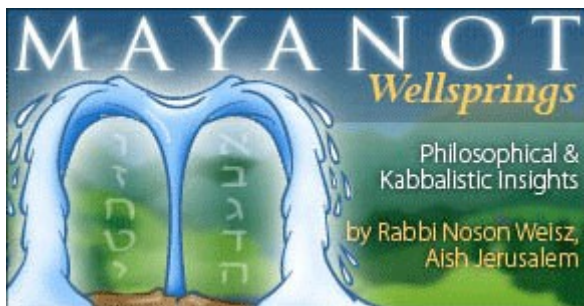


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**Give Me Liberty; Give Me Death**

The Book of Bamidbar up to our Parsha is a record of the doings of the Exodus generation marooned in the desert in punishment for the commitment of the sin of the spies. From the beginning of Parshat Chukat, the Book turns into a description of the conquest of Trans-Jordan and records the doings of the next generation, known as the 'Baei Aretz', the generation that 'comes to Israel.' Parshat Chukat marks the transition of the generations.

*"The children of Israel, the whole assembly, arrived in the wilderness of Zin in the first month and the people settled in Kadesh." (Numbers 20:1-2)*

Rashi comments that the emphatic phrase, "the whole assembly," is inserted into the

text to let us know that by the time of this encampment all those that had been sentenced to die in the desert had duly passed away, and all those who encamped in the wilderness of Zin belonged to the succeeding generation and would all live to witness the entry into Israel.

As part of the transition of the generations, the deaths of the great leaders of the Exodus generation, Miriam and Aaron - as well as the irreversible verdict that condemns Moses to die on the wrong side of the Jordan and is the harbinger of his imminent demise - all appear in our Parsha. The theme of death positively dominates the first part of Chukat.

**MISPLACED LAWS**

Perhaps because of the dominance of this theme, it is in this week's Parsha that we are formally given the laws of the "red heifer" - the mandatory purification process from the spiritual contamination caused by the contact with death that is imposed on every Jew. Contact with death renders a Jewish individual *tamey*, or "ritually impure."

These laws are clearly out of place. The laws of the red heifer had been issued prior to the inauguration of the Tabernacle in the second year of the Exodus (Talmud, Gittin 60b). A *tamey* person is not allowed to enter the premises; the only way to get rid of the *tumah* is by being sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer as described in our Parsha, which is a record of the events that transpired in the fortieth year of the Exodus. By this point in time the law of the red heifer had been in force for 38 years.

The reason for their insertion at this particular juncture is due to the fact that as these laws describe the effects of the encounter with death upon the living, they rightfully belong in the Parsha that is all about death.

*Tamey* and *tahor* - the states of "spiritual impurity" and "spiritual purity" - are both Torah phenomena. They do not adhere to the world of nature. The association between the *tamey* force and death only affects the people who voluntarily assumed an added spiritual dimension with the acceptance of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Non-Jews do not become *tamey* when they encounter death and have no need of the services of the 'red heifer.'

Jews not only live differently than other human beings, they die differently as well; for them death is associated with *tamey*.

### ORIGINS OF THE DEATH FORCE

The process has its origins way back in the Garden of Eden and we must return there to get a glimpse into its workings.

*"But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, you must not eat thereof; for on the day you eat of it you shall surely die."* (Genesis 2:17)

Nachmanides (ibid.) comments: This passage implies that death is not a natural phenomenon but is the consequence of sin; this implication does not jibe with the facts according to the Torah's own presentation of them. According to the Torah's own description, man was formed in a fashion that rendered death an inevitable natural

phenomenon:

*"By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread until you return to the ground from which you were taken: for you are dust and to dust shall you return."* (Genesis 3:19)

How can the Torah state that in the absence of sin there would have been no death?

He explains: It was the body that was taken from the dust of the earth, not the soul. The soul comes from God (see Genesis 2:7) and is inherently eternal. While the soul is in the body it has the capacity to sustain man, and the separation between body and soul that is the essence of death is not inevitable. Theoretically the body and the soul could remain together as an integral unit through eternity. Creation is not a natural phenomenon but an act of God's will; the disintegration of created items into their separate components is never inevitable. If God chooses, he can maintain the integrity of the combination forever.

We should interpret God's injunction to Adam as a warning that it is not His will to keep the body and soul together eternally if he violates the commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In other words, when man sinned God allowed him to revert to a natural state in which death was indeed inevitable.

But this still leaves matters unclear; Nachmanides seems to say that the power to grant the body eternal life is inherent in

the soul and does not require further positive input. Why would man die as a result of committing a sin if he possesses a soul that is capable of sustaining his body throughout eternity? After all, God never threatened to kill man if he sinned. He informed him that death was an inevitable consequence of sin. But how would this consequence manifest itself in light of the fact that man has an eternal soul?

### **THE BODY-SOUL CONNECTION**

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto unravels the mystery in his work "Derech Hashem." (See Part 1, Chapter 3.) He compares the union of the body and the soul to a shotgun marriage. The soul is permeable to Divine light and desires nothing more than to bask in the great spiritual joy it experiences when it connects to the Divine light that emanates from God's essence. No other possible experience of any sort could match the intense joy that can be experienced by connecting to the Divine Presence; consequently the soul finds attachment to material things repulsive. Such attachments weaken its ability to connect with the Divinity and cause it pain and frustration.

The body as it is originally formed is entirely impermeable to Divine light and does not experience any sensation at all when it comes into contact with it. Unlike the soul, which rejects any sort of union with the body, the body is not repulsed by the soul or by the Divine light to which it is attached; it is merely totally insensitive. The body is only interested in the material, because it is only the material world and the physical pleasure and pain that it provides that have

the capacity to stimulate it. It is pursuing stimulation, not physicality as such.

The purpose of the arranged marriage between these opposites is two-fold. First of all, the inner struggle that results from being pulled in opposite directions transforms the human consciousness into a battleground and compels human beings to exercise their free will powers through every waking moment. But this marriage of opposites also has enormous positive potential. It is the body-soul bond that enables us to experience our ultimate reward in the World to Come.

### **SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

For the soul was created with the capacity to transform the body. Although the body in its original state is opaque to the Divine Light and serves as an obstacle to connecting with God's Presence that must be overcome by the soul, the soul can overpower the body's insensitivity. It can make the body permeable to the light of spirituality as well.

Although the body can never attain the state of purity that would allow it to connect directly with the Divinity, in its altered, spiritually transparent state, the body also feels the stimulation of the spiritual light that emanates from God and pours into it through the medium of the soul to which it is connected. The body is therefore also open to the experience of spiritual Joy. Unlike the antipathy of the soul towards the material, the body has no inherent opposition to spirituality. It is merely insensitive to spiritual feeling and therefore naturally indifferent. When it becomes

sensitized to spiritual stimulation it loses its preference the material entirely.

The human being, who is a combination of a soul in such a sensitized body, is capable of cleaving to God in his entirety. No longer does the body attempt to detach the soul from its union with the Divine in its attempt to find stimulating experiences. Living with God in this state of cleavage is the eternal bliss that is called *Olam Haba*, or the World-to-Come. Inherently then, there is no need to separate the body from the soul, which is the state known as death. When Adam was created there was a better option than death available. He could have empowered his soul to transform his body and entered the state of eternal bliss we call the World to Come directly, without the need to experience death at all.

### REVISED PROCESS

The Ramchal goes on to explain that when Adam sinned, this process of the transformation of the body by the soul had to be somewhat revised.

Due to the contamination caused by sin, the soul could no longer entirely transform the body without Divine assistance. Allowing it to accomplish the incomplete transformation of which it was still capable would doom man to exist forever in a state of partial impurity, never fully able to enjoy his connection to God. God considered it preferable to deprive the soul of the power to purify and transform the body during a person's lifetime altogether.

Instead, the soul is forced to separate from the body in death, and is sent to a place we

refer to as Gan Eden while the body disintegrates back to its basic elements to be purified by God. At the end of days, God will recreate the body in its pristine pre-sin state and only then will the soul be allowed to transform it and make it transparent to the light of holiness. Once the contamination of sin is entirely removed, the soul will be able to do the full transformation job once again. Meanwhile the soul waits in Gan Eden, which is a spiritual world. In the World to Come we will be reunited with our bodies and enjoy eternal bliss as corporate beings once again.

This means that just as we are uniquely individual and different from one another today, we will retain this individuality in the World to Come as well. The extent and quality of the transformation that each Soul will affect on the purified body to which it is attached will depend on the spiritual power it has amassed during its working life. This power is drawn from the observance of the Torah and its commandments and its intensity corresponds to each person's level of observance during the period he was possessed of free will, his present lifetime on earth.

To sum up: as man was originally created, the transformation of the body was intended to be a dynamic ongoing process. Following Adam's sin, God was no longer willing to allow the soul to affect the transformation of the body as an ongoing process, which would have allowed the performance of every Mitzvah to be reflected simultaneously in the appropriate transformation of the body. As a result the



body remains opaque to the divine light during our earthly life no matter how many Mitzvot we may observe and even the most deserving of men is unable to step directly into eternal life. We are all doomed to suffer the disintegration of death.

### THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

Let us consider the implications of all this. The body was created so that it is opaque to the Divine light by nature. But the same nature that lends the body its opacity also provided the soul with the natural ability to penetrate this opacity and make the body permeable to the Divine light. Its present inability to affect this transformation amounts to forcible restraint of a power that the soul inherently possesses. You can only restrain nature by applying force. When you throw a ball up in the air, unless you continually exert force to keep it up, gravity will force it to fall. Unless God exerts force to restrain the soul from transforming the body, the soul would automatically affect this transformation and stave off death.

On our level of reality God applies force through the medium of an agency. When God parted the waters of the Sea of Reeds He executed the miracle through the agency of a powerful wind. When He sustained the Jews in the desert for 40 years He did it through the provision of a miraculous food, the manna. Upon examination it turns out that there are two agencies through which this restraining force is channeled. One is the power of *tamey*, or "spiritual impurity" - otherwise known as the Angel of Death whose aftereffects must be dealt with through the

'red heifer' process. The other is the power of *tahor*, its diametric opposite. They are both described in our Parsha.

### DIFFERENT TYPES OF DEATH

Let us follow the rule of focusing on the positive first and deal with the *tahor* force.

We learned that 903 different types of death were created in the world ... the most difficult one, [death] by strangulation; the easiest through a kiss [the origin of the phrase 'the kiss of death']. Strangulation is comparable to pulling thorns out of a tight ball of wool; others liken it to pulling a thick rope through a very narrow hole. Death by means of a kiss feels like picking up a hair floating in a cup of milk. (Talmud, Berachot 8a)

According to the commentators, the explanation of why there are so many different types of death is the following: death is the extraction of the soul from the body; the degree of force required to pull body and soul apart depends on the intensity of the attachment that exists between them.

Moses, Aaron and Miriam each died by means of the kiss of death described by the Talmud (Talmud, Baba Batra, 17a). Maimonides explains the symbolism of comparing death to a kiss (*Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:51): the spiritual attachment to God of these great prophets was so intense that the tiniest increase in the degree of their attachment made it impossible for them to separate from the Divinity entirely. The 'kiss': God raised the level of

attachment by increasing the intensity of the Divine light shining into their souls; their souls automatically detached themselves from their bodies, engulfed by the intense joy generated by the strengthened connection.

We could also view the process in terms of the imagery we have developed in this essay. If the union between the soul and the body remains a shotgun marriage the way the Ramchal described, it should be the easiest thing in the world to dissolve it by simply allowing the parties to separate. Upon being given permission to leave, the soul should be eager to fly out of the body to return to the Divine light; the body should automatically fall back to earth lifeless and inert. Why is the application of any sort of force necessary at all?

Were it not for complications caused by the ties that were forged between the soul and the body during a person's lifetime, the simple painless form of death through the 'kiss' would suffice for everyone. There would be no need for the *tamey* force or for the Angel of Death. There would be no 'red heifer'. But neither the soul nor the body control the dynamics of the relationship that develops between them. The soul-body connection results in the formation of an 'I', a human being with free will, and it is the free will decisions taken by human beings that create the sort of bond between the body and soul that only the Angel of Death can sever.

Every free will decision that expresses a preference for the material and the physical over the spiritual, every free will violation of

a Torah obligation, amounts to a voluntary attachment of the life force of the soul to the body and cements the bond between the two. Before such free will decisions were taken the description of the body-soul relationship as a shotgun marriage arranged by God may have been apt, but free will decisions transform the union into a marriage of choice.

Being forced into marriage does not necessarily prevent a couple from falling in love. It is one thing to dissolve an enforced marriage where the parties detest each other. It is quite another matter to dissolve a union that has been cemented by the ties of love and affection. The more free will decisions a person makes to attach his soul to the body, the more difficult it becomes to separate.

## TWO WAYS TO DIE

That is why there are two ways to die. In the case of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, there were no free will decisions in the direction of materialism to overcome; there was no affectionate attachment of the soul to the body whatever. All that was needed to bring about their separation was a loosening of the binding force that held them together. A tiny increase of the Divine light, as soft as a kiss, is sufficient to accomplish the job. There is no need for the Angel of Death and the *tamey* force. Nachmanides writes that for this reason the graves of *tzadikim* are not *tamey* (Bamidbar, 19:2).

However, in the case of rest of us who are not such great *tzadikim*, this separation has to be accomplished differently and necessarily involves some degree of pain.

When the union between the soul and the body is at least partially endorsed by our own free will decisions, a part of the soul does not wish to leave the body at all; it is no longer being forced to remain but has become genuinely attached. Separation cannot be accomplished by simply increasing the intensity of the Divine light shining into the soul. That may be enough to release the soul that is only reluctantly attached in the first place, but it cannot free the soul that has become welded to its body by a lifetime of free will decisions in preference of materialism over spirituality.

For those of us who have welded our souls to our bodies by freely investing some of our spiritual energy into material things, not only would a slight increase in the *tahor* - pure - force be inadequate to engineer a separation, even the application of a great deal of it is not an option; instead of separating the soul from the body, such a great *tahor* force would begin to transform the body to make it permeable to the Divine light, a process that has been disallowed by Divine policy for the present for the reasons cited earlier.

An increase in the *tahor* force cannot bring about the separation but an increase in the *tamey* force can. The Angel of Death upsets the uneasy equilibrium between body and soul by intensifying the *tamey* force to such a great extent that the soul is unable to bear further contact with the body. It becomes compelled to pull itself away from a body contaminated by a great increase in the *tamey* force despite the fact that it has become welded to it. To survive, the soul must draw Divine energy from God. In face

of the increased *tamey* force in the body it cannot connect itself at all. It is either separation or death. Imagine the anguish of breaking bonds that have been formed over an entire lifetime in the split second of death!

### THE BONDS OF LIFE

This thesis concerning death illuminates the incidents associated with the deaths of Aaron and Miriam recorded in our Parsha: the drawing of water out of the rock, (Numbers 20:1-14), and the attack by the Caananites (Numbers 21:1-3).

The shotgun marriage between the body and the soul expresses itself in the soul's acquired need for food, water and shelter. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (*Nefesh Hachaim*, Gate II) explains that although the soul itself has no need for physical sustenance, while it is married to the body it also becomes sensitized to the body's basic needs. As long as it is joined to the body, the deprivation of the body affects the soul as well. Physical needs become somewhat spiritualized.

Rashi (Bamidbar 20:2) explains the reason why a sudden shortage of water is recorded in the very next verse following the one describing Miriam's death; during the entire 40 year desert sojourn the water miraculously poured out of the rock in the merit of Miriam. In fact the rock out of which it gushed was called Miriam's well. Similarly, the Divine cloud that surrounded the Jewish camp and made it invulnerable to attack was there in the merit of Aaron (see Rashi, Bamidbar 21:1). It therefore disappeared upon his death and the Jews

became vulnerable to the Caananite attack in the very verse following the description of Aaron's death. Finally, while this is not recorded in our Parsha, the Rabbis also inform us that the manna fell in the merit of Moses and stopped on the day he died.

These three giants of the Desert generation, who all died through the kiss of death, formed no free will attachments at all to the world of the body. The normal source of the inputs of food water and shelter is the earth. But for people who have never attached themselves to the earth through the exercise of their free will these basic requirements of life are entirely spiritualized and they are able to deliver these physical inputs by bringing them down from heaven through the power of their souls. When their souls separated from their bodies these heavenly inputs naturally stopped at once.

The lesson we have learned from this essay is that the pain of death is inversely proportional to the state of holiness a person maintains during life. The fact that we are so terrified of death is demonstrative of the powerful bond we have all forged with the material pleasures associated with our bodies. Our spiritual problems stem from the fact that we have voluntarily transformed a marriage of convenience into a love match.



## The Ultimate Battle: Morality

As Parshat Chukat begins, the Jews have moved away from Mount Sinai and begun their trek to the Promised Land. The path would not be a simple one, for while the desert was relatively uninhabited, and they were therefore generally<sup>1</sup> able to make progress unmolested, they had now left the desert. From this point on, they must cross population centers, coming into contact with different nations, in order to enter the Land of Israel.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, not all of the nations whose paths they cross are treated equally.

When they meet up with Edom, Moshe begins with warm words: he notes their close genealogical relationship, going so far as to call the two nations "brothers". Moshe "catches up" on what the Jewish People have been doing over the past few hundred years:

And Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: 'Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the travail that has befallen us; how our fathers went down into Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and with our fathers. And we cried out to God, and He



heard our voice and sent an angel, and brought us out of Egypt; and, behold, we are in Kadesh, a city at the outer limits of your territory. (Bamidbar 20:14-16)

Beneath the surface of the pleasantries is a powerful message: Edom is another name for Esav, who was, of course, the brother of Yaakov/Yisrael. Esav detested the responsibilities of the firstborn, and happily sold his birthright for a pot of beans.<sup>3</sup> Being firstborn meant living up to the covenant that God had made with Avraham, a covenant that promised the Land of Israel at the cost of hundreds of years of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Moshe seems to be politely communicating to our "brother": the Children of Yisrael made a "down payment" on the Land of Israel with the slavery we endured in Egypt, and we are now ready to come home and take what is ours.

Moshe then makes a request; he asks, as a long-lost brother, if Israel can pass through the land of Edom. His request is denied:

Please let us pass through your land; we will not pass through field or through vineyard, nor will we drink of the water of the wells; we will go along the king's highway, we will not turn aside to the right nor to the left, until we have crossed your border.' And Edom said to him: 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you.' And the Children of Israel said to him: 'We will go up by the highway; and if we drink your water, I and my cattle, I will pay full price for

it; let me only pass through on my feet; there is no harm in it.' And he said: 'You shall not pass through.' And Edom came out against him with a heavy force of people, and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his border; and Israel turned away from him. (Bamidbar 20: 17-21)

In this instance conflict is averted; Moshe leads the people on a more circuitous route. Earlier confrontations with descendents of Esav did not end so quietly: Amalek did not wait for the People of Israel to establish contact, to stake their claim or even to approach the Land of Israel. Immediately after the Jews left Egypt, Amalek attacked - but their onslaught was thwarted: Moshe sent Yehoshua to lead the charge and repel the Amalekite onslaught.

In fact, these two scenes of confrontation are closely related, even though their respective resolutions are so divergent: The hatred articulated by Edom was acted upon by Amalek. It is the "stolen" birthright and blessings that enraged the descendents of Esav. They felt they had a moral claim against Yaakov who had behaved with deceit, but they staked this claim only when the positive aspects of the birthright were about to come to fruition. When the children of Yaakov went down to Egypt, in fulfillment of the first part of the Covenant forged with Avraham, namely the slavery, Esav and his descendants were nowhere to be found. Only now that the Israelites had endured unspeakable hardship, the hatred of these self-righteous adversaries bubbled up to the surface and they did what they could to

prevent the Nation of Israel from reaping the rewards of their foresight, their patience, their unwavering faith in God's promise to their forefathers.

Yehoshua, from the tribe of Yosef, is particularly able to offer a moral counter-claim to Esav's charges. Esav claimed that Yaakov had not treated him in a brotherly fashion; Yaakov's treachery had cost him the birthright - which he did not even want. Yet Yosef's brothers acted in a manner so far beyond anything Yaakov had done to Esav: they plotted to kill him, and in the end "only" sold him as a slave. And how did Yosef repay this treachery? He took care of his brothers, supported them, supplied them with food, jobs and homes for over 50 years. Esav's moral outrage would fall on deaf ears with Yehoshua; that is why Yehoshua was the right man to lead the people in the battle against the descendents of Esav: It is Yosef's moral superiority that defeats Amalek.

The next nation that crosses paths with the Israelites is the Canaanites. They, too, make a preemptive strike, even managing to take prisoners:

And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the South, heard that Israel came by way of the Atarim; and he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive. (Bamidbar 21:1)

The Jews respond by turning to God for help, and they make vows in an attempt to cajole God to hear their prayers:

And Israel made a vow to God, and said: 'If You will indeed

deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.' And God heard the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities; and the name of the place was called Hormah. (Bamidbar 21:2-3)

Victorious, the Israelites continue their trek. They bypass Edom<sup>5</sup> and come to the territories of the Emorites and the Midianites;<sup>6</sup> again, they send a message asking to transverse land:

And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, saying: 'Let me pass through your land; we will not turn aside into field, or into vineyard; we will not drink of the water of the wells; we will go by the king's highway, until we have crossed your border.' (Bamidbar 21:21-22)

The request is denied and they are met by an army sent to fight:

And Sihon did not allow Israel to pass through his border; Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel into the wilderness, and came to Yahaz; and he fought against Israel. (Bamidbar 21:23)

The Israelites are victorious. Not only do they capture the land of the Emorites, they also liberate land that was taken by the Emorites from the Moavites:

And Israel smote him with the edge of the sword, and

possessed his land from the Arnon to the Yabbok, even unto 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 Heshbon, and in all the towns thereof. For Heshbon was the city of Sihon the king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab, and taken all his land out of his hand, even unto the Arnon. (Bamidbar 21:24-25)

While Edom and Moav are from the larger Avraham family, the Emorites are descendents of Cham,<sup>7</sup> via Canaan.<sup>8</sup> Their ownership of the land was temporary, in fact part of the promise which God made to Avraham, when he forged the covenant was that this land would be given to his descendants, but only when the Emorites sin to the extent that they forfeit the Land.

And the fourth generation will return here, for the iniquity of the Emorites will not be complete until that time. (Bereishit 15:16)

Apparently not allowing the Jews to cross through their land, and instead waging war on them, was the final straw; this was the sin that tipped the scales against them, a sin significant enough to cause forfeit of the Land. As we see, not only did they lose their own land, they also lost lands they had conquered from others.<sup>9</sup>

Generations later, the people of Ammon had not forgotten. They let it be known that they still wanted "their" land back:

And the king of the Ammonites answered to the messengers of Yiftach: 'Because Israel took away my land, when they came up from Egypt, from Arnon to Yabbok, and to the Jordan; now therefore give back those lands peacefully.' (Shoftim 11:13)

The people of Ammon claim that the Jews captured their land, and declare that they are willing to work out a deal which could be called "land for peace."

The chosen warrior, Yiftach, seems to have a well-developed and well-informed historical consciousness, refutes the Ammonites' claim.

And Yiftach sent messengers again to the king of the Ammonites, and said to him, 'Thus said Yiftach: Israel did not take away the land of Moav, nor the land of the Ammonites; when Israel came up from Egypt, and walked through the wilderness to the Red Sea, and came to Kadesh; then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, Please let me pass through your land; but the king of Edom would not listen to it. And in like manner they sent to the king of Moav; but he would not consent; and Israel stayed in Kadesh. Then they went along through the wilderness, and around the land of Edom, and the land of Moav, and came by the east side of the land of Moav, and camped on the other side of Arnon, but did not come within the border of Moav; for Arnon was the border of Moav. And

Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Ammorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, Let us pass, we beseech you, through your land into my place. But Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his border; but Sihon gathered all his people together, and camped in Yahaz, and fought against Israel. And the Almighty, God of Israel, delivered Sihon and all his people to the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel possessed all the land of the Ammorites, the inhabitants of that country. And they possessed all the borders of the Ammorites, from Arnon to Yabbok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan. So now the Almighty, God of Israel, has dispossessed the Ammorites from before his people Israel, and should you possess it? Will not you possess that which Kemosh your god gives to you to possess? So whoever the Almighty our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess. And now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moav? Did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them, while Israel lived in Heshbon and her towns, and in Aroer and her towns, and in all the cities that are along the borders of Arnon, for three hundred years? Why therefore did you not recover them during that time? Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you do me wrong to war against me; the Almighty God of Judgement shall be judge this day between the people of Israel

and the Ammonites.' And the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Yiftach which he sent him. (Shoftim 11:14-28)

Yiftach had learned our Parsha well, and he cited it with ease and conviction.<sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that he concludes his message with a very particular phrase: "The Almighty God of Judgement shall be judge this day between the people of Israel and the Ammonites." This turn of phrase was first used by Sarah when she insisted that Avraham banish Hagar, her pregnant slave,<sup>11</sup> and exclude any child born to her from the inheritance and birthright. Likewise the children of Lot, Ammon and Moav, are not Avraham's rightful heirs, even though there was a time that Lot seemed to be Avraham's heir apparent, the only blood relative who would inherit Avraham's physical and spiritual empire. As with Lot, any rights they may have had to the Land are a result of their relationship to Avraham. Therefore, only behavior in line with Avraham's mores will allow them residence; any other type of behavior causes their exile.

The land which Lot himself receives is given to him by Avraham, its' rightful owner - by virtue of God's covenant:

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Avram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. And the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelt then in the land. And Avram said to Lot: 'Please let there be no strife between me and you, and between my



herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please, separate yourself from me; if you will take the left, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right, then I will go to the left.' And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before God destroyed Sodom and Amorrhah, like the garden of God, like the land of Egypt, as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed east; and they separated themselves from one another. (Bereishit 13:7-11)

Here too the word "brother" is used to describe the relationship, however the shepherds of Lot caused an untenable situation, and hence they needed to separate - Avraham allowed Lot to choose which land he wanted. Lot's right to the Land is by proxy, because it was given to Avraham. Lot has two son's Ammon and Moav, when they lost their land in battle, and that land is subsequently captured, Yiftach feels no moral compunction to return the land to Ammon or Moav, they had forfeited the land in war.

In fact Ammon and Moav, did not exactly behave like relatives should, when a relative comes to visit, you welcome him in and you provide food and drink, just like their great-uncle Avraham.

An Ammonite or a Moavite shall not enter into the Congregation of God; even to the tenth generation none of them shall

enter into the Congregation of God forever; because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Bil'am the son of Beor from Petor of Aram-Naharaim, to curse you. (Dvarim 23:4-5)

Instead of providing food they tried to curse us. The punishment for this behavior is they are no longer considered "brothers"<sup>12</sup> and can not marry into the Jewish People. When they behaved as they did, in a manner that went against everything their great-uncle Avraham stood for, they severed their connection with the land which belonged to Avraham, and from the people who were Avraham's legitimate heirs.

Conversely, Edom is still considered our brother:<sup>13</sup>

You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. (Dvarim 23:8)

With his keen sense of history, Yiftach - who hails from the tribe of Yosef - prepares for battle. He, too, like the Jewish People generations before, makes a vow:

Then the spirit of God came upon Yiftach, and he passed over Gilead, and Menasheh, and passed over Mizpeh Gilead, and from Mizpeh Gilead he passed over to the Ammonites. And Yiftach made a vow to God, and said, 'If you shall deliver the

Ammonites completely into my hands, then it shall be, that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the Ammonites, shall be God's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (Shoftim 11:29-31)

Yiftach promises that the first to walk out his door to greet him will be dedicated to God.

And Yiftach came to Mizpah, to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter. (Shoftim 11:34)

As luck would have it, his only child walked out the door, and now Yiftach would seem to have a dilemma - does he keep his word or break it? To this point, Yiftach has lived by a finely-tuned moral compass, and this episode is no exception. He does not consider breaking his vow, and his daughter follows in his footsteps:

And it came to pass, when he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said: 'Alas, my daughter! you have brought me down, and you have become my troubler; for I have opened my mouth to God, and I cannot go back.' And she said to him: 'My father, you have opened your mouth to God; do to me what you have spoken; for God has taken vengeance for you on your enemies, the children of Ammon.' (Shoftim 11:35-36)

There is a tradition that Yiftach actually saw it through to the bitter end, went ahead and sacrificed his daughter - an act that certainly would be considered a moral outrage. However, there are other choices: Jewish tradition allows a person to question the vow; in such a case, if an opening (a *petach*)<sup>14</sup> is found, the vow may be canceled. Yiftach did not seek a *petach*;<sup>15</sup> he made a vow - albeit one that is difficult to understand:<sup>16</sup> He only had one child. How surprised should he have been when she, and no other, is the first to come out of the door of his home (also called *petach*) to welcome him?

Is it possible that this is precisely what Yiftach was thinking - to a greater or lesser degree? The text never states that his daughter was turned into a sacrifice; in fact, this would be an absurdity. The law is very specific as to what types of animals may be brought as offerings. In fact, at most Yiftach would have been required to offer the monetary value of a person to the Temple. We may assume, based on Yiftach's detailed knowledge<sup>17</sup> of the Book of Bamidbar, that he was conversant with the other books of the Torah as well.<sup>18</sup> It would be illogical to think that Yiftach and all of the kohanim were totally ignorant<sup>19</sup> of the laws of sacrifice. What, then, was Yiftach thinking, and how did he fulfill the vow that he made - apparently in full awareness of what would or could happen?

The text uses very specific language in describing the results of Yiftach's vow: not murder, not slaughter, rather *olah*, an 'elevation'<sup>20</sup> or 'uplifting' sacrifice:

And she said to her father: 'Let this thing be done for me: let me alone two months, that I may depart and go down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my companions.' And he said: 'Go.' And he sent her away for two months; and she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. And it came to pass at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she had not known a man. And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Yiftach the Gileadite four days a year. (Shoftim 11:37-40)

The daughter's lament seems clear: she mourned for the life she would not live, for the love a man she would never meet, for the family she would not have. The verses that deal with Yiftach's fulfillment of his vow are far more difficult to understand: What exactly was the vow? Was it to slaughter her, or was it to sanctify her? A number of commentaries<sup>21</sup> understand that Yiftach's daughter led a life of celibacy and isolation, in some sort of Jewish version of a nunnery, and these same commentaries severely chastise Yiftach for bringing upon her this completely un-Jewish fate.

Let us consider Yiftach's motivation: If we assume that Yiftach was neither mad nor ignorant, we may say that he had a specific moral motivation for making the vow that he did. The key to his motivation must surely

lie in the identity of his enemy, Ammon. We have already noted that Ammon and Moav were the children of Lot; in fact, they were the products of incest:

And they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger arose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down, nor when she arose. Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the firstborn daughter bore a son, and called his name Moav; he is the father of the Moavites to this day. And the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-Ammi; the same is the father of the Ammonites to this day.

Perhaps realizing that at the enemy's very core, the Ammonites' proverbial Achilles heel was sexuality, Yiftach decided to consecrate his own daughter and keep her far away from sexuality and sin. Hence she mourned her virginity, which would be perpetual; other young women would make pilgrimages to cry with Yiftach's daughter.

At the door of his tent Lot showed bravery; he saved the angels from the marauding mob, who wanted to "know them" in the biblical sense.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both old and young, all the people from every quarter; And they called to Lot, and said to him, 'Where are the men who came in to you this night? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.' And Lot went out the

door to them, and closed the door after him, and said: 'I beg you, my brothers, do not do this wicked deed. (Bereishit 19:4-7)

Therefore, at the door of his own tent, Yiftach felt he needed to equal and offset the possible moral superiority of his enemy. In actuality, Lot was not a formidable foe: he left the holiness of Avraham's tent, and when pressured, in an act which exemplifies his own moral failure, he offered his daughters as the consolation prize to the lecherous masses:

Behold now, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me, I beg you, bring them out to you, and do to them as is good in your eyes; only to these men do nothing; seeing that they have come under the shadow of my roof. (Bereishit 19:8)

Yiftach<sup>22</sup> was correct: we must be far more moral than our enemies; unfortunately for his daughter, he overreacted to the moral challenge posed by Lot's descendents.

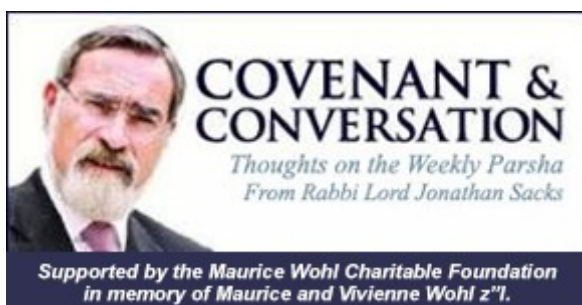
Today, as we face opponents of many different kinds, as we engage in both physical and moral battles, we must retain our moral superiority<sup>23</sup> on an individual and national level. If we are able to do so, God will be with us, and victory over our physical and spiritual foes is assured.

1. An exception was the attack waged by Amalek which transpired soon after the Israelites left Egypt. See Shmot 17.
2. One premature, aborted attempt to enter Israel was the ill-advised attempt recorded in Bamidbar 14:44-45; in that instance they met resistance from Amalek and Canaan.

3. See Bereishit 25:34.
4. See Bereishit 15:12-21.
5. See Bamidbar 21:4.
6. See Bamidbar 21:13.
7. Bereishit 10:6.
8. Bereishit 10:16.
9. See Talmud Bavli Gittin 38a.
10. Perhaps this is the reason that the Haftorah reading for Parshat Chukat is this section of the Book of Shoftim.
11. See Bereishit 16:5. "And Sarai said to Avram: 'My wrong be upon thee: I gave my handmaid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: God will judge between me and you.' "
12. See Bamidbar 23:7.
13. Edom also did not provide food and drink, perhaps they did have a reason for their displeasure, due to the birthright and blessings, while Amon and Moav should have had no reason to hate the Jews.
14. See Mishna Nedarim 3:4.
15. See Midrash Tanchuma Bchukotai chapter 5.
16. The Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 4a, states that he was in fact mistaken to make such a vow, and the implication is that he brought her as a sacrificial offering.
17. The Midrash Tanchuma Bchukotai chapter 5, states explicitly that Yiftach was not a scholar (*ben Torah*).
18. See Bereishit Rabbah 60:3: Yiftach asked in an unfitting manner, and God answered him in an unfitting manner. He asked in an unfitting manner, as it says, And Yiftach vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said: Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth... it shall be the Lord's and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering (Judg. XI, 30 f.). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Then had a camel or a donkey or a dog come forth, thou wouldst have offered it up for a burnt-offering I ' What did the Lord do? He answered him unfittingly and prepared his daughter for him, as it says, And Yiftach came... and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him (ib. 34). And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes (ib. 35). R. Johanan and Resh Lakish disagree. R. Johanan maintained: He was liable for her monetary consecration; Resh Lakish said: He was not even liable for her monetary consecration. For we learned: If one declared of an unclean animal or an animal with a blemish: 'Behold, let these be burnt-offerings,' his declaration is completely null. If he declared: 'Let these be for a burnt offering,' they must be sold, and he brings a burnt-offering for their money. Yet was not Phinehas there to absolve him of his vow? Phinehas, however, said: He needs me, and I am to go to him! Moreover, I am a High Priest and the son of a High Priest; shall I then go to an ignoramus? While Yiftach said: Am I, the chief of Israel's leaders, to go to Phinehas! Between the two of them the maiden perished. Thus people say: ' Between the midwife and the woman in travail the young woman's child is lost!' Both were punished for her blood. Yiftach died through his limbs dropping off: wherever he went a limb would drop off from him, and it was buried there on the spot. Hence it is written, Then died Yiftach the Gileadite, and was buried in the cities of



- Gilead (ib. XII, 7). It does not say, 'In a city of Gilead,' but, 'In the cities of Gilead' Phinehas was deprived of the divine afflatus. Hence it is written, And Phinehas the son of Eleazar had been ruler over them (I Chron. IX, 20): it is not written, He was ruler over them, but 'Had been ruler in time past, [when] the Lord was with him (ib.).
19. Many sources speak of Yiftach in a derogatory fashion see Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 25b.
  20. See my article on Akeidat Yitzchak: <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2008/11/parshat-vayera-5769.html>, which will be a chapter in my forthcoming book, "Echoes of Eden"(Jerusalem: OU/Geffen Publishers).
  21. See Radak and Ralbag, Shoftim 11:31.
  22. Yiftach is introduced at the outset as the son of a prostitute; perhaps this contributed to his sensitivity. See Shoftim 11:1. "Now Yiftach the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, and he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Yiftach."
  23. During the recent Second Lebanon War, I received a phone call from a group of soldiers who were in southern Lebanon. They had run out of supplies, and had entered a store that had been abandoned by the proprietors. Based on the signs and pictures hanging all around them, the soldiers had no doubt that the shopkeeper, as well as the entire town, were supporters of the ruthless terrorists with whom we were at war. The question they posed was whether they should leave money behind for the goods taken from the store. It is, quite frankly, impossible to imagine that soldiers in any other army in the world would be occupied with similar questions of ethics and morality in the middle of a war. It is the moral strength of these soldiers, and thousands more like them, that protects us.



## Healing the Trauma of Loss

It took me two years to recover from the death of my father, of blessed memory. To this day, almost twenty years later, I am not sure why. He did not die suddenly or young. He was well into his eighties. In his last

years he had to undergo five operations, each of which sapped his strength a little more. Besides which, as a rabbi, I had to officiate at funerals and comfort the bereaved. I knew what grief looked like.

The rabbis were critical of one who mourns too much too long.<sup>1</sup> They said that God himself says of such a person, "Are you more compassionate than I am?" Maimonides rules, "A person should not become excessively broken-hearted because of a person's death, as it says, 'Do not weep for the dead nor bemoan him' (Jer. 22:10). This means, 'Do not weep excessively.' For death is the way of the world, and one who grieves excessively at the way of the world is a fool."<sup>2</sup> With rare exceptions, the outer limit of grief in Jewish law is a year, not more.

Yet knowing these things did not help. We are not always masters of our emotions. Nor does comforting others prepare you for your own experience of loss. Jewish law regulates outward conduct not inward feeling, and when it speaks of feelings, like the commands to love and not to hate, halakhah generally translates this into behavioural terms, assuming, in the language of the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, that "the heart follows the deed."<sup>3</sup>

I felt an existential black hole, an emptiness at the core of being. It deadened my sensations, leaving me unable to sleep or focus, as if life was happening at a great distance and as if I were a spectator watching a film out of focus with the sound turned off. The mood eventually passed but while it lasted I made some of the worst

mistakes of my life.

I mention these things because they are the connecting thread of parshat Chukkat. The most striking episode is the moment when the people complain about the lack of water. Moses does something wrong, and though God sends water from a rock, he also sentences Moses to an almost unbearable punishment: "Because you did not have sufficient faith in Me to sanctify Me before the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you."

The commentators debate exactly what he did wrong. Was it that he lost his temper with the people ("Listen now, you rebels")? That he hit the rock instead of speaking to it? That he made it seem as if it was not God but he and Aaron who were responsible for the water ("Shall we bring water out of this rock for you")?

What is more puzzling still is why he lost control at that moment. He had faced the same problem before, but he had never lost his temper before. In Exodus 15 the Israelites at Marah complained that the water was undrinkable because it was bitter. In Exodus 17 at Massa-and-Meriva they complained that there was no water. God then told Moses to take his staff and *hit* the rock, and water flowed from it. So when in our parsha God tells Moses, "Take the staff ... and *speak* to the rock," it was surely a forgivable mistake to assume that God meant him also to hit it. That is what He had said last time. Moses was following precedent. And if God did not mean him to hit the rock, why did He command him to

take his staff?

What is even harder to understand is the order of events. *God had already told Moses exactly what to do.* Gather the people. Speak to the rock, and water will flow. This was *before* Moses made his ill-tempered speech, beginning, "Listen, now you rebels." It is understandable if you lose your composure when you are faced with a problem that seems insoluble. This had happened to Moses earlier when the people complained about the lack of meat. But it makes no sense at all to do so when God has already told you, "Speak to the rock ... It will pour forth its water, and you will bring water out of the rock for them, and so you will give the community and their livestock water to drink." Moses had received the solution. Why then was he so agitated about the problem?

Only after I lost my father did I understand the passage. What had happened immediately before? The first verse of the chapter states: "The people stopped at Kadesh. There, Miriam died and was buried." Only then does it state that the people had no water. An ancient tradition explains that the people had hitherto been blessed by a miraculous source of water in the merit of Miriam. When she died, the water ceased.

However it seems to me that the deeper connection lies not between the death of Miriam and the lack of water but between her death and Moses' loss of emotional equilibrium. Miriam was his elder sister. She had watched over his fate when, as a baby, he had been placed in a basket and floated

down the Nile. She had had the courage and enterprise to speak to Pharaoh's daughter and suggest that he be nursed by a Hebrew, thus reuniting Moses and his mother and ensuring that he grew up knowing who he was and to which people he belonged. He owed his sense of identity to her. Without Miriam, he could never have become the human face of God to the Israelites, law-giver, liberator and prophet. Losing her, he not only lost his sister. He lost the human foundation of his life.

Bereaved, you lose control of your emotions. You find yourself angry when the situation calls for calm. You hit when you should speak, and you speak when you should be silent. Even when God has told you what to do, you are only half-listening. You hear the words but they do not fully enter your mind. Maimonides asks the question, how was it that Jacob, a prophet, did not know that his son Joseph was still alive. He answers, because he was in a state of grief, and the Shekhinah does not enter us when we are in a state of grief.<sup>4</sup> Moses at the rock was not so much a prophet as a man who had just lost his sister. He was inconsolable and not in control. He was the greatest of the prophets. But he was also human, rarely more so than here.

*Our parsha is about mortality.* That is the point. God is eternal, we are ephemeral. As we say in the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we are "a fragment of pottery, a blade of grass, a flower that fades, a shadow, a cloud, a breath of wind." We are dust and to dust we return, but God is life forever.

At one level, Moses-at-the-rock is a story about sin and punishment: "*Because you did not have sufficient faith in me to sanctify Me ... therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land I have given you.*" We may not be sure what the sin exactly was, or why it merited so severe a punishment, but at least we know the ballpark, the territory to which the story belongs.

Nonetheless it seems to me that - here as in so many other places in the Torah - there is a story beneath the story, and it is a different one altogether. Chukkat is about death, loss and bereavement. Miriam dies. Aaron and Moses are told they will not live to enter the Promised Land. Aaron dies, and the people mourn for him for thirty days. Together they constituted the greatest leadership team the Jewish people has ever known, Moses the supreme prophet, Aaron the first High Priest, and Miriam perhaps the greatest of them all.<sup>5</sup> What the parsha is telling us is that for each of us there is a Jordan we will not cross, a promised land we will not enter. "It is not for you to complete the task." Even the greatest are mortal.

That is why the parsha begins with the ritual of the Red Heifer, whose ashes, mixed with the ash of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and dissolved in "living water," are sprinkled over one who has been in contact with the dead so that they may enter the Sanctuary.

This is one of the most fundamental principles of Judaism. *Death defiles.* For most religions throughout history, life-after-

death has proved more real than life itself. That is where the gods live, thought the Egyptians. That is where our ancestors are alive, believed the Greeks and Romans and many primitive tribes. That is where you find justice, thought many Christians. That is where you find paradise, thought many Muslims. As Jews we believe in life after death and the resurrection of the dead, but Tanakh is almost silent on this subject. "The dead do not praise God," says the Psalm. God is to be found in life, this life, with all its hazards and dangers, bereavements and grief. We may be no more than "dust and ashes," as Abraham said, but life itself is a never-ending stream, "living water", and it is this that the rite of the Red Heifer symbolises.

With great subtlety the Torah mixes law and narrative together - the law before the narrative because God provides the cure before the disease. Miriam dies. Moses and Aaron are overwhelmed with grief. Moses, for a moment, loses control, and he and Aaron are reminded that they too are mortal and will die before entering the land. Yet this is, as Maimonides said, "the way of the world." We are embodied souls. We are flesh and blood. We grow old. We lose those we love. Outwardly we struggle to maintain our composure but inwardly we weep. Yet life goes on, and what we began, others will continue.

Those we loved and lost live on in us, as we will live on in those we love. For love is as strong as death,<sup>6</sup> and the good we do never dies.<sup>7</sup>

1. *Moed Katan* 27b.

2. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Avel* 13:11.

3. *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, command 16.
4. Maimonides, Eight Chapters, ch. 7, based on *Pesahim* 117a.
5. There are many *midrashim* on this theme about Miriam's faith, courage and foresight.
6. *Shir ha-Shirim* 8:6.
7. See *Mishlei* 10:2, 11:4.



## The Sin of Moses: The Two Ways to Communicate

**Bamidbar, 20: 9-13:** "Moshe took the staff from before Hashem, as He had commanded him. Moshe and Aaron gathered the congregation before the rock and he said to them, 'Listen now, rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock? Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank. Hashem said to Moshe and to Aaron, 'because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them. They are the waters of strife, where the Children of Israel contended with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them.'"

**Rashi, Bamidbar, 19:12, Dh: Lehakdisheini:** "Because if you had spoken to the rock and



brought out water, I would have been sanctified in front of the congregation, and they would say, just like this rock that does not speak and does not hear, and does not need a livelihood, fulfils the word of the Makom (God), all the more so us.”

One of the most enigmatic incidents in the entire Torah is the sin of Moshe Rabbeinu at Mei Merivah (the waters of Meriva). The most difficult aspect of this sin is that it is not at all apparent what exactly it was. Consequently, there are numerous, disparate explanations of what exactly happened and what Moshe did wrong.<sup>1</sup> A number of commentaries follow the approach of Rashi<sup>2</sup>: He understands that Moshe’s sin was the fact that he did not speak to the rock as God commanded, rather he struck the rock. God had wanted the people to see that even an inanimate rock listens to God’s word, and all the more so, should human beings, but when Moshe struck the rock, this lesson was lost.<sup>3</sup>

A number of commentaries focus on the difference between striking and speaking: The Mei Marom<sup>4</sup> offers an interesting approach. In his words:<sup>5</sup>

“We invest heavily in our link to the past – to our forebears, and to the events in their lives. That is a very good thing. Except when it isn’t. Had Moshe understood the exact prescription for connecting to what came before, he would not have struck the rock. Want to get someone to act according to a

higher consciousness than they usually do? Generally, you have two options. You can speak convincingly, so that they come to internalize the value that you promote. All of the resistance to a higher truth melts away when you demonstrate to them the majesty and splendor contained in their own souls. Alternatively, you can speak reprovngly, from a position of authority. If you choose the latter, your audience accepts the reproach sufficiently to refrain from some dastardly deed – but their spiritual consciousness remains where it was before.”

God wanted Moshe to see that the Jewish people had the potential to reach the higher consciousness through communication and therefore, God instructed Moshe that he should speak to the rock, alluding to this form of communication. However, Moshe did not believe that the people were not at this level, and could not attain this level. Accordingly, he chose the more forceful approach of hitting the rock.

However, a question remains on Rashi’s explanation of Mei Merivah that the key mistake was hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it. Many years earlier, soon after the Jewish people left Egypt, God did indeed command Moshe to hit the rock. Accordingly, why was hitting the rock at Mei Merivah so problematic?

The Yalkut Shimoni<sup>6</sup> addresses this question. Its answer is based on an important principle: When a child is young, one needs to be more forceful in teaching

them the correct way to act, because he is too young to understand rational explanations, and he won't rebel.<sup>7</sup> However, when he grows up, he won't respond well to force, rather he needs to be spoken to and given reasons for what he is being asked to do. In this vein, the Yalkut explains that when the Jews left Egypt they were equivalent to children in terms of their level of Emunah and spiritual level, and so the more forceful approach was appropriate. However, after forty years in the desert, they had 'grown up' so to speak, and were comparable to an older child who needs speech.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein applies this idea to guiding one's community and parenting. He says that sometimes a leader or educator needs to speak to people who seem unreceptive to what we have to say. Likewise, in parenting, sometimes it is necessary to speak again and again to our children even if they don't immediately seem to accept the message. This is in contrast to the 'easier' approach of forcing them to do something. This may work when they are young, but does not work when they grow older and need things to be explained to them, rather than blindly following rules. Indeed, forcing at the wrong time is normally counter-productive in the long-term as it breeds resentment, and as soon as the child is old enough, he will break free. In this vein, Mei Merivah teaches that using the 'striking' approach when one should use the 'speaking' approach is counter-productive.

May we all merit to internalize the lessons of Rashi's explanation of Mei Merivah.

1. See Abarbanel for a summary of many of the opinions.
2. There are a number of questions posed by the Ramban on Rashi – they will not be addressed here.
3. See Ayelet HaShachar, ibid for questions on this aspect of Rashi.
4. Written by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap.
5. Adapted and translated by Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein.
6. Yalkut Shimoni, Chukas, 20.
7. Of course, even forcing a child to do something should not be done in the wrong way.

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