**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Chukat begins by introducing the *mitzva* of *para aduma* – the red heifer which was burned into ash, which was then mixed with water to form the *mei chatat*, the special purifying waters. These waters are needed to restore a person or article’s status of impurity after coming in contact with a human corpse. The great irony of the *mei chatat*, as already noted by *Chazal*, is that while it had the effect of bringing purity to those who had become impure, it brought impurity to those who were pure. Towards the end of this section in Parashat Chukat, the Torah establishes that the one who sprinkles the *mei chatat* to purify somebody, or who simply touches the *mei chatat*, becomes impure and requires immersion (19:21).

One the approaches that have been taken to explain this anomaly is that the ashes of the red heifer symbolize death. The red heifer had to be an adult cow, perfectly red, and entirely free of physical defects. It was a perfect creature, that was burned and reduced to ash. It is thus symbolic of the incomprehensible tragedy of death – a strong, accomplished, vital and impressive human being becomes reduced to nothingness. The ashes of the *para aduma* have two opposite effects – they can bring both purity and impurity – to instruct that an encounter with death, and contemplating death, can have two opposite effects on a person. One possibility is that it can cause “impurity”; it can lead a person to depression and cynicism, to question the value of life insofar as it necessarily results in death, and to view himself as nothing more than a heap of ashes even during his years of vitality and potential achievement. This “impurity” can devastatingly stifle a person and hold him back from pursuing meaningful goals and from productivity. On the other hand, encountering or contemplating death can bring “purity”; it can infuse a person with a mature sense of responsibility and mission. Reminding ourselves of our mortality, of our limited time and opportunities, can spur us to work harder and to live more conscientiously. As Rabbi Eliezer (Shabbat 153a) famously admonished, we must repent on our final day of life – and since we do not know when that will be, we must repent each day. Being aware of the prospect of the death can motivate us to accomplish more and to treat each day as though it were it last, while ignoring our mortality can lead to complacency and indifference.

The message of the *para aduma*, then, which is subtly conveyed to the individual who has encountered death, is that this encounter can serve as either a source of “purity” or “impurity,” as an impetus for growth and achievement, or as a cause of depression and despair. And it is up to the individual to decide which direction to follow. (See Rav Reuven Bulka’s [“Parah Adumah – Pardoxical But True,”](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=12876&st=&pgnum=103) where he explains along similar lines.)

To some extent, this is true of all forms of adversity. Difficulties and hardship can cause us despair, but can also spur growth and maturation. They can cause us to view the world with harsh negativity, or inspire us to work towards appreciating our blessings and utilizing them to the very best of our ability. The paradox of the *para aduma* thus perhaps challenges us to take all of life’s difficult situations and turn them into a source of ‘purity,” as opportunities for growth and for renewing our commitment to live at the highest standards we can.

Sunday

Parashat Chukat tells the famous story of *Mei Meriva*, when *Benei Yisrael* complained about the lack of water in Kadesh, and God instructed Moshe to produce water from a stone.

The story of *Mei Meriva* begins by informing us of the death of Miriam, Moshe’s sister (20:1), and the very next verse tells that the nation found itself without water. To explain the connection between the two episodes, the *Keli Yakar* suggests, boldly, that *Benei Yisrael* were punished for failing to accord Miriam proper honor upon her death. She was buried without much attention and without widespread eulogies, which would have been befitting for a woman of her stature, and so God punished *Benei Yisrael* by withholding water from them.

This theory gives rise to the question of why, in fact, *Benei Yisrael* failed to properly mourn for and eulogize Miriam. What might be the cause of this slight to her honor?

It would seem natural to associate the *Keli Yakar*’s theory with the last time when Miriam is mentioned in the Torah – the story of her disparaging remarks about Moshe, for which she was punished with *tzara’at* (chapter 12). Although that episode occurred many years earlier, [the Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36053&st=&pgnum=308) suggested that the people still resented Miriam’s disrespect for their devoted leader and teacher, and they therefore could not bring themselves to give her the honor she deserved after her death.

As the Rebbe proceeded to note, this explanation adds a striking dimension to the ensuing story of *Mei Meriva*. Soon after Miriam’s death, the people faced a crisis and cast the blame on Moshe. They angrily berated Moshe for bringing them out of Egypt into the wilderness – even though they had been cared for with manna and water for nearly forty years. The venom spewed towards Moshe at that time far surpassed Miriam’s disparaging remarks about Moshe. And thus right after the people showed their disdain for Miriam on account of her insulting comments spoken about Moshe decades earlier, they turned around and hurled far worse insults at Moshe. The Klausenberger Rebbe suggested that it was this hypocrisy that angered Moshe, prompting him to deridingly call the people “*morim*” (20:10), which Rashi understood to mean “fools.”

Significantly, we might add, God did not display any anger towards the people at *Mei Meriva*. To the contrary, His anger was directed at Moshe and Aharon, who themselves reacted angrily to the people’s complaints. Although the people acted unreasonably and hypocritically, nevertheless, Moshe and Aharon were expected to respond with patience and empathy, recognizing that the people’s outburst was brought on by a dire crisis. They may, indeed, have acted like “*morim*,” like hypocritical fools, but the appropriate response from the leadership was sensitivity and understanding. People facing hardship often act irrationally, and we must respond with patience and tolerance, rather than exacerbating their pain with harsh criticism.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Chukat commands that the *para aduma* (red heifer) should be taken “outside the camp” and burned (19:3). Its ashes were then mixed with water, and this water was used to purify those who had become impure through contact with a human corpse. The Mishna in Masekhet Para (3:6) establishes that in the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the *para aduma* was burnt east of Jerusalem, on *Har Ha-mishcha*, which is commonly identified as *Har Ha-zeitim* – the Mount of Olives.

We might perhaps view this association between the *para aduma* and the Mount of Olives in light of the early historical importance of this sight, as mentioned by the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 33:9). The Torah tells in Sefer Bereishit (8:11) that following the flood, the world remained covered by water for many months, and it was only when Noach sent out a dove from the ark, and the dove returned with an olive leaf, that Noach determined that the waters had subsided and life on earth was again viable. The Midrash cites the view of Rabbi Levi that this leaf was taken from the Mount of Olives. As *Eretz Yisrael* was not flooded during the deluge that covered the earth in Noach’s time, its vegetation remained intact, and the dove took an olive branch from the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, as a sign of the world’s recovery after the Flood.

Symbolically, then, the Mount of Olives represents the hope of rebirth and renewal after even the greatest calamity. A leaf from this mountain heralded the end of the period of devastation, and the potential for reconstruction. After the entire earth had effectively “died,” the leaf from the Mount of Olives was the harbinger of hope, a kernel of life from which the world could be rebuilt.

This perhaps explains the connection between the *mei chatat*, the purifying waters made from the ashes of the *para aduma*, and the Mount of Olives. After encountering death, a person is prone to despair and negativity. The sight of a human body, that not too long ago was capable of remarkable achievements, lying lifeless, can cause depression and hopelessness. The ashes used to “cleanse” such a person of his negativity originate, like the dove’s leaf, from the Mount of Olives. He is reminded of the message of this leaf, that even in the world’s darkest and dreariest moment, there remained an oasis of hope from which the process of reconstruction began. Even when the entire earth “died,” there was still one small pocket of life that enabled recovery. And thus after an encounter with death, with the harsh reminder of human mortality, a person is reminded of the Mount of Olives, the place which heralded the world’s rehabilitation after the devastation of the flood. He is shown that in his state of personal devastation and emotional turmoil, there is an “olive leaf” of hope and promise, which can and must inspire him to move onward with confidence and faith.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Chukat the story of *Mei Meriva*, when God instructed Moshe to produce water for *Benei Yisrael* from a stone in the desert of Tzin. Moshe angrily shouted at *Benei Yisrael* for their fierce complaints and accusations against him when they found themselves without water, and he struck the rock. God responded by decreeing that Moshe would die in the wilderness and not lead the nation into *Eretz Yisrael*.

It has been suggested that this incident be understood off the backdrop of a famous story told by the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 2:2) about Moshe as he shepherded his father-in-law’s flocks. The Midrash relates:

When Moshe Rabbenu *a”h* was a shepherd for Yitro’s sheep in the wilderness, a kid escaped from him, and he ran after it until it reached a shady place. The kid chanced upon a pool of water, and it stood to drink. When Moshe came near it, he said, “I did not know that you were running because you were thirsty, you were weary.” He placed it on his shoulders and walked.

The Almighty said: “You have compassion to lead human sheep…”

It was because of the compassion Moshe showed for this sheep that he was assigned the position of leader of *Benei Yisrael*.

*Chazal* here depict the great challenge and responsibility of leadership in an especially poignant and compelling way. It occasionally happens that a “sheep” will “escape” far from the “flock,” straying well beyond the path the shepherd has charted for them for their benefit. The patient “shepherd” does not ignore, reject or resent the runaway “sheep.” Instead, he follows him, wherever he is, even if the “sheep” has strayed far off the beaten track. And he understands that the “sheep” has “fled” because he is “thirsty” and “weary,” because he felt dissatisfied with the path he was taken on; he had a thirst that needed to be quenched. The devoted “shepherd” does not resent or ignore the criticism, but responds with empathy and concern. He lovingly takes the “sheep” on his “shoulders,” selflessly and compassionately caring for him and doing what he can to lift his spirits and provide him with the “water” for which he so desperately yearns.

With this background, we can perhaps understand God’s stern reaction to Moshe’s conduct at *Mei Meriva*. This time, when his flock was thirsty, and when they steered from the course, complaining bitterly about having been taken along this route from Egypt into the wilderness, Moshe angrily berated them. This time, he did not take note of their thirst, of their fears, of their inner turmoil, and scolded them for their defiance. And thus God declared that he would not continue leading the people along the final leg of their journey.

The contrast between these two stories teaches of the need to acknowledge the “thirst” and “fatigue” of those who stray from the course they ought to be following. The appropriate response is not anger or rejection, but rather compassion and love, attempting to understand and genuinely empathize with their plight, so we can then lift them on our shoulders and care for them to the very best of our ability.

(Based on Rav Shmuel Yaakov Rubenstein’s [*She’eirit Menachem*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20380&st=&pgnum=236&hilite=))

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Chukat of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints as they impatiently traveled to circumvent the kingdom of Edom, forced to take a circuitous route after the king of Edom refused to allow them passage through his territory. They told Moshe that he should not have taken them from Egypt to bring them to the desert, and they expressed their dissatisfaction with the manna, derisively calling it “*lechem ha-kelokel*” (“this miserable bread” – 21:5). God punished the people by unleashing poisonous snakes that swarmed through the camp and killed large numbers of people.

Rav Aharon Levine (the “Reisha Rav”), in his [*Ha-derash Ve-ha’iyun*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20949&st=&pgnum=73&hilite=), suggests a creative approach to explain the people’s complaints about the manna, an approach which he acknowledges is meant “*be-derekh derash*” (a far-fetched reading that does not reflect the plain meaning of the text). He cites a passage from the *Benei Yissaskhar* (*Ma’amar Ha-Shabbatot* 43) in which the author (Rav Tzvi Elimelekh Shapiro of Dinov) states that *Benei Yisrael* did not recite a *berakha* before partaking of the manna each day. Rav Levine explained this comment by noting the Gemara’s formulation in Masekhet Berakhot (35) establishing the obligation to recite a *berakha* before eating: “It is forbidden for a person to derive benefit **from this world**before reciting a *berakha*.” The obligation is to recite a *berakha* before deriving benefit from our world, and it thus did not apply to the manna, which originated from a different world, from the heavenly domain. And it was for this reason that *Benei Yisrael* resented the manna. The Gemara there in Berakhot explains that we must recite a *berakha* before eating, because it is only after reciting a *berakha* that the food becomes ours. Until then, it – like the rest of the world – is the exclusive property of the Almighty. Only once we recite a *berakha* do we “acquire” the food as our own such that we are “legally” entitled to enjoy it. The fact that *Benei Yisrael* did not recite a *berakha* over the manna demonstrated that it was not theirs, that throughout this period, they ate God’s food. They ate as guests, each and every day. They never experienced the satisfaction of ownership and self-sufficiency, and this is what they resented.

Like many Midrashic readings of verses, this creative “*derash*” in fact dovetails with the true meaning of the text. *Benei Yisrael* had anticipated approaching the border and preparing for their long-awaited entry into the land, but their hopes were dashed by Edom’s stubborn refusal to grant them passage. But they were most troubled not by the conditions in the wilderness per se, but rather by their perpetual state of dependency. They longed to till their own land, to bake their own bread. They wanted to eat food from the earth, not food from the heavens. Their desire was to recite *berakhot* – to take ownership, so-to-speak, of this world, even while acknowledging that everything is given to us from God. But while this desire, in and of itself, is legitimate, the time had not yet arrived for them to prepare their own bread. As Moshe tells the people at length in the Sefer Devarim (beginning of Parashat Eikev), the purpose of the desert experience was to inculcate within *Benei Yisrael* absolute faith in the Almighty and His exclusive ability to provide them with their needs. They needed to live with complete dependence on His grace and on His supernatural assistance so that once they entered the land, tilled the soil, and enjoyed the fruits of their labor, they would recognize that their material blessings come from God alone, notwithstanding their efforts and ingenuity. And thus the people’s protests were inappropriate, as God had determined that they were not yet spiritually prepared to begin the next stage of their history as a nation building an agricultural society in their homeland. They still needed to eat heavenly bread, to live a miraculous existence in which they took no part in securing their sustenance, until the time when they would be ready to build their own country without losing sight of the hand of Providence that brought success to their endeavors.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Chukat “*shirat ha-be’er*” – the song sung by Moshe and *Benei Yisrael* in praise of the great miracle of the well that accompanied the nation in their travels through the desert. This song concludes with the phrase, “*ve-nishkafa al penei ha-yeshimon*,” which Rashi (in his second interpretation) explains, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, to mean that the well is still visible in the Kinneret (“the Sea of Tiberias”). Rashi here alludes to the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Shabbat (38a), “One who wishes to see Miriam’s well should climb to the peak of the Carmel and gaze, and he will see something resembling a sieve in the sea – this is Miriam’s well.” The well, which is traditionally attributed to Miriam, in whose merit this forty-year miracle occurred, can be seen by climbing to the peaks of the Carmel hills and looking down into the sea.

There is considerable discussion among the commentators regarding the geographic aspects of the Gemara’s comment. If the well is supposed to be visible in the Kinneret, on the eastern edge of *Eretz Yisrael*,it is difficult to understand why the Gemara advises one to climb to the top of the Carmel, which overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. Leaving aside this question, we will focus on the symbolic message which the Gemara seeks to convey. What does the Gemara mean by informing us that the well is still visible? And why does it resemble a sieve? Moreover, why must one climb a tall mountain to view it?

Elsewhere (Sota 12a), the Gemara tells the famous story of Miriam, as a young child, persuading her father to remarry her mother. After Pharaoh enacted his decree that newborn Israelite boys should be killed, Miriam’s father divorced his wife, figuring it was best not to bring more children into the world. Miriam, however, succeeded in changing his mind, noting that by marrying, he at very least could beget girls, even if the boys are killed. Miriam emerges from this story as a young woman filled with optimism and positivity, who is able to find a kernel of hope even amid the direst conditions. This is consistent with the Torah’s account of Miriam standing on the riverbank after Moshe, her three-month-old brother, was placed in a basket in the river to escape the Egyptian authorities. Even when Moshe was abandoned and appeared to have no hope for survival, Miriam stood alongside him so she could somehow assist him, which she eventually did, after the Egyptian princess discovered the infant.

For good reason, then, *Chazal* associate the miraculous well with Miriam. Her outstanding quality was her ability to produce water in the desert, to maintain hope and optimism even when it seems impossible to find. Miriam could extract hope from a desperate situation, as though extracting water from a rock in an arid desert.

On this basis, we can perhaps understand the Gemara’s advice for viewing Miriam’s well. The Gemara is teaching us how to find water in a desert, how to find hope in dire situations. It instructs that Miriam’s well resembles a sieve, which has the ability to extract small particles that would otherwise be overwhelmed in a mixture. Hope and optimism require a process of “sifting,” searching through the unfortunate circumstances for glimmers of hope and promise, for the “particles” of goodness and blessing that are difficult to identify. Like a small handful of diamonds lost in a bucket of sand, but can be found and retrieved through sifting, particles of hope can be discovered even in the darkest of times.

Secondly, the Gemara teaches us that optimism requires “climbing.” It does not come easily or naturally. Our natural tendency is to wallow in self-pity and despair, to see only the darkness without discerning the sparks of light. If we want to experience the joy and comfort of positivity, we need to “climb” and work to find the jewels of goodness concealed by many layers of anguish.

The image of climbing to the mountaintop also reminds us that optimism requires seeing the broader picture, assessing life and the world from a bird’s eye view. Miriam’s well can only be seen from afar, from a mountaintop, when we look with a broad perspective. Problems and misfortunes which seem devastating in the here and now appear far less significant when viewed in relation to our lives in general.

Like Miriam, we are all capable of finding the kernels of hope and remaining joyful and positive even in difficult times. By working to see the whole picture, and searching for the hidden particles of blessing and good fortune, we can bring the optimism and positivity of Miriam into our lives, regardless of the difficult challenges we face.

Friday

The story of *Mei Meriva*, which we read in Parashat Chukat (20:2-13), and which tells of how Moshe was punished after striking a rock to produce water for the people, bears close resemblance to a story told of Moshe producing water earlier, in Sefer Shemot (17:1-7). There, too, the people speak angrily to Moshe in response to the absence of water, and God instructs him to produce water from a rock, only in that instance, he was commanded to strike the rock, rather than speak to it. This similarity led some commentators, such as Rabbenu Yosef Bekhor Shor (one of the Tosafists), to conclude that the two accounts actually refer to the same incident. Rabbenu Yosef Bekhor Shor interpreted the verses here in Parashat Chukat in such a way that even here, Moshe was commanded to strike the rock, and thus the two accounts can describe the same event as the one described in Sefer Shemot.

The conventional understanding, however, is that despite the strong resemblances, these were, in truth, two separate events, the first of which occurred within the first several months after the Exodus, and the second of which took place in *Benei Yisrael*’s final year in the wilderness.

The question, then, becomes, if these are two separate events, then given that the circumstances in both instances were nearly identical, why did God instruct Moshe to strike the rock the first time, and to speak to the rock the second time?

*Yalkut Shimoni* (Chukat, 763) offers what appears to be a symbolic explanation:

“You shall speak to the rock” – it does not say, “You shall strike.” He [God] said to him [Moshe]: When a youngster is small, his teacher strikes him and teaches him. Once he grows older, he chastises him through speech. Similarly, the Almighty said to Moshe: When this rock was young, you struck it… But now, “You shall speak to the rock.”

According to *Yalkut Shimoni*, a different course of action was required at *Mei Meriva* because many years had passed, and the new stage in *Benei Yisrael*’s development necessitated a new approach. A harsh response – symbolized by striking the rock – may have been appropriate in the nation’s “younger” years, in the first months after the Exodus, but now that the nation had matured over the course of the years of desert travel, the time had come to “speak” and communicate verbally.

*Yalkut Shimoni*’s comments give rise to several questions, such as what kind of “harshness” was used in dealing with *Benei Yisrael* in Sefer Shemot, and why exactly the new reality warranted a softer approach. Regardless, it emerges from the Midrash that Moshe was punished because he reacted harshly when the situation called for a gentler response. The difference between striking the rock and speaking to it, symbolically, is the difference between angrily shouting and scolding, and speaking calmly and softly. Moshe’s resorting to the former approach at a time when the latter was warranted rendered him unfit to continue leading the people as they proceeded to the next leg in their historic journey, into *Eretz Yisrael*.

One of the difficult challenges of education is knowing which approach to use when, determining when one needs to “strike the rock,” to react sternly, and when a situation requires “speaking” with patience and sensitivity. While the answer to this question in some situations is far from clear, *Yalkut Shimoni*’s comments serve as a warning of the potential dangers of resorting to anger at times when it is inappropriate. Recognizing the severity of unwarranted anger and sternness, we must try to the best of our ability to determine the most effective and appropriate course of action under all circumstances, and remember that, like Moshe at *Mei Meriva*, the fact that we hold the “staff” which can be used to “strike” does not necessarily mean that this is the appropriate course of action.

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