

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

In his 2011 bestseller, *The Social Animal*, New York Times columnist David Brooks writes: "We are living in the middle of the revolution in consciousness. Over the past few years, geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, and others have made great strides in understanding the building blocks of human flourishing. And a core finding of their work is that we are not primarily products of our conscious thinking. We are primarily the products of thinking that happens below the level of awareness."

Too much takes place in the mind for us to be fully aware of it. Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia estimates that the human mind can absorb 11 million pieces of information at any given moment. We can be conscious of only a tiny fraction of this. Most of what is going on mentally lies below the threshold of awareness.

One result of the new neuroscience is that we are becoming aware of the hugely significant part played by emotion in decision-making. The French Enlightenment emphasised the role of reason and regarded emotion as a distraction and distortion. We now know scientifically how wrong this is.

Antonio Damasio, in his *Descartes' Error*, tells the story of a man who, as the result of a tumour, suffered damage to the frontal lobes of his brain. He had been known to have a high IQ, was well-informed, and had an excellent memory. But after surgery to remove the tumour, his life went into free-fall. He was unable to organise his time. He made bad investments that cost him his savings. He divorced his wife, married a second time, and rapidly divorced again. He could still reason perfectly but had lost the ability to feel emotion. As a result, he was unable to make sensible choices.

Another man with a similar injury found it impossible to make decisions at all. At the end of one session, Damasio suggested two possible dates for their next meeting. The man then took out a notebook, began listing the pros and cons of each, talked about possible

weather conditions, potential conflicts with other engagements and so on, for half an hour, until Damasio finally interrupted him, and made the decision for him. The man immediately said, "That's fine," and went away.

It is less reason than emotion that lies behind our choices, and it takes emotional intelligence to make good choices. The problem is that much of our emotional life lies beneath the surface of the conscious mind.

That, as we can now see, is the logic of the *chukim*, the "statutes" of Judaism, the laws that seem to make no sense in terms of rationality. These are laws like the prohibition of sowing mixed seeds together (*kelayim*); of wearing cloth of mixed wool and linen (*shaatnez*); and of eating milk and meat together. The law of the Red Heifer with which our parsha begins, is described as the *chok par excellence*. As it is written: "This is the statute of the Torah." (Num. 19:2)

There have been many interpretations of the *chukim* throughout the ages. But in the light of recent neuroscience, we can suggest that they are laws designed to bypass the prefrontal cortex, the rational brain, and create instinctive patterns of behaviour to counteract some of the darker emotional drives at work in the human mind.

We know for example -- Jared Diamond has chronicled this in his book *Collapse* -- that wherever humans have settled throughout history they have left behind them a trail of environmental disaster, wiping out whole species of animals and birds, destroying forests, damaging the soil by over-farming and so on.

The prohibitions against sowing mixed seeds, mixing meat and milk, combining wool and linen, and so on, create an instinctual respect for the integrity of nature. They establish boundaries. They set limits. They inculcate the feeling that we may not treat our animal and plant environment however we wish. Some things are forbidden -- like the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The whole Eden story, set at the dawn of human history, is a parable whose message we can understand today better than any previous generation: Without a sense of limits, we will destroy our ecology and discover that we have lost paradise.

As for the ritual of the Red Heifer, this is directed at the most destructive pre-rational instinct of all: what Sigmund Freud called *thanatos*, the death instinct. He described it as something "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides". In his essay *Civilisation and Its*

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Sima bas Hirsch Avraham z"l
May her memory be a blessing

Discontents, he wrote that "a portion of the [death] instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness", which he saw as "the greatest impediment to civilisation."

The Red Heifer ritual is a powerful statement that the holy is to be found in life, not death. Anyone who had been in contact with a dead body needed purification before entering the sanctuary or Temple. Priests had to obey stricter rules, and the High Priest even more so.

This made biblical Judaism highly distinctive. It contains no cult of worship of dead ancestors, or seeking to make contact with their spirits. It was probably to avoid the tomb of Moses becoming a holy site that the Torah says, "to this day no one knows where his grave is" (Deut. 34:6). God and the holy are to be found in life. Death defiles.

The point is -- and that is what recent neuroscience has made eminently clear -- this cannot be achieved by reason alone. Freud was right to suggest that the death instinct is powerful, irrational, and largely unconscious, yet under certain conditions it can be utterly devastating in what it leads people to do.

The Hebrew term *chok* comes from the verb meaning, "to engrave". Just as a statute is carved into stone, so a behavioural habit is carved in depth into our unconscious mind and alters our instinctual responses. The result is a personality trained to see death and holiness as two utterly opposed states -- just as meat (death) and milk (life) are.

Chukim are Judaism's way of training us in emotional intelligence, above all a conditioning in associating holiness with life, and defilement with death. It is fascinating to see how this has been vindicated by modern neuroscience.

Rationality, vitally important in its own right, is only half the story of why we are as we are. We will need to shape and control the other half if we are successfully to conquer the instinct to aggression, violence, and death that lurks not far beneath the surface of the conscious mind. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“This is the statute of the law which God commanded, saying, ‘Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer.’” (Numbers 19:1–2) One of the most profound mysteries of the Bible is the rite of the red heifer, called a *chok* (statute) because it belongs to the group of divine decrees which human logic cannot penetrate.

Detailed in the first twenty-two verses of our Torah reading, the ceremony certainly sounds strange to the modern ear: a heifer, which is completely red, without blemish, and upon which no yoke has been brought,

shall be slaughtered outside of the encampment of Israel; cedar wood, hyssop, and a scarlet thread shall be cast into the burning pyre of ashes, and a “personage of purity” (*ish tahor*) shall gather the ashes in a sacred place, mix them with spring water (*mayim chayim*, waters of life) and use the mixture to purify those who have been contaminated by contact with a corpse. What can we possibly make of such a primitive sounding ritual?

We must be mindful of the fact that all other impurities other than a death impurity find their purification by the defiled individual’s immersing himself or herself in a *mikveh*, a gathering of freshly running spring water or specially collected life-giving rainwater; in effect, in all these instances, the defiled individual actually purifies him- or herself! Only in this rite of the red heifer does the *kohen*, representing God Himself, effectuate the purification. It is as though the Bible is teaching us that we can save ourselves from many of our weaknesses, we can rise above many of our temptations, but only God can ultimately redeem us from death.

And from this perspective, the symbolism of the red heifer ritual begins to make sense. A heifer is the consummate symbol of life, the cow’s mother-milk serving as the universal expression of maternal nurturing of her young; red is likewise the color of blood, and blood is the life-force, the very *nefesh* of the living organism. However, although human beings come in various shapes, sizes, personalities, and powers – they can be as tall and proud as the cedar tree and as mean and humble as the hyssop plant – the angel of death ultimately conquers them all, because the scarlet thread of human sin condemns each of us to the common destiny of mortality.

Following the sacrifice, the personage of purity gathers the ashes of the remains, mixes them with the life-giving waters of the divine and, born-again, purified life emerges even from the surrealistic specter of death itself. Inherent in this symbolism is that historic Israel – mother nurturer of the continuity of humanity by means of the Abrahamic “compassionate rightness and moral justice” which Israel taught and must continue to teach – is destined to be slaughtered, but will always rise again to life and to the fulfillment of her mission and destiny.

This symbolism of the red heifer assumed new significance for me after a trip to Frankfurt and Berlin I took just a few years ago. Ohr Torah Stone’s Joseph Straus Rabbinical Seminary has sent close to three hundred rabbis and their families to communities throughout the world, from Caesarea to Curacao to Guatemala City to Johannesburg to Lincoln Center – with eight of our graduates presently in Germany. While in Berlin, I made it my concern to visit their newly completed Holocaust Memorial at the very center of the city, not far from the last bunker from which the “mad Führer” (may his name be blotted out) committed suicide.

The open-air memorial consists of 2,711 stones, monuments of various shapes and sizes. Walking amongst the narrow, massive slabs of stone, one becomes lost within a giant cemetery, feeling helplessly and hopelessly minute and insignificant within a maze of monuments whose eerie, death-imbedded caskets seem to have overtaken world and life; I even felt a panic attack, was almost ready to scream out loud in fear and anxiety, when I saw the sight of blessed steps of exit from this mass and massive tomb. One then descends into a netherworld of hell, where pictures and stories of Holocaust victims evoke their life experiences and all of their future potential that was snuffed out, inexplicably and cruelly torn asunder from the tree of life by monstrous and subhuman hands. How many medical and scientific advances were simply burned to ashes in the death factory called Auschwitz! How many Nobel Prize winners, how many giants of humanity!

I stumbled away from the experience feeling as though I had just awakened from a horrific nightmare. The symbolism of the monuments continued to haunt me months after I returned to Efrat; after all, those who lost loved ones in the Holocaust don't even have graveside monuments to weep over. Each empty stone screams out with any name, with every name, with my name, and with my children's names, because a part of each human being was killed in those death camps whose perpetrators attempted to destroy every last vestige of humaneness.

But I also came away from the experience feeling cheated by the memorial. Something was missing, the essence was missing, the victorious ending was missing. Because, you see, the Jewish people won the war which Hitler tried to wage against us. Yes, he succeeded in destroying six million of us, but as he records in *Mein Kampf*, he wasn't waging a war against six million Jews. He was waging a war against the last Jew, against Judaism, against what he called a slave morality of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, of sensitive concern for the weaker vessels, of a God of ultimate power who insists upon human protection of the powerless. And in that war, Hitler failed!

Yes, we won that war. Alas, the brilliantly alive "red heifer," a metaphor for the Jewish people, a people who nurture the world with the milk of morality of the Ten Commandments and the milk of human kindness of "You shall love the stranger" and "You shall love your neighbor like yourself" was, to a large extent, tragically and inexplicably slaughtered beyond the "human encampment" in Auschwitz and Treblinka. But the Almighty God, the "Personage of Purity" Himself, gathered the ashes, Himself mixed them with living waters of rebirth, and Himself transformed those ashes into the fertile soil of the recreated sovereign State of Israel. And the "Personage of Purity" Himself mixed the ashes with the life-giving wellsprings of Torah, our tree of eternal life, and in addition to our national physical

being, likewise revived our spiritual being, Torah centers, and Daf Yomi Talmud study groups to an unprecedented and unparalleled degree all over the world. In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, who could have predicted the rise of the State of Israel; who could have foreseen hundreds of thousands of Jews studying Daf Yomi every day?

Indeed, it boggles the mind to think that Judaism is reawakening even in the failed Führer's own capital city of Berlin, where three new yeshivot have been dedicated over the past several years. Imagine the historical irony of the fact that the only two growing Jewish communities in the world today are in Israel and in Germany!

And take note: there are 2,711 monument stones in the memorial, and when the artist Peter Eisenman was asked as to the significance of that number, he said there was no significance, it was purely arbitrary. However, if you check Google, you will find that there are 2,711 folio pages in the Babylonian Talmud studied in Daf Yomi! And this is more than coincidence. Adolf Hitler is now mercifully long dead. Curiously enough, one of his personal effects within his self-inflicted suicide bunker was the tractate *Pesachim*, a Gemara of the Vilna Shas (six orders of the Talmud) which tells of the Pesach festival of Jewish freedom and redemption. The American State Department decided to give this sacred text to Rabbi Herzog, then chief rabbi of Israel, whose wife showed it to me in the early 1970s. Apparently the devil incarnate, who was obsessed with Judaism, had hoped to bury the last Talmud tome in existence. Instead the Talmud tome buried him! Indeed, 2,711 pages of the Talmud have literally walked out of the 2,711 monument stones, and have granted to the Jewish victims the eternal life of Jewish victors, who will yet teach the world the message of universal freedom and redemption which is the vision of the Pesach Seder.

A Biblical and Historical Postscript: We learn from the rite of the red heifer that only God, the Personage of Purity, can redeem from death; and in our post-Holocaust generation, He has certainly done so. There ought to be a final glorious exhibit in the Berlin Holocaust Memorial which features pulsating present-day religious Jewish life in Germany, as well as a magnificent tribute to the reborn State of Israel.

"Thus says the Lord your God... 'I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves and bring you into the Land of Israel.... And I shall put My spirit in you and you shall live and I shall place you in your land.'" (Ezekiel 37:13-14) ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah interrupts, so to speak, its narrative of the events that befell the Jewish people in the desert with the description of a commandment that

admittedly has no rational human understanding in logical terms. Even the great King Solomon, the wisest and most analytical of all humans, was forced to admit that understanding this parsha of the Torah was beyond his most gifted intellect and talents.

If the Torah is meant to instruct us in life and its values, to improve and influence our behavior and lifestyle and to help us achieve our goal of being a holy people then why insert this parsha in the Torah when it can seemingly have no practical impact on our daily life or broaden our understanding of God's omnipresence in our lives?

Though there is a section of Mishna devoted to the laws and halachic technicalities of the sacrifice of the "red cow" it does not deal with the underlying motives for the existence of this commandment, and it also does not address why this parsha is inserted in the midst of the description of the events that occurred in the desert to the generation of Jews who left Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai.

We have historical record and description in the Mishna and from non-rabbinic sources as to the actual performance of the commandment in Temple times. This comes as a reminder of our necessary obeisance to God's commandments even if they are not always subject to actual human understanding. Yet, some glimmer of comprehension is demanded by us to make this parsha meaningful to us.

I think that perhaps the Torah comes to point out the very fact that human life is in fact always irrational and that human behavior many times defies any logic or good sense. How could the generation that left Egypt and witnessed the revelation at Sinai complain about food when there was adequate Heavenly food? How could they prefer Egypt or the desert itself over living in the Land of Israel? And how could Moshe's and Aharon's own tribe and relatives rise against them in defiant and open rebellion?

Are these not basically incoherent and irrational decisions with a terrible downside to them? And yet they occurred and continue to recur constantly in Jewish and general life throughout history. In spite of our best efforts and our constant delusion that we exist in a rational world, the Torah here comes to inform us that that is a false premise.

If everyday life defies logic and accurate prediction then it is most unfair and in fact illogical to demand of Torah and God to provide us with perfect understanding of commandments and laws. The Torah inserts this parsha into the middle of its narrative about the adventures of the Jewish people in the desert to point out that the mysteries of life abound in the spiritual world just as they do in the mundane and seemingly practical world.

One of the great lessons of Judaism is that we are to attempt to behave rationally even if at the very same time, we realize that much in our personal and

national lives is simply beyond our understating. © 2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Immediately after being told he will not enter Israel for hitting the rock in a place called Kadesh, Moses sends a delegation to Edom asking that the Jewish People be allowed to enter their territory on their way to Israel. The Torah, in the portion of Chukat, goes out of its way to indicate that the delegation was sent from Kadesh (Numbers 20:14).

Here the Midrash states: "In the usual way, when a man is slighted by his business partner, he wishes to have nothing to do with him; whereas Moses, though he was punished on account of Israel, did not rid himself of their burden, but sent messengers [to Edom]" (Bamidbar Rabbah 19:15).

Nehama Leibowitz reinforces this idea by noting that the text states that Moses sent the delegation from Kadesh. This fact is unnecessary. In her words, "Wherever no change of locale is recorded in the text, it is presumed that the event described took place at the last mentioned place. Obviously, Kadesh is mentioned again to emphasize Moses's adherence to his mission of bringing the people to the land even after his rebuff (there), in spite of the fact that he had been explicitly excluded from it."

An important lesson may be learned here. Leaders must always remember that the cause is larger than their personal feelings or interests. Although Moses may have felt dishonored by being condemned to die in the desert, he continues to help the Jews enter Israel by sending messengers to Edom.

Compare this moment to the haftarah, the prophetic portion read for Parashat Chukat. Yiftach promises God that if he is victorious in war, he will offer whatever he sees first upon his return to God. Alas, he returns victorious and sees his daughter (Judges 11:34, 35).

Here the Midrash notes that Yiftach could have gone to Pinchas, the high priest, to annul the vow. But Yiftach says, Should I, the head of tribes of Israel, stoop to go to that civilian? Pinchas also does not approach Yiftach, proclaiming, Should I, a high priest, lower myself and go to that boor? (Kohelet Rabbah 10:15).

Unlike Moses, Yiftach and Pinchas's focus remains on their personal honor; their pursuit of kavod is more important to them than the well-being of an innocent child (Tosafot, Ta'anit 4a, s.v. "v'hainu").

The Chassidic rebbe Rabbi Simcha Bunem said that everyone must carry two notes in his pocket, one stating, "The world was created for me," and the other, "I am like the dust of the earth." The rebbe may have been

speaking to himself with a reminder that unchecked personal interests can overwhelm and even subvert the cause to which one is dedicated but too much humility can prevent one from reaching his or her potential.

The idea often attributed to Father Strickland, a nineteenth-century Jesuit priest, rings true: As my good friend Shimon Katz often tells his business associates, "There's no limit to the good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit." © 2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

The whole congregation saw that Aharon had died and they cried for Aharon, for thirty days, the whole house of Israel." (Bamidbar 20:29) When Moshe (with torn clothing and ashes) and Elazar (wearing the clothes of the Kohain Gadol) descended the mountain, the people looked for Aharon. They couldn't believe that the man who stood up to the Angel of Death at the plague, could have succumbed to him and died. [They were actually right, because it was Hashem, Himself, who took Aharon's soul with a Divine kiss.]

They were afraid and exposed, because with Aharon's death, the Clouds of Glory which had previously surrounded them and protected the Jews from all manner of threats, were now gone. Just as when Miriam died, the well of water which had come in her merit disappeared, now the clouds which came because of Aharon disappeared. (Moshe would bring them both back in his own merit.)

Chazal tell us that everyone cried for Aharon, including men and women, because he had been the one to restore peace between people and healed relationships. When a couple had a falling out, Aharon would come and speak to each spouse and help them repair the relationship. Because the women were more personally affected, their crying is highlighted by Aharon's death as opposed to by Moshe's later on.

The question is, were they crying for Aharon, or for themselves? Perhaps, they weren't just mourning the loss of the great man, but lamenting what they now realized was possible for a human being to achieve.

When Miriam died, the well disappeared. The people knew she was a holy person, and it made sense that such a great miracle happened because of her. Though they didn't know it was in her merit while she was alive, when she died, they could understand that such a tzadeikes could be the source of such a bracha which helped everyone.

When Aharon died, and the Clouds of Glory disappeared, they realized that it was in his great merit that they'd been protected all these years, and now they were afraid. Why? Because Aharon wasn't an aloof tzaddik. He wasn't an ascetic hermit who dwelled on a

mountain top, but a man of the people who was involved in day-to-day life.

This brought into focus that each of them, man or woman, young or old, could do so much more than they realized. They recognized the potential they had for caring for others and that they had not learned enough from Aharon in his lifetime. They had underestimated him and missed the chance to maximize their own lives.

This was enough to bring everyone to tears.

R' Moshe Feinstein would often be driven home by a student from the Yeshiva. One day, when his regular driver was not available, they looked around for a student with a car. Seeing one, the boy making the arrangements said, "Goldstein! You have a car, right? The Rosh Yeshiva needs a ride."*

Rushing to his car, the young man began to prepare it for his prestigious passenger, hurriedly cranking the sunroof closed as R' Moshe approached.

"No, no, don't close it," said R' Moshe with a smile as he removed his hat and sat down in the car. He raised his face to enjoy the sunshine and said, "It's very nice this way."

The sage, who was constantly involved in Torah study, was not too big or too busy to stop and appreciate the simple pleasure of the warmth of the sun. © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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Reasons for Mitzvot

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In Parshat Chukat, the Torah refers to the mitzva of the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) as a *chok*, a mitzva that seemingly has no rational explanation. The Talmud cites a verse (*Vayikra* 18:4), "You shall follow My commandments (*chukotai*)," and comments: "These are the decrees of the King and there is no explanation for them... You do not have permission to think about them" (*Yoma* 67b). Does this really mean that there is no rationale for the *mitzvot*? Could it mean that we have no way to understand the mitzva's rationale, but there is a rationale known to G-d?

If there is such a rationale, why shouldn't it be revealed to humanity? Possibly because there were *mitzvot* whose reasons were revealed (specifically, that the king should not have too many wives lest they lead his heart astray, or too many horses lest he return to Egypt), and this led to the downfall of a great leader (Shlomo). On the other hand, we could argue that since reasons were given for those *mitzvot*, and for many others besides (such as Shabbat and *tzitzit*), this would seem to imply that all *mitzvot* do have a rationale. If the reason is not revealed, that is because it does not necessarily explain all that can be found within a given mitzva. Thus, King David proclaims, "I have seen that all things have their limit, but Your commandments are broad beyond measure" (*Tehillim* 119:96).

This may be at the root of the disagreement between Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yehudah as to whether we are permitted to seek reasons for *mitzvot*. Many *Rishonim* offer rationales for *mitzvot* (including the Rambam in both the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Moreh Nevuchim*). It would seem that they side with Rabbi Shimon, who permits seeking reasons for *mitzvot*.

According to these *Rishonim*, not only is it permitted, but it is a good idea to explore the rationale for the *mitzvot*. However, other *Rishonim* disagree and say that this is what our Sages warned us about when they said regarding a prayer leader (*Mishnah Berachot* 5:3), "Someone who says 'Your mercy extends to a bird's nest' should be silenced, because he makes it seem like G-d's ways are compassionate, when in reality they are decrees." © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Passing of Aharon

Parashat Chukat is a very sad parasha for the B'nei Yisrael. It includes the deaths of two of the most important people in the desert, namely, Miriam and Aharon. Miriam's death resulted in the Well associated with her to dry up, which caused a confrontation with Moshe and Aharon in which the people demanded water. That confrontation resulted in Moshe and Aharon mishandling the situation and losing the right to enter the Land of Israel. At the end of the parasha, Aharon passed away and Elazar became the new Kohein Gadol. The death of Aharon had a profound mark on the people. Before Aharon passed, he was blessed to see his son, Elazar, dressed in the clothes of the Kohein Gadol, both father and son as leaders of the Jewish People.

The Torah tells us, "They journeyed from Kadesh and the B'nei Yisrael arrived – the entire assembly – at Hor HaHar. Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon at Hor HaHar on the border of the Land of Edom, saying, 'Aharon shall be brought in to his people (die), for he shall not enter the Land that I have given to the B'nei Yisrael, because you (Aharon) defied My word at the waters of strife. Take Aharon and Elazar, his son, and bring them up to Hor HaHar. Divest Aharon of his garments, and dress Elazar, his son, in them; Aharon shall be brought in and die there.' Moshe did as Hashem commanded, and they ascended Hor HaHar before the eyes of the entire assembly. Moshe divested Aharon of his garments and dressed Elazar, his son, in them; then Aharon died there on top of the mountain, and Moshe and Elazar descended from the mountain. The entire assembly saw that Aharon had perished, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Yisrael."

Rashi tells us that the timing of Aharon's death was a result of the behavior of the B'nei Yisrael. The pasuk tells us that Hor HaHar was "on the border of the land of Edom." Edom was the inheritance of Eisav, the wicked brother of Ya'akov, yet the B'nei Yisrael chose to be close to Eisav at this time. Rashi explains that the

B'nei Yisrael were about to enter the Holy Land, yet they maintained their relationship with Eisav's descendants and their land which was unworthy of a Holy nation. This desire to connect to the wicked Eisav caused the people to lose their great leader, Aharon. It is not that Aharon would not have died shortly, as Hashem had said that he would not enter the land, "because you defied My word at the waters of strife." Rashi is telling us that the exact time of Aharon's death was determined by the people desiring a connection to the wicked Eisav at this time.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that no one knows the length of his days on Earth. This is done so that no one can change his personal judgment nor can that judgment be postponed even one day once it has been determined. Yet it appears here that Aharon is told when he would die. How could this be? We are told that with truly righteous people, Hashem allows them to know the day of their death so that they can inform their households and prepare them. We see this here by Aharon, and we also see this with the death of Moshe and Pinchas later in the Tanach. The Ohr HaChaim states that Hashem also wanted Moshe to say clearly to the people that their desire to associate with the wicked Edom caused the loss of Aharon. The Ohr HaChaim also brings another explanation for mentioning that the B'nei Yisrael were on the border of the land of Edom. He explains that this was to teach that Aharon and Moshe would rise together at the time of the Final Redemption and bring the Jews back into their land. The land of Edom was considered the land of Satan, and Moshe and Aharon together would lead the Jews away from there and into the land of Israel.

HaRav Sorotzkin asks why Aharon wore his special garments in public as the Kohein Gadol did not wear the Golden Garments except when he was serving Hashem in the Temple. HaRav Sorotzkin's second question involved Moshe's instructing Elazar on these special clothes on the mountain and not after they had returned to the Camp. Aharon wore these special clothes now because he was doing an official act, namely, transferring power to his son. It was important that the people saw that he wore the clothes while ascending the mountain, as they were then able to see Elazar descend with those same garments and understood that a transfer of power took place. This act told them that Aharon had passed, and yet the office of the Kohein Gadol would not be vacant. It showed them that there would be continuity for the Priesthood.

It is interesting to note the difference in the reaction of the people to Miriam's death as opposed to Aharon's death. When Miriam passed, the Torah gives us a brief statement, "And Miriam died there, and she was buried there. There is no mention of a thirty-day period of mourning, no mention of tears, and no mention of the entire nation suffering from her death. Only later, when the people realized that the Well that accompanied the B'nei Yisrael in the desert was Hashem's gift to the

people through Miriam because of her righteousness, did the people cry out, not because of her death, but because of their loss of water. Aharon's death created a different response. "The entire assembly saw that Aharon had perished, and they wept for Aharon thirty days, the entire House of Yisrael."

Rashi offers an explanation for the different reaction to Aharon's death. Aharon was known as a man who chased after peace. The Midrash tells us how Aharon would go separately to two people who had an argument, and tell each that the other one wanted to compromise. This encouraged the two parties to meet and discuss the matter and reach an agreement. HaAmeck Davar explains that Aharon was more directly involved with the people when it came to their everyday prayers and needs than Moshe strictly because of his position. HaAmeck Davar compares this situation to Raban Yochanan ben Zakai and Rabi Chaninah ben Dosa. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai was the leader of the army in battle while Rabi Chaninah ben Dosa was like a servant to Hashem. The people were more likely to approach Rabi Chaninah ben Dosa for the needs of the King than they would the head of the War.

Today's pulpit Rabbis are very much like Aharon; they direct our tefillot, our prayers, they counsel their congregations and handle disputes. Aharon built his life on serving Hashem and being true to the Laws of the Torah. Aharon interacted daily with his "flock," seeing to the needs of each individual while serving the community as a whole. The entire nation cried and mourned at Aharon's death. May we all be blessed with Rabbis who develop that same relationship with us through their efforts to serve us and Hashem. ©2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Approaching the land of Edom, Moshe Rabbeinu sends messengers to the region's king, requesting passage through his land. Moshe reminds Esav's descendant of how his ancestor's brother's descendants had sojourned in Mitzrayim for "many days" (hundreds of years), how oppressed they had been and how they "called out to Hashem," Who "heard our voices" and released them from Egyptian servitude.

Moshe reassures Edom that the Jewish desert-wanderers will not encroach on its fields or vineyards, that they will happily purchase food and water (which they didn't even need, as they had the mon and the be'er).

The request is tersely rebuffed. And Moshe and his people are threatened by Edom's king with the words: "I will come against you with the sword" (Bamidbar 20:14-18).

Rashi (based on Midrash Tanchuma, Bishalach) fleshes out the response: "You pride yourselves on the 'voice' your father bequeathed you... I, therefore, will

come out against you with that which my father bequeathed me when he said, 'And by thy sword you shall live'."

These troubled days, under the pressure of contemporary enemies' murderous designs, many Jews are less than fully sensitive to the fact that our "voice" -- our prayers and Torah-study -- are our most powerful means of undermining those who wish us harm. There may be superficial acknowledgment of the value of our "voice," but less than full investment in the truth of that value.

We have witnessed colossal failures of physical means intended to protect Jewish lives. That should make us all the more cognizant of the truth of "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says Hashem" (Zecharia 4:6).

Military might, to be sure, is necessary. But what ultimately empowers and protects both those on the front lines and Jews worldwide are our "voice."

That, and our true, honest and complete conviction that Torah and tefillah are indeed key to effecting victory. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The whole congregation saw that Aharon had died and they cried for Aharon, for thirty days, the whole house of Israel." (Bamidbar 20:29) When Moshe (with torn clothing and ashes) and Elazar (wearing the clothes of the Kohain Gadol) descended the mountain, the people looked for Aharon. They couldn't believe that the man who stood up to the Angel of Death at the plague, could have succumbed to him and died. [They were actually right, because it was Hashem, Himself, who took Aharon's soul with a Divine kiss.]

They were afraid and exposed, because with Aharon's death, the Clouds of Glory which had previously surrounded them and protected the Jews from all manner of threats, were now gone. Just as when Miriam died, the well of water which had come in her merit disappeared, now the clouds which came because of Aharon disappeared. (Moshe would bring them both back in his own merit.)

Chazal tell us that everyone cried for Aharon, including men and women, because he had been the one to restore peace between people and healed relationships. When a couple had a falling out, Aharon would come and speak to each spouse and help them repair the relationship. Because the women were more personally affected, their crying is highlighted by Aharon's death as opposed to by Moshe's later on.

The question is, were they crying for Aharon, or for themselves? Perhaps, they weren't just mourning the loss of the great man, but lamenting what they now realized was possible for a human being to achieve.

When Miriam died, the well disappeared. The people knew she was a holy person, and it made sense

that such a great miracle happened because of her. Though they didn't know it was in her merit while she was alive, when she died, they could understand that such a tzadeikes could be the source of such a bracha which helped everyone.

When Aharon died, and the Clouds of Glory disappeared, they realized that it was in his great merit that they'd been protected all these years, and now they were afraid. Why? Because Aharon wasn't an aloof tzaddik. He wasn't an ascetic hermit who dwelled on a mountain top, but a man of the people who was involved in day-to-day life.

This brought into focus that each of them, man or woman, young or old, could do so much more than they realized. They recognized the potential they had for caring for others and that they had not learned enough from Aharon in his lifetime. They had underestimated him and missed the chance to maximize their own lives.

This was enough to bring everyone to tears.

R' Moshe Feinstein would often be driven home by a student from the Yeshiva. One day, when his regular driver was not available, they looked around for a student with a car. Seeing one, the boy making the arrangements said, "Goldstein!* You have a car, right? The Rosh Yeshiva needs a ride."

Rushing to his car, the young man began to prepare it for his prestigious passenger, hurriedly cranking the sunroof closed as R' Moshe approached.

"No, no, don't close it," said R' Moshe with a smile as he removed his hat and sat down in the car. He raised his face to enjoy the sunshine and said, "It's very nice this way."

The sage, who was constantly involved in Torah study, was not too big or too busy to stop and appreciate the simple pleasure of the warmth of the sun. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

Blessing of the Mon

The Torah states (Breishis 2:3) regarding Shabbos, "Va'yevorech Elokim es yom ha'shvi'i -- Hashem blessed the seventh day", which Chazal (Breishis Rabba 11:2) interpret as referring to the miracle of the mon which fell as a double portion on Friday. When the Jewish People first ate the mon, Moshe was inspired to compose the text of the first bracha of Birchas Hamazon. Notwithstanding the potential of mon to be a source of bracha, in Parshas Chukas the mon is described using derogatory terms by those same people who had experienced the effects of its blessing.

The mon is scorned as something worthless, "Lechem hak'lokeil -- the insignificant bread" (21:5.) Rashi (Parshas Ki Teitzi) comments that the word k'lal -- curse is related to the word kal -- light and meaningless. To curse something, or someone, is to treat it as something that is devoid of any significance. A blessing is the opposite of a curse; it is an expression of

one's appreciation of the importance of that which is being blessed. How could the Jewish People see in the mon something that deserved to be scorned as lechem hak'lokeil? What was the nature of the true blessing of the mon that was not appreciated properly?

Man's toil for bread is the result of the curse inflicted on man and on the ground from which bread comes. After sinning by eating from the etz hada'as all of man's food would have to come through great effort. There was one exception to this need for effort: the bread that fell from heaven was a pure blessing and was not subject to the curse of the ground. The nature of the mon was fundamentally different than bread from the ground; Whereas bread produced in this world is subject to the laws of the physical, natural world, the mon which emanates from the spiritual realm of heaven has no such bounds. Chazal teach us that the mon wasn't digested in a physical manner and as such there were no waste products associated with eating it.

This blessed food could only be appreciated by those who view the world around them as a place of spiritual opportunities. It is truly a pure gift from Heaven untainted by the effects of the sin of eating from the etz hada'as. To refer to the blessed food in a derogatory way, as something deserving to be cursed, reflects a lack of appreciation of the spiritual world and a total focus on the physical one.

How can we relate to the mon which hasn't fallen for over three thousand years? Every Shabbos we relive the miracle of the mon. When we recite our bracha on our two challahs and eat our Shabbos meal, we are not partaking of merely physical food, but rather we are receiving spiritual sustenance. Chazal teach us that we have an additional soul on Shabbos. Rashi explains that it is this soul that enables us to eat larger portions on Shabbos than we are accustomed to during the week. How does this spiritual addition impact on our physical meal? It is only because on Shabbos our meal is not merely partaking of physical delights, but rather experiencing how Hashem blessed the seventh day. Our food is from Heaven and as such is not subject to physical limitations, similar to the mon. We reenact the miracle of the mon at our Shabbos table.

May we learn the lessons of the mon and enable the bracha the mon represented to enter our homes every Shabbos. We can correct the mistake of calling the mon "lechem hak'lokeil" by celebrating Shabbos in a way that is befits of a day about which the Torah says, "Hashem blessed the seventh day". ©2016 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & TorahWeb.org

