**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha*:**

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***Parashat Chukat:***

**The Unreported Miracles**

**The Transition from Dependence to Leadership**

The *Sifrei* on *Parashat Chukat* consists entirely of halakhic *derashot* that derive the laws of the red heifer from the biblical verses, and it is entirely lacking in aggadic *derashot*.

For this reason, this *shiur* will be dedicated to the manner in which the narratives in *Parashat Chukat* are represented in the literature of *Chazal* in general.

The biblical stories that follow the section dealing with the red heifer (*Bamidbar* 19:1-22) are the death of Miriam, Mei Meriva, the appeal to Edom, the death of Aharon, the war waged against the Canaanites, the bronze serpent, several instances of "camping" and "journeying" that are briefly reported (Zered Wadi, the song of the well), the war waged against Sichon, the war waged against Og and camping “in the plains of Moab, beyond the Jordan at Jericho” (ibid. 20:1-22:1).

On the level of the plain sense of the biblical text, we discern a process that the people are undergoing: from dependence on a leader to the beginning of resourcefulness and assumption of responsibility. Let us begin with the first time the protagonist switches from Moshe to Israel and follow the action through the end of the portion:

And Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom…

And the Israelites said to him: We will go up by the highway; and if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, then will I give the price thereof…

And Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border; therefore Israel turned away from him…

And when all the congregation saw that Aharon was dead, they wept for Aharon thirty days, even all the house of Israel.

And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of Atarim; and he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.

And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord, and said: If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy (*vehacharamti*) their cities.

And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed (*vayachareim*) them and their cities; and the name of the place was called Chorma.

And they journeyed from Mount Hor (Hor Ha-har) by the way of the Reed Sea to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became impatient because of the way. 

And the people spoke against God, and against Moshe: Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?…

And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many people of Israel died.

And the people came to Moshe, and said: We have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord, and against you; pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”

So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

And the Israelites journeyed and camped in Ovot… 

Then Israel sang this song: Arise, O well, respond to it…

And Israel sent messengers to Sichon king of the Amorites, saying…

And Israel smote him with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land from the Arnon to the Yabbok, even to the children of Ammon; for the border of the children of Ammon was strong.

And Israel took all these cities; and Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites, in Cheshbon.

Thus Israel dwelt in the land of the Amorites. 

And Moshe sent to spy out Yazer, and they took the towns thereof, and drove out the Amorites that were there. 

And they turned and went up by the way of Bashan; and Og the king of Bashan went out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edre’i.

And the Lord said to Moshe: Fear him not; for I have delivered him into your hand, and all his people…

So they smote him, and his sons, and all his people, until there was none left to him remaining; and they possessed his land.

And the Israelites journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab, beyond the Jordan at Jericho. (*Bamidbar* 20:14-22:1)

Over the course of these verses, there are eight main places where the people of Israel are portrayed as playing an active role:

1. They negotiate with the descendants of Eisav.
2. The congregation weeps over the death of Aharon.

It would appear that this is the first positive independent action on the part of the people.[[1]](#footnote-1) One might argue that they are merely reacting to the loss, and that this is not an independent action, but it is not always the case that a nation properly mourns the loss of its leader. Consider what *Chazal* say about Israel's failure to mourn the deaths of Moshe and Yehoshua, respectively:

“And it was fully forty days… and the days of crying for him passed” (*Bereishit* 50:3-4). Here it says “and the days of crying for him passed,” but below it says: “And the days of crying in mourning for Moshe came to an end.” Moshe had no one to cry for him, so it is written “[they] came to an end;” but Ya’akov had those who would cry for him, so it is written “And the days of crying for him passed.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 100:4)

Rav Yehuda said in Rav's name: He who neglects eulogizing a sage deserves to be buried alive, because it is said (*Yehoshua* 24:30), “And they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnat Serach, which is in the hill country of Efrayim; on the north of Mount Quake” [Har Ga’ash, a proper name meaning volcano in Modern Hebrew]: this teaches that the mountain raged against them to slay them. (BT *Shabbat* 105b)

Proper grieving serves as recognition of a leader's work and value. At the deaths of Miriam and Aharon, at the beginning and end of Chapter 20 respectively, we find that the Torah stresses the impact on “all the congregation.”

And the Israelites, even all the congregation, came to the Wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and she was buried there. (v. 1)

And when all the congregation saw that Aharon was dead, they wept for Aharon thirty days, even all the house of Israel. (v. 29)

It may also be suggested that the very deaths of these leaders, and the mourning periods that follow, contribute to the maturation process, as the people become conscious of their power to contribute to and influence the events which they experience.

1. The war against the Canaanites of the south is presented in the Torah as being waged by the people of Israel on their own, without Moshe, even on the spiritual level: "And Israel vowed a vow to the Lord." God's response, accordingly, relates directly to them: "And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Israel."
2. They recognize and assume responsibility for their sin on the journey around Edom, while turning to Moshe to pray on their behalf.
3. Setting out and camping at Ovot and beyond is an action of the people, without God's intervention or direction.
4. They sing a song over the well at Arnon. The singing of the song expresses the ability to recognize God's benefaction and show gratitude for it, which stems from a balanced, healthy and mature perspective.
5. Messengers are sent to Sichon, the king of the Amorites, by Israel, and not by Moshe, as is the case in the appeal to the descendants of Eisav. Thus, the Torah points to a maturation process of the people over the course of the *parasha* itself.
6. As in the war against the Canaanites, the war against Sichon as well is waged in its entirety by the people of Israel themselves.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This tendency is clearly represented in the symmetry between the beginning of the period of Israel's travels in the wilderness in *Parashat Beshalach* (*Shemot* 15-17), and the end of that period in our *parasha*:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Parashat Beshalach* | *Parashat Chukat* |
| "Then Moshe sang" | "Then Israel sang" |
| Complaint about water ("And the people strove with Moshe"(, followed by a miracle | Complaint about water ("And the people strove with Moshe"), followed by a miracle |
| The people's complaint about bread, and the giving of the manna | The people's complaint about the manna, and their punishment (the serpents) |
| Moshe conducts the war against Amalek | The people of Israel conduct the wars against the Canaanites and Sichon |
| The hands of Moshe | The bronze serpent as an answer to Israel's request that Moshe pray on their behalf |
| Journeying at the word of God | Journeying and camping independently |

The appearance of the well in our *parasha* has metaphorical significance as representing the state of the people of Israel towards the end of the period of their wanderings in the wilderness. The well embodies the connection of the groundwater located beneath the earth's surface, the hidden sources, to the human endeavor of digging and excavating — "The well, which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people excavated" (*Bamidbar* 21:18) — which is necessary for creating the well and for the continuous activity of drawing water from it.

After a long, difficult, wondrous process, the people internalize God's providence and the beliefs connected to it, learn His Torah, and now identify with their role and purpose in the time and place in which they are found. When they stumble (the complaints about the bread and the water), they know the way of repair. Like the well, they are connected to that which springs forth from the depths, and this leads to vitality and renewed growth. The people of Israel during their fortieth year in the wilderness are neither weary nor exhausted. They have grown up, and they have the strength and energy to meet whatever comes their way.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After having sketched the outlines and features of the *parasha* according to the plain meaning of its verses, let us now turn to the Sages' *derashot* concerning the events related in it.

### AHaron's death

Two of the events described in *Parashat Chukat*, the stories of Mei Meriva and the bronze serpent, involve miracles that are explicitly mentioned in the Torah. *Chazal* in their *derashot* add a miraculous dimension to other events described in the *parasha*: at Mount Hor (the site of Aharon's death), the removal of Aharon's priestly garments and the dressing of Elazar in them; the well at Arnon; the war against Sichon and the war against Og.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this *shiur,* we will examine their comments on some of these events.

Rabbi Simai said:

Surely it is stated: "And Moshe stripped Aharon of his garments, and put them upon Elazar his son" (*Bamidbar* 20:28).

This teaches that Moshe stood Aharon on the rock,

and was stripping him of the priestly garments,

until he found that he was wearing garments of the *Shekhina*.

(*Sifrei Zuta* *Devarim* 27:13)

This *derasha* is reported in the name of Rabbi Simai, one of the last Tannaim. It would appear that it is not built on some difficulty in the text, which may be read in accordance with its plain meaning as a description of the passing of the office of the high priesthood from Aharon to Elazar before the former’s death. Rather, it relates to a logistical problem that arises from the situation described in the verse. If Moshe strips Aharon of his priestly garments and immediately puts them on Elazar, then Aharon remains without clothing. Rabbi Simai's answer that "he found that he was wearing garments of the *Shekhina*" resolves this difficulty, and also points to the lofty status of Aharon, who is prepared to move to a higher place.

This *derasha* appears in a more explicit form in the *Sifra*:

"And he put upon him the tunic, and girded him with the girdle" (*Vayikra* 8:7).

This teaches that Moshe was made Aharon's aide, and he would undress and dress him.

And just as he was made his aide during his lifetime, so was he made his aide at the time of his death.

As it is stated: "Take Aharon and Elazar his son… and strip Aharon of his garments" (*Bamidbar* 20:25).

And from where do we know that Moshe did this?

For it is stated: "And Moshe did as the Lord commanded, and they went up into Mount Hor… And Moshe stripped Aharon of his garments" (*Bamidbar* 20:27-28).

How could Moshe have stripped him of his garments in their order,

when the upper garments are always the upper garments and the lower garments are always the lower garments?

Rather, this was a miraculous act performed by Moshe.

And the Holy One, blessed be He, did more for him at the time of his death than during his lifetime.

Moshe stood him on the rock,

and stripped him of his priestly garments,

and he was given garments of the *Shekhina* to wear in their place.

"And he put them on Elazar his son" (*Bamidbar* 20:28).

How could Moshe have dressed Elazar in the garments in their order?

Rather, God showed him greater honor at the time of his death than during his lifetime.

He first dressed him in garments of the *Shekhina* below,

And Moshe then stripped Aharon of his garments in their order and dressed Elazar in the garments in their order.

(*Sifra, Tzav, Mekhilta de-Millu’im* 1, 6)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this source, the miraculous act does not emerge from a difficulty arising from the verse, as in *Sifrei Zuta* on *Devarim*, but rather from the need to preserve the order of undressing and dressing. This is repeated four times over the course of the *derasha*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Torah expands in great detail upon the order in which Aharon is dressed in his garments during the seven days of consecration:

And Moshe brought Aharon and his sons, and washed them with water. And he put upon him the tunic, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the *eifod* upon him, and he girded him with the skillfully woven band of the *eifod*, and bound it to him therewith. And he placed the breastplate upon him; and in the breastplate he put the *Urim* and the *Tumim*. And he set the miter upon his head; and upon the miter, in front, did he set the golden plate, the holy crown; as the Lord commanded Moshe. (*Vayikra* 8:6-9)

It is possible that *Chazal's derasha* here is built on this expansion.[[7]](#footnote-7)

### The well in the wilderness

The Torah tells us more than once how the people of Israel are nourished by the manna over the course of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. In contrast, we hear about water only in the context of grievances and adversities. So too the Book of *Tehillim*, which contains a significant number of verses that address the period of the wilderness, relates to the miracle of bringing forth water out of the rock both in *Parashat Beshalach* and *Parashat Chukat*:

He cleaved rocks (*tzurim*) in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as out of the great deep.

He brought wadis also out of the rock (*mi-sela*), and caused waters to run down like rivers *(ka-neharot).* (*Tehillim* 78:15-16).

Behold, He smote the rock (*tzur*), that waters gushed out,

And wadis overflowed;

Can He give bread also?

Or will He provide flesh for His people? (Ibid. v 20)[[8]](#footnote-8)

He opened the rock (*tzur*), and waters gushed out;

They ran, a river (*nahar*) in the dry places. (*Tehillim* 105:41)

*Chazal*, however, expand upon the Well of Miriam, which accompanies Israel throughout their years in the wilderness. This description appears in many places in the literature of *Chazal*. We will examine the words of the Tannaim in the Tosefta:

I.

Why is it called the "Water Gate"?

For through it they take the flask of water used for the libation at the Feast [of Sukkot].

Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov said:  
In it, water drips.

This teaches that water oozing out and rising, like from the mouth of this flask, will in the future come forth from under the threshold of the Temple.

And so it is stated: "When the man went forth eastward with the line in his hand, he measured a thousand cubits, and he caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the ankles" (*Yechezkel* 47:3).

This teaches that a man can pass through water up to his ankles.

"Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the knees" (*Yechezkel* 47:4).

This teaches that a man can pass through water up to his knees.

II.

Another explanation:

"Waters that were to the knees (*birkayim*)" — those which are blessed (*she-mitbarekhin*) and flow out…

III.

"Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through waters that were to the loins" (ibid.).

This teaches that a man can pass through water up to his loins.

"Afterward he measured a thousand; and it was a wadi that I could not pass through" (*Yechezkel* 47:5).

You might say that one cannot cross it on foot, yet one may be able to cross it by swimming?

Therefore it is stated: "For the waters were risen [above] waters to swim in" (ibid.)

You might say that one cannot cross it by swimming, yet one may be able to cross it in a small boat?

Therefore it is stated: "For the waters were risen [above] waters to swim in," too high for floating.

IV.

You might say that one cannot cross it in a small boat, yet one may be able to cross it in a large boat?

Therefore it is stated: "Wherein shall go no galley with oars" (*Yeshayahu* 33:21).

You might say that one cannot cross it in a large boat, yet one may be able to cross it in a great liburna [galley with a sail]?

Therefore it is stated: "Neither shall gallant ship pass thereby" (ibid.).

And it is stated: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem" (*Zekharya* 14:8).

V.

You might say that they will be mixed with the water of other fountains?…

Where do the waters go?…

VI.

And it is stated: "And it shall come to pass, that fishers shall stand by it" (*Yechezkel* 47:10). "But the miry places thereof, and the marshes thereof" (*Yechezkel* 47:11).

And it is stated: "And by the wadi upon the bank thereof shall grow" (*Yechezkel* 47:12).

This teaches that all the waters of creation will in the future come forth as from the mouth of this flask.

VII.

And so the well that was with Israel in the wilderness,

was like a rock the size of a sieve*,*

and was oozing and rising as from the mouth of this flask,

traveling with them up the mountains and going down with them to the wadis.

Wherever Israel encamped it encamped opposite them in a high place,

opposite the door of the Tent of Meeting.

The princes of Israel came and surrounded it with their staffs, and said over it the song (*Bamidbar* 21:17): "Arise, O well, respond to it,” "Arise, O well, respond to it.”

Then the water bubbled forth and rose on high like a pillar.

And everyone drew out his staff, each man to his tribe, and each man to his family.

As it is stated: "The well, which the princes dug" (*Bamidbar* 21:18).

VIII.

"And from Matana to Nachaliel; and from Nachaliel to Bamot; and from Bamot to the valley" (*Bamidbar* 21:19-20).

It goes around the entire camp of Israel and waters the entire desert.

As it is stated: "Which looks down upon the desert."

And it made mighty wadis,

as it is stated: "And wadis overflowed" (*Tehillim* 78:20).

They sat in skiffs, going one to the other,

as it is stated: "They ran, a river in the dry places" (*Tehillim* 105:41).

IX.

What went up on the right, went up on the right,

and what went up on the left, went up on the left.

So the waters which emptied themselves from it became a great wadi,

pouring themselves into the great sea, and bringing there all the precious things in the world.

As it is stated: "These forty years your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (*Devarim* 2:7).

(Tosefta *Sukka* 3:3-13)

The Tosefta opens with a spectacular account (I-VI) based on Yechezkel's prophecy concerning the water that will issue forth from the threshold of the Temple and cause the desert to bloom:

And he brought me back to the door of the house; and, behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward, for the forefront of the house looked toward the east; and the waters came down from under, from the right side of the house, on the south of the altar. Then brought he me out by the way of the gate northward, and led me round by the way outside to the outer gate, by the way of the gate that looked toward the east; and, behold, there trickled forth waters on the right side.

When the man went forth eastward with the line in his hand, he measured a thousand cubits, and he caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the ankles. Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the knees. Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through waters that were to the loins. Afterward he measured a thousand; and it was a wadi that I could not pass through; for the waters were risen [above] waters to swim in, a wadi that could not be passed through.

And he said to me: Have you seen this, O son of man? Then he led me, and caused me to return to the bank of the wadi. Now when I had been brought back, behold, upon the bank of the wadi were very many trees on the one side and on the other.

Then said he to me: These waters issue forth toward the eastern region, and shall go down into the plain; and when they shall enter into the sea, into the sea of the putrid waters, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, that every living creature wherewith it swarms, wherever the wadis shall come, shall live; and there shall be a very great multitude of fish; for these waters are come there, that all things be healed and may live wherever the wadi comes…. (*Yechezkel* 47:1-10).

In the continuation (VII-IX) the Tosefta draws a connection between this and Israel's situation in the wilderness. In this way, the promises regarding the distant future are verified by way of the recognition that they are merely a repetition of a concrete reality that existed in the past.[[9]](#footnote-9) The period of the wilderness, as well, is painted in vibrant, fresh colors. The camp of Israel in the wilderness turns into a place that is rich in water, where the members of the various tribes conduct their social relations by way of boats, traveling in the canals from place to place, just like in Venice.

The Tosefta's description is well-developed, literary, and rich, and it incorporates for the sake of the *derasha* verses from other places as well. Are we dealing here with an ancient tradition concerning a mobile well that accompanies Israel on their journeys over the course of their forty years in the wilderness, for which the Tannaim find support in the verses, in light of which it is reconstructed? Or are the Tannaim creating here a new story, through a creative process of reading, interpreting and weaving together the wording of the Torah?

Another point worth noting is the fact that the well in the wilderness that is described in the Tosefta is not connected to the figure of Miriam the Prophetess. This connection is found elsewhere in the Tosefta:

As long as Miriam was alive,

the well provided for Israel.

When Miriam died, what is stated?

"Miriam died there, and she was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation" (*Bamidbar* 20:1-2).

For the well disappeared…

Rabbi Yosa be-Rabbi Yehuda said:

When Israel left Egypt, three good leaders were appointed over Israel, namely: Moshe, Aharon and Miriam.

By their merits, [Israel] was given three gifts: the Pillar of Cloud, the manna and the well.

The well by virtue of Miriam, the Pillar of Cloud by virtue of Aharon, the manna by virtue of Moshe.

When Miriam died, the well was cancelled, but it returned by virtue of Moshe and Aharon.

When Aharon died, the Pillar of Cloud was cancelled, but they both returned by virtue of Moshe.

When Moshe died, the three of them were cancelled, and they did not return,

as it is stated: "And I cut off the three shepherds in one month" (*Zekharya* 11:8).[[10]](#footnote-10)

(Tosefta *Sota* 11:1, 8)

We see then that already the Tannaim have a tradition about "the Well of Miriam."[[11]](#footnote-11)

The *derasha* in the Tosefta draws our attention to the magnitude of the miracles and acts of kindness connected to the mobile well that provide the people with water to drink. The question therefore arises: if the miraculous well is mentioned by *Chazal* in one breath together with the manna and the Clouds of Glory, about which the Torah speaks at length in more than one place, why is there no mention of the Well of Miriam in the Torah? Indeed, if it is not mentioned, why do *Chazal* mention it together with the great and explicit miracles of the manna and the Clouds of Glory?

### The war waged against Sichon

The third narrative in *Parashat Chukat* to which *Chazal* add a miraculous dimension is the account of the war waged by Israel against Sichon, king of the Amorites. According to the plain sense of the Torah, Israel wages battle and emerges victorious. *Midrash Tanchuma* describes miraculous intervention on the part of God:

"Then Israel sang this song" (*Bamidbar* 21:17).

This song was uttered at the end of the forty years,

while the well gave them [water] from the beginning of the forty years.

What did he see that it should be written here?

This matter is expounded with the help of what is written before it:

"Therefore it is said in the book of the Wars of the Lord: Vahev in Sufa and the wadis of Arnon" (*Bamidbar* 21:14).

The signs and miracles performed for them in the wadis of Arnon

were like the miracles performed for them at the Reed Sea (Yam Suf).

What were the miracles in the wadis of Arnon?

A man would stand on a mountain on one side, and speak to his fellow on a mountain on the other side, yet he was at a distance of seven miles from him.

And the road descended into the wadi and then ascended.

And Israel's course was to pass through the wadis.

All the nations assembled endless troops.

Some of them sat in middle of the wadi, and the [slope of the] wadi was riddled with caves.

And opposite them was a mountain dotted with crags in the form of breasts.

As it is stated: "And the slope of the wadis" (*Bamidbar* 21:15).

And they said: When Israel will come down into the wadi,

those in the wadi will stand up before them,

and those above from the caves.

When Israel came to that place,

the Holy One, blessed be He, did not require them to go down into the wadi,

but rather He signaled to the mountains,

and the [craggy] breasts of the one mountain went into the caves [of the other] and they all died…

"Mount Hor (*Hor Ha-har*)" (*Bamidbar* 20:22).

What is *Hor Ha-har*? A mountain on top of a mountain, like a small apple on top of a large apple.

Even though the cloud that went before them lowered that which was high and raised that which was low,

the Holy One, blessed be He, left the mountain as an example,

that they should know the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for them,

that He did not leave a mountain in the wilderness, so that they not tire themselves on it.

What is more, even though the cloud made all of the wilderness into a plain, it left a high place for the *Mishkan,* that it should camp there.

And it left three mountains:

Mount Sinai for the *Shekhina*, Mount Nevo for Moshe's burial, and Mount Hor for Aharon's burial.

(*Tanchuma* [Buber] *Chukat* 37)

### conclusion

From a review of the *derashot* of *Chazal* on the narratives of *Parashat Chukat*, it would appear that at all levels of rabbinic literature — Tannaim, Amoraim, and late Midrash — we find the phenomenon of adding to and expanding upon the miraculous dimension over and beyond what is reported in the biblical text.

Why does the Torah not tell us about these miracles? If the Torah does not report them, why would *Chazal* do so? *Chazal*'s specifying the miracles performed in the wilderness serves a clear educational goal, emphasizing the magnitude of God's love for Israel, the endless acts of lovingkindness that He performs for the Jewish people from the time that it first emerges as a nation and until today, and the belief in and recognition of Divine providence.

Why then are these miracles not written explicitly?

The *derashot* that relate to the miracles about the narratives in *Parashat Chukat* are built on the exposition of obscure words appearing in them, revealing the stories behind them. It seems that the Torah wants us to know that beyond those events spelled out at length in the Book of *Bamidbar*, there are also many more miracles. As the *derasha* in the *Tanchuma* cited above regarding Mount Hor puts it: "The Holy One, blessed be He, left the mountain as an example, that they should know the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for them." If so, the *derashot* of *Chazal* continue the tendency delineated in the style of the Torah, revealing the full story behind the allusions found in the biblical text.

The characterization of the *derashot* of *Chazal* on the narratives in *Parashat Chukat* as adding a miraculous dimension to the Torah's final stories about the era of the wilderness jibes with the parallel conclusion that emerges from other *shiurim* in this series, over the course of our studies of *Parashiyot* *Teruma*, *Tzav* and *Beha'alotekha*.[[12]](#footnote-12) All of the appearances of this phenomenon are connected to an exceptional environment manifesting the *Shekhina*: in the Temple, in the *Mishkan*, and in Israel's journeys in the wilderness. In all of them, the phenomenon is found, across the various strata of rabbinic literature. As a result, it may be said that we have had the good fortune of arriving at one of the conceptual foundations of the spiritual world of *Chazal.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Over the courses of the Book of *Bamidbar*, initiatives on the part of certain individuals are noted: the impure people who want to bring the paschal offering; Yehoshua and Kalev in the Sin of the Spies, Pinchas; the daughters of Tzelofchad. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In contrast, the Torah emphasizes that the struggle with King Og of the Bashan requires that Moshe play an active role. *Chazal* see in this struggle the defeat of primordial forces that operate in the world, which Moshe neutralizes before Israel enters the Promised Land. See: *Sifrei, Devarim* 3; BT *Berakhot* 54b; *Devarim Rabba* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wells in the Torah mark the beginnings of periods of taking root — the creation of deep connections with people or places, e.g. Yitzchak's settlement in the land of the Pelishtim (*Bereishit* 26); finding a wife at a well (Rivka, Ya’akov and Rachel, Moshe and Tzippora). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Only two other matters — the appeal to Edom and the war waged against the Canaanites who dwell in the south — are not explained as miraculous events. It should be noted that the vow and the ban pronounced in the war against the Canaanites, like the discourse between the people and God, together indicate elevated spiritual tension, and not just combat in the natural manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Compare *Sifrei, Ha'azinu* 339; *Midrash Tannaim, Devarim* 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The commentators to the *Sifra* have difficulty understanding the meaning of this *derasha*. See the commentaries of the Ra’avad and Korban Aharon. This *derasha* of the Tannaim appears to have a deep meaning, which will not be explained here. The concept of "garments of the *Shekhina*" is not found elsewhere in rabbinic literature. In the *Sifra,* the miraculous elements are attributed not to God, but to Moshe. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The *Sifra* expounds the verses in *Vayikra*, which strengthens this connection. This *derasha* does not appear in the *Sifrei* on the Book of *Bamidbar*. In the *Sifrei Zuta* on *Bamidbar* we find a different *derasha* that relates to death by way of a Divine kiss. It should further be noted that in JT *Yoma*, Chapter 1, there is a lengthy discussion of Aharon's death, but this tradition does not appear there. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It may be suggested that *tzur* refers to the miracle in *Parashat Beshalach*, whereas *sela* relates to the miracle in *Parashat Chukat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It should be noted that in Yechezkel's Temple as well there are elements of the generation of the wilderness, e.g.: the figure of the *nasi* and the seven days of consecration. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The immediate and broader context of the citation from the prophecy of *Zekharya* and the striking incongruity with the characters of the three exemplary leaders of the nation require clarification. It is possible that the *derasha* is making use of the term "three shepherds," without considering the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Compare BT *Bava Metzia* 86b, where the School of Rabbi Yishmael connects the well to Avraham's hospitality. Amoraim of Eretz Israel connect the Well of Miriam to the Kinneret; see JT *Ketubot* 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See those *shiurim* on the VBM website and the sources discussed in each *shiur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)