we erroneously think that our problems are not serious enough to warrant "bothering" Him about them, or because we assume that since He always acts in our best interests, it must be that He wants us to suffer this way. The truth is, however, that G-d eagerly awaits our prayers, and once we pray to Him to deliver us, He will begin doing so. Our sincere prayers open our hearts and our lives to receive His blessings. (Yom Tov Shel Rosh HaShanah 5666, pp. 60-61; Sefer HaMa'amarim Kuntereisim, vol. 1, p. 64; Sefer HaMa'amarim 5689, p. 112) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SUPPORT THE LOCALS

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from a well..." (20:17)

As Moshe tries to negotiate passage through the land of Edom, he proposes that the people pass through Edom without going through fields or vineyards and without drinking from "the well." Rashi wonders why Moshe expressed not to drink from a single well when presumably Edom had many.

While most commentaries explain this statement to mean that the Jews would avoid using Edom's resources, Rashi suggests the opposite. Rashi suggests that Moshe offered to support the local economy by buying water from local vendors and not from the portable well that traveled with the Jews as their water supply.

Rashi derives from this a crucial component when visiting foreign places away from our own: support the locals as much as possible. Perhaps this new business balances the hospitality granted and increases mutually beneficial exchanges with others.

THE KING'S ROAD

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from a well. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory." (20:17)

(Moshe asked the king of Edom to allow the Jewish people to pass through his land on the way to the Land of Israel. The Edomites refused, so Moshe led the people southward, detouring around their territory.)

Moshe's message to the Edomite king is the same message that our Divine souls must convey to the material world so long as we are still in exile. "True, we Jews are physically the same as all people; we have physical needs that must be met by working and living in the physical world. Nonetheless, we will not let this fact obscure our true purpose in life: to fulfill our Divine mission of elevating and refining physicality. We will walk along our Divine King's road; we will not deviate from G-d's ways, either to the right or to the left!"

By remaining true to both our inner selves and to our Divine mission, we will merit witnessing the ultimate redemption of the world and its transformation into G-d's true home. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 18, p. 468) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SINCERE PRAYERS

Reb Tzvi of Zidichov

"Edom said to him, 'You shall not pass through me, lest I go forth against you with the sword...'" (20:18)

Rashi comments: "You pride yourselves with the voice that your forefather bequeathed you, and say, 'We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice,' and I go forth against you with that which my forefather bequeathed me."

Jewish prayer is very powerful only when there is no arrogance. Even if there is only a modicum of arrogance, the prayer is not effective. Therefore, Rashi says: If "You pride yourselves with your voice," it shows that you have arrogance in your prayer, and Esav (Edom) will overpower you. When your prayer is honest, then Esav has no power over you; as long as the voice is the voice of Yaakov, then "the hands are not the hands of Esav" (see Bereishis 27:22).

THE TRUE JUDGE

Sefas Emes

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon at Mount Hor, by the border of the land of Edom, saying, 'Aharon shall be gathered to his people.'" (20:23-24)

This tells us that because they wanted to unite in close friendship with wicked Esav, their undertakings were unsuccessful, and they had to lose this righteous man (Aharon). (Rashi)

The Torah explicitly states in pasuk 24 the reason why Aharon had to die; i.e., "because you rebelled against My word at the waters of Meribah." Why, then, should Rashi give another reason; i.e., "because they wanted to unite in close friendship with wicked Esav"?

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa used to say: It is written that “G-d’s judgments are righteous altogether.” When a mortal king punishes a subject he is doing justice with regard to the criminal, but he is doing an injustice to the friends and relatives of the condemned for he is causing them to suffer through no fault of their own. But when G-d, blessed be His Name, punishes a sinner, even the sorrow felt by the family of the condemned is only just punishment for some misdeed that the family has been guilty of.

The same holds true also in the punishment G-d meted out to Aharon. The Torah gives only the reason for Aharon’s death; i.e., “because you rebelled against My Word...” Rashi, however, doesn’t mean to tell us the reason for Aharon’s death, but for the sorrow that descended upon the Jews as a result of this enormous loss. Why, Rashi asks, did the Jews have to be punished by losing this righteous man whom they loved so dearly? “Because they wanted to unite in close friendship with wicked Esav.”

LEGACY OF PEACE

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“And the entire congregation saw that Aharon had died and they wept for Aharon thirty days...” (20:29)

Aharon died on Rosh Chodesh Av, a month that is not a happy one in the Jewish calendar. However, there was also a bittersweet side to the death of Aharon. Greater than the sadness was the happiness and optimism that the memory of Aharon engendered within the Jewish people.

Aharon, after all, is the one who broke the deadly cycle of sibling rivalry that had permeated the accounts of siblings in the Torah up until then: Kayin and Hevel, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaakov and Eisav, Yosef and his brothers. The Torah is rife with tales of sibling enmity, until it introduces Aharon Hakohen. We first see this when Hashem assured Moshe that when Aharon heard that his younger brother would be the great redeemer of the people, leaving him to be his spokesman, he had no misgivings and “will rejoice in his heart” (Shemos 4:14).

For this reason, Aharon is described in Pirkei Avos in the present tense (who loves and pursues peace) for his legacy lives on from generation to generation - whether through our *gedolim* (leaders) who guide us with their examples, or the simple people who understand that restoring peace in a family will bring eternal life, rather than everlasting strife. (Divrei Dovid)

DEFEATING AMALEK

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[The Amalekites] heard that Yisrael was coming by the route of the spies, and he waged war against Israel and captured a captive from it.” (21:1)

The word “spies” in this verse refers both to the scouts whom Moshe had sent to spy out the land (Bamidbar 13) and to the Ark of the Covenant, which went before the Jewish people during their trek through the desert (ibid. 10:33-36).

Our inner Amalek attacks us in two ways. Sometimes he attacks via the intellect, explaining why we should ignore our commitments both to G-d and to our better selves. In such cases, it is enough to contemplate how unprofitable it is to follow his lead and how wise it is to remain true to our higher callings. This is “the route the spies had taken,” seeking out the natural means of conquering the enemy and using these means.

At other times, our inner Amalek brazenly defies logic, insisting on our obedience to our worst instincts without any regard to rhyme or reason. In such cases, logic is of no help. If, however, we recall our intrinsic bond with G-d, Amalek is powerless against us. This is relying on “the Ark of the Covenant,” which scatters all our enemies before us. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 38, pp. 83-84) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

AMALEK’S TACTICS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[Amalek] waged war against Israel and captured a captive from it.” (21:1)

(Moshe asked the kingdom of Moav, which was situated to the east of Edom, for permission to pass through their land, but they too refused. After this, Moshe’s brother Aharon died, and the nation of Amalek attacked the Jewish people for the second time.)

Amalek first attacked the Jewish people when they were on the way to receive the Torah and again as they were preparing to enter the Land of Israel.

Similarly, our inner Amalek first attempts to cool our enthusiasm toward G-d and His Torah. As long as we are fulfilling our religious obligations, this might not seem to pose such a problem. But if we approach our Divine mission without warmth and enthusiasm, we will eventually lose interest in it, seeking diversions that offer more immediate material or spiritual gratification.

If our inner Amalek fails to cool our enthusiasm, it will attempt to take over our life in the “land,” i.e., the material life we enter after our daily prayers and studies. It will argue, “Be holy while you’re praying and studying the Torah, but when you’re earning your living and dealing with the physical world, live by my rules.”

Although this may sound like the voice of a clever businessman, we must recognize it as the voice of Amalek. Despite its concessions to our spiritual endeavors, its goal is to destroy us. The only proper response to Amalek is to wipe it out - by constantly renewing our enthusiasm for G-d and His Torah, and our desire that G-d be our guide in all aspects of life. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SNAKE-LIKE SPEECH

Reb Yaakov Leiner of Izhbitz

"G-d sent snakes, the burning ones, and they bit the people..." (21:6)

Hashem sent people who lacked honesty because they spoke evil, were talebearers, and caused dissension among the people. These are snakes in the form of people. In their mouths they have deadly poison that can destroy innocent people and bring disharmony.

TRUE FORGIVENESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"The people came to Moshe and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against G-d and against you. Pray to G-d that He remove the snakes from us.' Moshe prayed on behalf of the people." (21:7)

Moshe's wholehearted forgiveness of the people who slandered him is intended to serve as an example for us (Rashi, based on Midrash Tanchuma). When we forgive someone only "officially," we indeed cause him to be spared any Divine punishment for his acts against us. But when, like Moshe, we forgive him wholeheartedly, cleansing ourselves of any residual grudge against him, we are moved to pray for his overall well-being and spiritual betterment as well.

Furthermore, in the merit of our sincere forgiveness, G-d acts generously toward us, forgiving our transgressions and granting us material and spiritual bounty. - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

CHANUKAH BLESSINGS

Kozhnutzer Maggid

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Make yourself a burning one and place it on a pole (nes) and it will be that anyone who had been bitten will look at it and live.'" (21:8)

"Make yourself a burning one" refers to the blessing made over the candles on Chanukah. The Hebrew word nes can be translated as "miracle" as well as "pole." Therefore, the words "place it on a pole (nes)" refer to the blessing "That you perform miracles," which is the second blessing over the Chanukah candles. "And live" refers to the blessing "Who has kept us alive."

AWARE OF OUR SURROUNDINGS

Reb Naftali of Ropshitz

"And Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit someone, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live." (21:9)

Rashi comments: "Could a snake cause death or give life? Rather, at the time that Israel would look upward and subject their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be cured."

A Jew must constantly look Heavenward but not be so completely involved there that he neglects to look at what is happening around him on earth. Therefore, our thoughts should be Heavenward but remain on earth.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"And Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit someone, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live." (21:9)

The Jews complain about their food, claiming to be disgusted by the manna that they have been receiving. In response, G-d sends snakes to attack them, followed by Moshe's prayers on their behalf, and instructions to gaze upon a copper snake (nachash nechoshes) to heal them from the snake bites (21:9). Why would looking at a snake be the cure for being bitten, and why was the cure made specifically out of copper?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler suggests that having an elevated statue to which people can look up at has the added purpose of reminding the people to look to Heaven (G-d) for guidance, a concept that would serve them well.

Rav Hirsch adds that it was made of copper because copper (nechoshes) sounds like a snake (nachash), and further helps remind people to always be mindful (l'nachesh, to sense) of the source and purpose of what they have.

As the inevitable entry into the promised land draws near, G-d is trying to prepare the people (and us) to be mindful of the higher purpose, despite the entrenchment of everyday life.

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF SPEECH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And Moshe made a copper snake and placed it on a pole, and whenever a snake bit someone, he would gaze upon the copper snake and live." (21:9)

In response to the Jewish People's evil speech against Hashem and Moshe, Hashem sent poisonous snakes to attack them, and many were killed. Realizing that they were being punished for their evil speech, they begged Moshe to pray to Hashem to remove the snakes. Moshe prayed, and then, as we see from our verse, instructed them to make a copper snake which would lead to their lives being saved (Bamidbar 21:5-9).

It is interesting to note that the Jewish People requested that Moshe pray for the dangerous snakes to be removed, yet Moshe's solution was to erect a copper snake to heal those who had been bitten. Moreover, the verse implies that not only were the snakes not removed, but people would still be bitten - albeit that they would not die from the bite. Why were the snakes not removed; and why did they still present a danger even after the Jewish People regretted their actions?

The Chofetz Chaim answers that their punishment is measure-for-measure for their sin. For, just as the damage of lashon hara cannot be eradicated completely - even after the speaker has regretted his actions and even when he attempts to make amends for his evil speech - so too, the snakes would still be found and would still cause pain even after the Jewish People had regretted their actions.

We learn from here the magnitude of responsibility we face every time we open our mouths to say anything and even more so when we register a complaint or criticism. We cannot remind ourselves enough about the great danger in speaking lashon hara and the devastation it can cause, for it is a challenge that we all face on a constant basis, and something that always requires strengthening (Bava Basra 165a).

UNCONDITIONAL COMMITMENT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"From there they journeyed [northward] and encamped on the side of the Arnon River." (21:13)

G-d originally promised Avraham the territories of ten nations: seven in Canaan and three to the east of the Jordan. The Jewish people were at this point supposed to only conquer Canaan, leaving the land east of the Jordan for the Messianic era. But because Edom and Moav refused them passage, the Jewish people had to enter Canaan by way of the very territories that G-d had promised them would be theirs in the future. Circumstances thus enabled them to conquer large parts of these lands even before entering Canaan. The originally intended order was reversed; they began to consummate the future even before actualizing the present.

The new generation did not ask to send out spies, nor did they question Moshe's leadership. Having grown up immersed in G-d's presence and teachings in its desert "academy," it did not subject its connection to G-d to the approval of human intellect.

Similarly, when we inspire ourselves to fulfill our Divine mission unconditionally, optimistically focused on our ultimate goal, G-d grants us the opportunity to make our dreams come true and lead us to the final Redemption. (Sefer HaSichot 5750, vol. 2, pp. 541-550; Likutei Sichot, vol. 4, p. 1056) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

SACRED DEBATES

Rebbe Nachman

"I have given as an outermost boundary the rivers of Arnon." (21:14)

Et va'hev b'sufah (את והב בסופה, I have given as an outermost boundary) - they did not move from there until they became Ohavim (אוהבים, lovers). (Kiddushin 30b)

Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will, in the end (b'sofah, בסופה), prove constructive. (Avos 5:17)

Even though Torah scholars battle each other over G-d's words, in the end, they are friends, because their battle is for the sake of G-d and eventually brings them to attain da'at (knowledge of G-d).

Although a battle for the sake of Heaven may appear hostile, it is actually an expression of profound peace. (See Likutey Moharan I, 56:8)

ASSISTED BY THE MITZVAH

Reb Noson of Breslov

"And the valley's rapids that turn aside to rest by Ar, leaning on the border of Moav." (21:15)

As the Jewish people traveled towards the Holy Land, the mountains of the Land uprooted themselves and went out to meet them, as a maidservant goes out to greet her mistress. (Rashi)

Because the Jews wanted to perform the mitzvah of entering the Holy Land, the sanctity of that mitzvah was drawn upon them. Thus, the mountains of the Land "went out to meet the Jews."

The same is true of every mitzvah a person performs. The sanctity of the mitzvah is drawn upon him from the very first moment he undertakes the mitzvah, helping him to perform it. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 118a)

ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Rabbi Shlomo Ressler

"Then Israel sang this song: 'Spring up, O well, sing to it...'" (21:17)

The Torah lists the locations where the Jews journeyed and abruptly stops to tell us that the Jews sang a song about a well. What prompted the interruption, and what lesson can we derive from it?

Rashi explains that as the Jews passed through a deep gorge in Moav, the Amorites planned to ambush them from above. A miracle occurred, and the opposing cliffs above merged to crush the attackers, and their blood flowed to the well below.

Rabbi Menachem Feifer points out that the resulting song referenced again at this point thanked G-d not simply for the miracle that just occurred, but for the forty years of water the well miraculously provided for them.

When something extraordinary happens to us, it's an opportunity to be grateful for the experience and appreciate the ordinary just as well.

THE TZADDIK'S CHANNELS

Reb Noson of Breslov

"The well that princes dug; nobles of the people excavated it, through a lawgiver, with their walking sticks. And from the wilderness, a gift." (21:18)

When the Jews encamped in the desert, the leader of each tribe would take his staff and draw a line from the well to his tribe's encampment, in which the water from the well would flow to them. (Rashi on Bamidbar 21:20)

The "well" represents the source of life and vitality. The tribal leaders represent the tzaddikim who draw that light and vitality from G-d and channel it to each individual, according to his ability to receive it. (Likutey Halakhot III, p. 94a)

ENDLESS WELL

Chida

"The well that princes dug; nobles of the people excavated..." (21:18)

The Torah has no limit. Even after the great rabbis of generations past taught and wrote so much Torah, there is still room for scholars in future generations to add to knowledge of the Torah.

The princes in the pasuk are the rabbis of past generations, and the nobles are today's scholars. Anyone, in any generation, who adds to the knowledge of Torah becomes a partner to Moshe in "digging" the well of Torah.

PRINCES AND NOBLES

Vilna Gaon

"The well that princes dug; nobles of the people excavated it, through a lawgiver, with their walking sticks. And from the wilderness, a gift." (21:18)

"The well": This is the Torah, likened to a well of living waters. "That the princes dug": Into which our princes, the scholars, have searched. "Which the nobles of the people delved" (the Hebrew word *karuah*, used here for "delved," can also be translated as "acquired"): The nobles of the people, who are not brilliant scholars themselves, have an opportunity to acquire the Torah with their money by supporting scholars, as the Torah puts it: "It is a tree of life to those who cleave to it."

In other words, both the scholars and the noble, generous supporters of scholarship can have a share in the Torah; the scholars through the lawgiver (the Hebrew word *mechokek*, used in the pasuk for "scepter," can also be translated as "lawgiver") by studying themselves, and the "nobles" by acting as "staves" to support the students of the Torah.

In keeping with the above, the Gemara (Nedarim 55) relates the passage "from the wilderness to Mattanah, and from Mattanah to Nachaliel" to the giving of the Torah, pointing out that Mattanah is also the Hebrew word for "gift" and that the literal meaning of Nachaliel is "the inheritance of G-d."

HEALING WATERS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"From the heights, [the well descended] to the valley in the field of Moav [where Moshe will die] at the top of the peak. It will be able to be seen from the wastelands." (21:20)

The Midrash teaches us that the water of this well - the well of Miriam - miraculously healed all those who drank it of any sickness from which they were suffering (Vayikra Rabbah 22:4; Bamidbar Rabbah 18:22).

The Kol Bo, a medieval rabbinic work, records a tradition that water from this well miraculously circulates at the end of every Sabbath to all the springs and wells in the world, and for this reason, there was an ancient custom to draw well-water after the end of the Sabbath in order to benefit from its healing powers.

Although this custom is not commonly practiced nowadays, water allegorically symbolizes the Torah, because of its life-giving and healing properties (see Shemos 15:26). Thus, studying the Torah on Saturday night helps heal us from both physical and spiritual sicknesses by inspiring us to lead a healthy, spiritual life during the upcoming week. (Sichot Kodesh 5739, vol. 3, pp. 278-280) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BEING ONE WITH THE TZADDIK

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Israel sent messengers to Sichon, king of the Amorites..." (21:21)

The medieval sage Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (known universally by his initials as "Rashi") points out that the Torah says that Moshe sent messengers to Edom but that Israel sent messengers to Sichon, even though in both cases Moshe sent the messengers on behalf of all the Jewish people. As Rashi notes, this teaches us that Moshe and the Jewish people are essentially equivalent.

The true Jewish leader does not just represent the people, he is one with them in essence. His affairs are not divided into his private and public lives. He is a public servant to his very core.

The true Jewish leader's total identification with his people and his selfless devotion to them makes him the conduit through which G-d provides all their material and spiritual needs. Therefore, not only is he one with them: they are one with him.

As such, they can rise to his perspective on reality and share his Divine consciousness and his inspired life, even if they have not yet refined themselves enough to be worthy of these on their own. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 33, pp. 131-136) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

REMEMBER THE MISSION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Moshe sent men to spy out Yazeir. They captured its villages, dispossessing the Amorites who lived there.” (21:32)

Although Moshe only sent these men to spy out the district, they understood that this was not an end in itself but the first step in the ultimate goal of taking possession of it. Thus, confident in the success assured to all those who devote themselves selflessly to their Divine mission, they not only spied out the district but conquered it. (In this way they rectified the mistake of the previous spies, who trusted their own intuition regarding the purpose of their mission.)

Similarly, G-d has given us all specific sensitivities, talents, and gifts - which together define the specific mission with which He has charged us. Once we have identified our unique, individual purpose in life and have dedicated ourselves to fulfilling it, we must take care not to focus so intently on our specific Divine mission that we lose sight of our general Divine mission: to refine the world, making it into G-d's true home. It is only by seeing our personal purpose in life as part of the greater purpose of life in general that we will succeed in our personal self-fulfillment, utilizing our G-d-given gifts and actualizing our G-d-given potentials to the fullest degree. (Hitva'aduyot 5721, vol. 3, pp. 127-130) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

UNIMAGINABLE WORTH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

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

Hashem tells Moshe not to fear Og. But why was Moshe afraid of him more than anyone else who came to wage war against the Jewish People (we do not find that Hashem calms Moshe's fears about anyone else who approached them in war)?

The Gemara (Niddah 61a) tells us that it was Og who came and told Avraham that his nephew Lot had been captured (he is the “fugitive” referred to in Bereishis 14:13). As a result, Avraham went and rescued him, and because of Og's role in saving Lot's life, Moshe was afraid of his merit. Tosefos points out that the only reason that Og told Avraham about his nephew's capture was so that Avraham would be killed whilst trying to save him and then Og could marry his wife, Sarah. Nevertheless, adds Tosefos, Moshe was afraid of Og's merit!

Could it be that the merit of Og's “help” - which he only did in order to cause Avraham harm - could warrant such a great reward that he would be able to succeed in battle against Moshe and the Jewish People?

The answer is simply: Yes! We cannot comprehend the value of a single Mitzvah, even one performed with improper intentions. However, we can get some idea of its value in Hashem's eyes from the reward that Balak received after making forty-two sacrifices to Hashem. Even though his intentions were solely to cause the Jewish People harm, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 105b) says that as a result of these sacrifices, Balak was rewarded that his descendant would be Rus (Ruth), great-grandmother of Dovid HaMelech.

Therefore, before considering whether to do a Mitzvah or not, think of the immense reward you will get and then multiply that by many millions - and that is still nowhere near the real reward of a single Mitzvah, even one performed without the best intentions.

(Although the Mishna in Pirkei Avos [1:3] says to “be like servants who serve their master without expecting reward,” the Baalei Mussar today suggest that nowadays, the low level of our faith necessitates that we should do everything that we can to convince ourselves to perform Mitzvos and serve Hashem.)

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Reb Noson of Breslov

“G-d said to Moshe, ‘Do not be afraid of him... You will do the same to him as you did to Sichon, king of the Emorites who dwells in Cheshbon.’” (21:34)

When Yehoshua led the Jews in their conquest of the land of Canaan, he was able to vanquish thirty-one kings. Yet he could not, on his own, conquer Sichon and Og, whose land bordered the Holy Land. Only Moshe had the strength to conquer those kings, who represent the powers and obstacles that stand at the border of everything holy.

Had the people followed Moshe wholeheartedly, they would have been able to enter the Holy Land even during Moshe's lifetime. But since they rebelled against him, they had to face many obstacles to gain possession of the Land.

We read Parashat Chukas prior to Tisha B'Av, the day we commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temple, because national destruction grows out of rebellion against the tzaddik. Opposition to the tzaddik also caused both Moshe and Aharon to pass away right on the borders to the Holy Land. Still, because they conquered the obstacles at the borders, the Jews merited to enter the Land and eventually win their battles. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 187a)

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