

## In This Issue

- **Ancient Wisdom & Modern Psychology** by *Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman*
- **Shraga's Weekly** by *Rabbi Shraga Simmons*
- **Torah for Your Table** by *Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis*



## Blocked Goals and Anger

Anger often surfaces when an obstacle blocks our goals. If we want to accomplish an objective and someone or something arises to hinder us from achieving our intentions, we are prone to respond with anger.

This can be particularly challenging for parents or educators whose goals are to inculcate certain values, traits, or behaviors within children, but the children may not always be receptive. In those moments that their teaching goals are blocked, whether due to lack of understanding or due to defiance, the parent or educator is susceptible to feelings of frustration and anger.

Moshe was punished for something. We just aren't sure exactly what went wrong.

Still stuck in the desert after almost 40 years, The Children of Israel complain to Moshe about the lack of food and water, preferring life in Egypt over their situation. God instructs Moshe to speak to a rock and it will bring forth water. Moshe takes his staff, says to the people, "Listen you rebels, shall we bring forth you water out of this rock?", hits the rock twice, and water gushed out, providing enough for all to drink. God then says to Moshe and Aharon that they will not be allowed to lead the Children of Israel into the land "Because you did not believe in me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel."

Dozens of explanations have been provided to help explain exactly what Moshe and Aharon did wrong. Famously, Rashi focuses on the fact that Moshe was instructed to speak to the rock and instead he hit it. Alternatively, Ramban contends that the problem is highlighted in Moshe's use of the word "we" when saying "shall we bring forth you water." Instead of capitalizing on an opportunity to demonstrate G-d's miracles, Moshe insinuated that it was him and Aharon who had the power to do so.

Rambam, however, takes a different approach, focusing on the phrase "Listen now you rebels." Embedded in this language, according to Rambam, is anger. Moshe's sin is that he responded in anger towards the Children of Israel. The angry response was problematic from a character perspective as he should have responded with more patience. Additionally, there is a theological danger in that the Children of Israel could mistakenly think that if Moshe

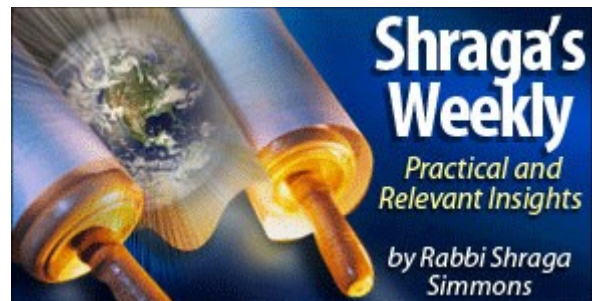
is angry, so is God, which would have been incorrect.

Elaborating on Rashi's approach that Moshe's fault was hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein offers a powerful educational insight. Rabbi Feinstein suggests that God wanted Moshe to "speak to the rock because he wanted to teach the lesson that one must speak words of Torah and ethics even to those who seem not to comprehend. Repeating and reviewing ultimately results in understanding" (translation by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb).

As an example, a parent "must never despair of educating his children just because they appear not to understand what he is telling them." Repetition of ideas and consistent communication is essential. "[J]ust like the rock could not understand but eventually fulfilled God's will. Certainly, human beings, although they seem now not to understand at all, will eventually reach understanding."

While Rabbi Feinstein builds off Rashi and focuses on the importance of persistence in the face of despair, the message can be amplified if we add the Rambam's anger approach to the mix. As a leader and a teacher, Moshe had educational aspirations for the Children of Israel. He wanted them to be grateful to God for taking them out of Egypt and for providing for them in the desert. Yet, after uprisings, scandals, and incessant complaints they didn't seem to be getting the message. He became angry because the message wasn't getting through and he was not achieving his goals.

When we have important values, traits, or behaviors that we want to teach others, and the messages don't seem to seep through, it may be natural for us to feel frustrated and express anger. Yet, we are called upon to choose patience instead. Our best bet is to use clear and consistent communication and model the way we want others to follow.



## Moses Hits the Rock

This week's Parsha features one of the most perplexing incidents in the entire Torah. The Jews have been wandering for 40 years in the desert and they're thirsty. So God tells Moses to speak to the rock and water will come forth (Numbers 20:8). The instruction to "speak" to the rock is in contrast to 40 years earlier, when Moses followed God's instruction to **hit** the rock – and water gushed out (Exodus 17:6).

This time, Moses is to speak. Yet he again hits the rock. Nothing happens, so Moses hits the rock a second time, and water comes out.

God's response: "Since you **HIT** the rock rather than speaking to it, you will not lead the Jewish people into the Land of Israel" (Numbers 20:11-12).

### New Generation

We read this story and think: Here's the mighty Moses, who confronted Pharaoh, arranged the Ten Plagues, split the Red Sea, brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai, and defended the people through trials and tribulations in the desert. Now he makes one little mistake and God takes away his dream of entering Israel. The consequence seems inappropriately harsh!

The first step in understanding this incident is to appreciate how the Jewish people were at the critical juncture of transitioning from desert life to Israel. At the rock, God's instructions to Moses are carefully chosen to reflect this transition. Forty years earlier, when Moses was told to HIT the rock, the people had just come out of brutal slavery in Egypt – and "hitting" was a language they understood. But this time, Moses was called upon to lead a generation who'd grown up in freedom; a generation which required the softer approach of "speaking."

Notice how in our Parsha, Moses hits the rock twice. First, he hit the rock and no water came out. At that moment he had the opportunity to reevaluate his approach and reflect more carefully on God's specific instruction to "speak." But Moses hits the rock again.

The commentators suggest that perhaps symbolically, we can learn about our own need to be flexible in our approach. Moses' punishment is not harsh; it is simply a consequence of his relationship to the new generation and their needs in entering Israel.

### Jewish Education

We learn from this a crucial lesson about education. King Solomon says: "Educate each child according to his own way." The process of learning is different for everybody, and the approach that's effective for one is often not effective for another.

This defines the crucial difference between education and indoctrination.

"Indoctrination" is when the teacher is concerned primarily with advancing his position. "Education" is drawing out from the student's own intuitive sense.

This idea is elucidated in the Talmud, which says: "Even more than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse." The simple understanding is that of course the calf is hungry and needs to eat. But even more so "the mother wants to nurse" – meaning that the mother is full of milk and needs to get it out.

However, I heard in the name of Rabbi Simcha Wasserman (20<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles and Jerusalem) that the Talmud must be understood differently. Because if the mother's only concern is to get rid of her milk, then it would come out in one big gush. And we see instead that it comes out precisely in the right proportion to satisfy the specific needs of the calf. So when the Talmud says, "More than the baby calf wants to drink, the mother wants to nurse," it is saying that even more than the calf desires to eat, the mother wants that it should eat – not for the mother's sake, but because that's what's best for the calf. And that, said Rabbi Wasserman, is what good

education is all about.

Jewish ideals have existed against all odds for 3,000 years – not because we've pounded people over the head, but because we've communicated those ideas in a rational, practical way. Anyone who says that yeshiva is a cult is woefully misinformed. Yeshiva is precisely the place to discuss the issues, ask questions, work it through, and make it your own.

### **American Ways**

It is interesting that the experience of Moses in the desert can be understood in light of the experience of Judaism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the shtetl of Europe, a rabbi might be able to communicate displeasure to his students by hitting the knuckles with a ruler. It was a language that was accepted and understood. But when tens of thousands of Jews moved to America, those who sent their children to Jewish day school found these same rabbis applying their European-style methods to children with American mentalities. These children, who were used to a more open and permissive approach, could not relate to Judaism as it was being presented. The result is that many of them shifted away from observance.

It has only been in the last 20 years – with American-born rabbis now taking the helm and explaining Judaism in modern, relevant terms – that American Jewry has seen a resurgence back toward traditional observance.

Berel Wein writes:

"In our always-uncertain world, it is natural to crave security and stability. Financial planners, estate planners, insurance experts and politicians in office all attempt to convince us that the way it is now is how it will be in the future as well. However, all of us in our secret hearts know that the only thing certain about the future is that it will not be the same as the present. Therefore, we should be prepared to be open to new circumstances, to a constantly changing world. We should not be afraid to try out new technology, new ideas and theories, to change careers and pursue our true interests and goals. There is an innate longing for greatness within all of us. That longing can never be fulfilled without a willingness to change, improve and try something new."

Like Moses and the rock, our ability to adjust and customize our approach – while remaining true to Torah standards – will in large part determine how successfully we move our children, our students, our nation and ourselves forward into the "Land of Israel" – into the next exciting stage of personal and national destiny.



## Voids Left By Those Who Die

In this *parashah*, we encounter the deaths of two of our spiritual giants, Aaron and Miriam. With their deaths, calamity befalls the nation. After Aaron's death, it is written, "And the Canaanite king of Arad heard ... and he warred against Israel."<sup>1</sup> Our Sages ask: What exactly did the king hear that prompted him to do battle against our people? And one answer given is that he heard of the death of Aaron the High Priest and the subsequent departure of the Clouds of Glory that accompanied the Jewish people in his merit. But the question still remains: Why did the death of Aaron render the nation vulnerable to attack and cause the Clouds of Glory to depart?

*Ethics of the Fathers* describes Aaron as "loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people, and bringing them closer to the Torah."<sup>2</sup> So we find that Aaron was forever involved in resolving all sorts of quarrels. Whenever he heard that two people were at odds, he would approach one of them and say, "Your friend said that the quarrel was all his fault, and he deeply regrets it." Aaron would then go to the second party and tell him the same story. Thus, when the two met again, they would embrace and become friends again. It is for this reason

that the entire nation wept when he passed away.<sup>3</sup>

So it is that, with the passing of Aaron, a terrible void was left. Who would make peace between brother and brother, neighbor and neighbor, husband and wife? Thus, when Aaron died, arguments erupted again, and that caused the Cloud of Glory, which represented the spirit of Hashem to depart, rendering the nation vulnerable to attack.

The reading of *Parashas Chukas* falls in the month of Tammuz, the month that foretells disaster for our people; the month in which the walls of Jerusalem were breached, culminating in the destruction of the Holy Temples. At the root of this tragedy and all the subsequent tragedies that have befallen our people is baseless hatred. It is *baseless hatred* that caused the Clouds of Glory, the presence of God to abandon us, and it is love - exemplified by acts of *chesed* - between Jew and Jew that merits God's presence in our midst.

This simple and yet complex message of Aaron is desperately needed in our fragmented, torn families and communities. If we would only follow Aaron's example, we could dissipate the anger that has created ugly walls of animosity that destroy us.

### GRATITUDE

In contrast to Aaron, whom the Torah testifies was mourned by the entire nation, at Miriam's passing, which took place earlier, there is no mention of mourning. Rather, it states "there was no water for the congregation."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes silence speaks

louder than words, and the silence that should give us pause is the absence of mourning and weeping. God denied the nation water so that they might be ever-cognizant that the fresh sweet water of the well in the desert was all in the merit of Miriam. During the long, bitter years of Egyptian bondage, Miriam was responsible for imbuing the nation with faith. She put herself on the line to save the lives of doomed Jewish babies; she lovingly stood guard over the infant Moses while he was floating in a basket on the Nile; and she courageously convinced Pharaoh's daughter to entrust the baby to the care of Jochebed, Moses' mother. At the Splitting of the Reed Sea, Miriam inspired the women to call out to God in praise, dance, and sing songs of thanksgiving.<sup>5</sup> How could the people have forgotten her? Unfortunately, human nature is such that with the passage of time, it is easy to forget. There is an all-too-familiar adage that speaks in every generation, "What have you done for me lately?"

Therefore, with the death of Miriam, Hashem reminded the people of one of the main pillars of Jewish life: *hakaras hatov* -- gratitude. They had to remember that it was in the merit of Miriam that they had been granted the gift of water in the desert; to drive the lesson home, with her death, her well was lost. The people had to search for it so that forever after, they - and we, their descendants- might bear in mind this basic principle of *hakaras hatov*.

We are never to forget any kindness that was extended to us, even if it occurred centuries ago. To this day, we gather at our

Seder tables and recall with thanksgiving that time so long ago when God brought us forth from Egyptian bondage. We chant "*Dayeinu*" and enumerate in great detail every blessing that God bestowed upon us. However, it is not only on Pesach night that we are enjoined to thank God for His manifold blessings, but in our daily prayers as well. There is no aspect of life that we can ignore, from the most physical to the most spiritual, from the most simple to the most complex; we thank God for it all.

Unfortunately, too often, these expressions of thanks are just empty words, mouthed without thought or feeling. We would do well to take a few moments every day to consider God's manifold gifts, as well as the kindnesses that our families, friends, and many others have extended to us. The well of Miriam is an eternal testimony to our indebtedness. We dare not take anything for granted, but must count our blessings. If we would only absorb this simple teaching, our lives would have much more meaning; people who realize that they have been blessed are content and happy. In contrast, those who are ingrates know no peace, for instead of appreciating their own gifts, they are forever gazing enviously at others. If we think about it, we will quickly realize that to live by Torah values is to our benefit, and negating them is to our detriment and misfortune.

### UNWAVERING FAITH

The *parashah* begins, "This is the decree of the Torah ... and they shall take unto you a *parah adumah* (Red Heifer) ...."<sup>6</sup> The obvious question is, why does the text

preface the commandment regarding the Red Heifer with those puzzling words, "*This is the decree of the Torah ...*"? It seems that the text should simply state, "*This is the decree of the parah adumah - the Red Heifer.*"

But herein is a very profound teaching. Even as the laws of the *parah adumah*, which can simultaneously purify and contaminate, are beyond our human comprehension, similarly, all the laws of the Torah (even *mishpatim* - those laws that appeal to our human intelligence, such as "Thou shalt not steal") have elements that are inexplicable.

King Solomon was the wisest of all men and he proclaimed, "All this I tested with wisdom; I thought I could become wise; but it is beyond me."<sup>7</sup> Solomon was not speaking only of the laws pertaining to the Red Heifer, which he could not grasp; rather, he stated that *all of the Torah* is above man's reason. And *that is precisely why it is Torah* - the Word of God. We finite beings cannot possibly hope to understand the infinite.

One might argue however, that we have entire responsa on *ta'amei hamitzvos* - reasons for the mitzvos - but *ta'amei hamitzvos* doesn't really mean "reasons for the commandments"; rather, it means a *taste* for them. For example, when a mother encourages a child to eat, saying, "Taste it - it's delicious," does she want the child to eat the food because it tastes delicious, or does she want him to benefit from its nutritional content? The answer is obvious. Similarly, our Sages gave us *ta'am* - a *taste*

for the mitzvos, but that is not the ultimate reason for observing them.

Through the wisdom of our Sages, through our studies, we can better appreciate the majesty, the sanctity, and the blessings of the Torah, but we have to bear in mind that the *definitive* reasons for the mitzvos are beyond our reach.

Ultimately, if our relationship with God and our observance of the commandments are to survive the vicissitudes of time, they must be rooted in unwavering faith. Most of life is baffling; death, illness, sorrow - the ups and downs of daily existence - are very much like the Red Heifer; they are beyond the scope of our understanding, but our faith sustains us and keeps us going.

Even as a toddler cannot comprehend why his parent takes him to a physician, makes him go to sleep, and disciplines him, we cannot possibly know why certain things befall us. Next to God, we are not even toddlers. But despite this lack of understanding, the toddler trusts his parents implicitly and would panic if they were absent. Similarly, should we not have as much trust in our Heavenly Father as the toddler does in his parents? At Sinai, we accepted the Torah and proclaimed "*Na'aseh v'nishma.*" We will observe the mitzvos and study the Torah. This unequivocal declaration of observance and study laid the foundation for our relationship with the Almighty.

The moment we attribute our own reasons for the observance of the commandments, we also place them at risk, for "reasons" are debatable. Moreover, that which

appeals to us today may lose its attraction tomorrow. Our commitment must be *above* our human reasoning. It must be constant, immutable, and steadfast. So, why do we observe? Because "*Zos chukas HaTorah* - This is the decree of the Torah." This is God's decree.

### UNEQUIVOCAL FAITH

The need for this unequivocal faith is evidenced throughout the *parashah*: Miriam the prophetess and Aaron the High Priest die, and Moses, the loyal shepherd of the Jewish people is denied the right to enter the Promised Land. Our human reason might rebel against these apparently harsh decrees, but who are we to question the will of God? So, yes, the entire Torah is like the laws of the Red Heifer, beyond the bounds of our finite reasoning. But how else can it be, since it is God's Word?

This teaching is especially relevant to our generation, for while we pride ourselves on our intellectual acumen, we fall pitifully short on faith. We lack spiritual stamina and at the slightest crisis collapse and become angry, bitter, and alienated. Foolishly, we close the door on our only source of help - God - and feel that we are forced to walk alone through life's dark, treacherous valleys.

1. Numbers 21:1.
2. Ethics of the Fathers 1:12.
3. Numbers 20:29.
4. *Ibid.* 20:2.
5. Exodus 15:20.
6. Numbers 19:2.
7. Ecclesiastes 7:23.

See more great  
parsha essays at:  
[www.aish.com/tp/](http://www.aish.com/tp/)