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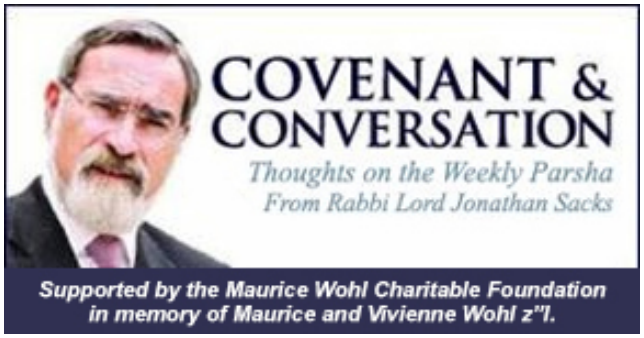

Healing the Trauma of Loss

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.[1] 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."[2] 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."[3]

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.[4] 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 ball-park, 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.[5] 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,[6] and the good we do never dies.[7]

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.

Embracing Torah

Death permeates this week's parasha. There are the obvious deaths - Moshe's older siblings, Miriam and Aharon - and the not-so-obvious deaths: At some point, very quietly, the Torah has "fast forwarded" and skipped 38

years between the previous parashah, Korach, and this week's parashah, Chukat; all the adults that left Egypt, the generation that had been condemned to death as a result of the sin of the spies, had perished. Moshe himself receives a death sentence; the new generation will enter the Promised Land without him.

Parashat Chukat is comprised not only of narrative that is rife with overtones of death, but also of laws that are concerned with the same subject. The parashah begins by introducing the laws of the red heifer ritual, used as an antidote to the impurity that results from contact with the dead.

This is by no means our first encounter with death in the Torah. From time immemorial, from the dawn of human experience, from the beginning of the Torah, people have been dying. On the level of biological reality, we understand death; it results either from sudden trauma which compromises the integrity of the biological system, or from systemic breakdown caused by years of wear and tear. But if the mechanics of death are part and parcel of life, it is the philosophical aspect of death that haunts and torments us, and it is regarding this aspect of death that the Torah's philosophy is remarkable.

In Parashat Chukat and elsewhere, we cannot escape the conclusion that death is not a necessary element of the human condition. The physical realities of death which we consider immutable facts of life need not be so; death as we know it was only one of the possible options for human existence, and it was the option chosen by man himself. Death became a part of our lives in the Garden of Eden, as a result of partaking from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Moreover, even in Eden, even after the sin, there was still another tree that was the antithesis of, or the antidote to death: the Tree of Life. There are, then, two antidotes to death: the red heifer ritual, which removes the spiritual stain left behind by death, and the Tree of Life, which completely eradicates death.

Taken together, these two disparate "antidotes" teach us that although on a biological level death seems inevitable, on a theological level, death need never have been a part of our existence. Had man refrained, as commanded, from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or, even after eating from it, had man eaten from the Tree if Life as well, death would have remained only a philosophical possibility.

What are these miraculous antidotes? What is the unfathomable secret that would make death external to human reality? What is this source of eternal life? It is Torah, the common denominator between the Tree of Life and the red heifer ritual. Both are identified as "Torah," not in a general sense but in a very specific sense. In the book of Proverbs (3:18) the Torah is described as a "Tree of Life to those who embrace it," while in our present parashah, the red heifer ritual is introduced as "the decree of Torah" ("*Zot Chukat haTorah*") -in a definitive, exclusive sense. Torah is as accessible as the fruit of a tree, and as mysterious as the most inscrutable Divine decree; it is both attainable yet of unfathomable, unlimited depth; Torah is the very source of eternal life. God Himself gave this gift to mankind at the dawn of creation, in the form of the Tree of Life - but man forfeited the rights to it. Later, in an almost unbelievable act of kindness, God gave mankind a second chance: At Sinai, God once again gave man access to this source of eternal life, in the form of Torah. Equally unbelievably, mankind once again failed to seize the opportunity.

Had things worked out differently at Sinai, had the Torah been properly received, death would have been vanquished. The first steps in this process were experienced at the foot of Mount Sinai: Tradition tells us that in preparation for receiving the Torah, all the sick were healed, all the infirm were restored to full health. Even today, so many hospitals are named in

commemoration of the great healing experienced at Mount Sinai. Had the people only stayed the course, had they not squandered the opportunity to take hold of the source of eternal life that is Torah, there would never have been a need for hospitals at all; sickness and death would have become memories, theoretical possibilities that belonged to the abandoned path of ignorance and impurity. Instead, when Moshe descended with the Tablets of Testimony, the people were busy singing and dancing in worship of a calf made of gold. We would do well to imagine how history would have played out had they instead danced and celebrated around Moshe as he descended from on high, grasping the Torah he had received from God's hand. By choosing the calf over Torah and turning their backs on Moshe, who was the ultimate symbol of God's transmission of Torah to mankind, they once again chose death over life.

As a result of their choice, they should have been eradicated on the spot; if not for Moshe's intercession, that is precisely what would have happened. Instead, their sin re-mapped the course of history, and continues to resonate in this week's parashah. According to a tradition cited by Rashi, the golden calf served as the impetus for the red heifer ritual: As a counterbalance to death, to the choice they made that was symbolized by a calf, they would be commanded to sacrifice this very special cow, a heifer of unique color; the mother cow would be used to "clean up" the mess created by the mischievous calf. The rebellion of the golden calf is thus transformed into a Torah experience, symbolized by the red heifer and all its mystery. The desire to create and worship a concrete god is combatted with an act of surrender to a law we do not understand, and the horror of the physical reality of death is tempered by the Torah's reminder, through the red heifer ritual, that this condition is not inevitable. Just as death is the result of our own poor choices, so, too, can eternal life be achieved by grasping the Tree of Life - Torah.

Tragically, the people's poor choices did not end at Mount Sinai. They continued to reject the source of life. Over and over, they failed to embrace Moshe, failed to take advantage of the opportunity to dance around him and rejoice in the man who was, for all time, the embodiment of Torah. Their litany of complaints seems unending; in Parashat Chukat, they are incapable of finding an appropriate way to address the water crisis, and revert to their habitual complaining, nagging, baiting and loss of faith. In responding to them, Moshe deviates ever so slightly from God's instructions, and momentarily ceases to embody Torah. For this, he forfeits the right to lead the people into the Land of Israel and the privilege of serving as the Messiah.

Had Moshe led the people into the Land of Israel, ushering in the messianic age, death would have been eradicated and history would have reached its apex. Sadly, the people never properly embraced Moshe. They continued to turn away from the Tree of Life and Moshe, our Torah Master. Death remained an inextricable part of their lives, and Moshe, the living antidote to death, perished along with them. But unlike them, when Moshe died, no one became impure; God Himself conducted the funeral and burial. Moshe had no part in the sin of the golden calf, and no ashes of the red heifer were needed after his passing.

All of us, descendants of those who failed time and time again to choose life, continue to grapple with death. For our ancestors, the ashes of the red heifer served as a reminder of what might have been had they made better choices. Sadly, after generations of similarly poor choices, even this spiritual antidote is no longer available to us. Instead, we live with death and impurity, facing the consequences of the choices we continue to make.

For a more in-depth analysis see: http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-chukat.html

Threatening Moves

Moav and Ammon were protected nations. Because of the two great women who would descend from them, Rus and Naamah respectively, the Torah forbade attacking them. But there was a difference between the two nations.

In their relations with Ammon, the Jewish people were not to strike a hostile posture or do anything that could be construed as a belligerent act. In their relations with Moav, however, they were allowed to make any threatening and belligerent moves, as long as they stopped short of outright hostilities. They could mass troops in full armor and battlefield gear at the Moabite border. They could whoop and yell and make bloodcurdling cries and brandish their swords in the air. But they could not shoot in anger. This explains why Moav was "frightened of the people."

Why does the Torah differentiate between Moav and Ammon in this regard? The Talmud explains (*Bava Kama* 38b) that the difference dates back to the circumstances of the birth of their founders. After Sodom was destroyed, Lot's daughters thought that they and their father were the only human beings left on the face of the earth. If the human race was to survive, they believed, they would have to conceive by their own father—which is what they did.

Each daughter gave birth to a son. The older one named her child Moav, "from my father," advertising the incestuous relationship. It is therefore permitted to threaten or harass the nation that emerged from this birth. The younger daughter named her child Ammon, "my nation," making no mention of the incestuous relationship with her father. She did not advertise to the world the illegitimacy of her son's birth. It is therefore forbidden to disturb the nation of Ammon with even the pretense of belligerency.

What is the connection between the birth of Moav and Ammon and their treatment at the hands of the Jewish people? The *Zohar* states that "*chutzpah* begets *chutzpah*." The older daughter was immodest and bold; she took an aggressive posture. Therefore, we are allowed to take an aggressive posture toward her descendants. The younger daughter was modest and discreet, the opposite of aggressive. Therefore, we are forbidden to be aggressive toward her descendants.

Consider these two women. Each had an incestuous relationship with her father. Each gave birth to an illegitimate son. The difference is that one felt shame, while the other did not. And this difference had ramifications for entire nations hundreds of years later.

One of the most profound changes on the contemporary cultural scene in America in the last forty years is the end of shame. People have always had failures and shortcomings, but they were not proud of them. They did not advertise them. They did whatever they did, and they concealed it and lied about it. Today, it is popular to be up front, to be open and honest about one's foibles, to come out of the closet and do your own thing. Shame is a thing of the past.

Which is better? Modest and dishonest or honest and immodest?

The Torah gave us the answer by rewarding the modesty and dishonesty of Lot's younger

daughter.

The Stunning Miracle

Bilam was not an ordinary person. He was a famous wizard, a man who wielded extraordinary power with his tongue. Those he blessed were blessed, and those he cursed were cursed. He did not command armies and navies, but he was more powerful than generals and admirals. His one word could lay waste an entire country.

Balak, king of Moav, summons this famous and powerful wizard to employ his power against the Jewish people. Bilam is fully aware that Hashem does not approve, but he goes nonetheless. Along the way, his donkey stops and refuses to take another step. Bilam strikes the donkey, and suddenly, miraculously, the donkey opens its mouth and speaks.

Never in the history of the world has such a thing happened. A talking donkey? A donkey holding a conversation with a man? Impossible. And yet, there it was, happening right in front of him. Did this stunning miracle give pause to Bilam? Did it make him rethink his travel plans?

Imagine yourself driving on the highway, and suddenly, your car stops. You pump the gas pedal again and again, and the car says to you, "Enough already! Can't you see that I don't want to go there?" What would you do? Would you keep trying to get the car started? Or would you sit back and reconsider your trip? There is little doubt that all of us would be shaken to our very roots in such a situation. But Bilam, the wise and extraordinary Bilam, the famous wizard Bilam, was nonchalant about it.

Sforno compares the amazing miracle of Hashem's allowing the donkey to speak to the verse (*Tehillim* 51:17), "O God, open my lips and let my mouth speak Your praises." In other words, human speech is also a miracle. The ability to communicate, to express, to articulate is no less a miracle than a donkey speaking. This should have been clear to Bilam.

Bilam should have said to himself, "My strength is my speech. Who gave me that power? Hashem. And the same God Who can give me the power of speech just gave the power of speech to a donkey! Just as a talking donkey is a miracle, a human being talking is also a miracle. This must be a Divine message to me, a sign that I should not use my power of speech in a manner that Hashem does not approve. I should turn back and abandon this evil journey."

Yet for some reason, all of this went right by Bilam. He never stopped to consider the significance of what he had just seen and the ramifications of what he intended to do. For all his skill and wisdom, he missed the clearest of all messages. He was stricken with a strange myopia.

What lesson does this hold for us? It is that if it can happen to Bilam it can happen to every one of us! If Bilam can be blinded, we can also be blinded. When a person is driven by some personal motive, whether it is money or power or whatever else, he becomes blinded to reality. He only sees what he wants to see. He sees those things that will advance his purpose and is impervious to all else.

There are none so blind as those who will not see.

A Different Destructive Approach

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

Parshat Balak tells the story of a Moabite king named Balak who is terrified by the Jewish people's presence on the border of his country. Since the Jews were recently victorious over the mighty armies of Sichon and Og (see Numbers 21:31-35), Balak knows that he will be unable to defeat them militarily. Instead, he tries a different approach: he hires a gentile prophet, Bilam, whom he instructs to curse the Jewish people and thereby destroy them (Numbers 22:5-6). (Balak's behavior has contemporary overtones. Today we see many examples of those who try to destroy Israel politically when they recognize that they will be unable to do so by force.)

The Zohar (3:210a) makes a statement that leads us to examine this story more carefully: Balak was a great sorcerer! If so, why did he need to hire Bilam to destroy the Jewish people? Why couldn't Balak simply have done the job himself?

We can explain this based on the Yesod V'Shoresh HaAvodah (2:3:12, citing Maimonides' "Moreh Nevuchim"), which states that when a Jew is attached to the Divine, he is protected from all negativity and strict judgments. According to this view, bad things happen to righteous people only in moments of interruption and distraction. This breaks their focus and severs their attachment to God, which creates an opening for negativity to enter.

The Netivot Shalom uses this idea to explain the mechanics of blessings and curses. A blessing creates connection and attachment to God, whereas a curse creates separation and distance from God. Bilam's power to curse therefore indicated his goal: to separate the Jewish people from their closeness to the Divine.

Now we can understand why Balak needed Bilam's help in destroying the Jews. As long as the Jewish people were attached to the Divine, they were immune from all negative forces. Even the most powerful sorcery and magic in the world could have no effect on them. Balak therefore wanted Bilam to curse the Jews in order to break their strong connection to God. If this connection could be broken, then Balak's evil sorcery would be able to penetrate and the Jews would be destroyed.

TRANSFORMING THE CURSE

As the parsha continues, however, we see that Bilam is unable to curse the Jews, despite his repeated efforts to do so. In fact, every time Bilam tries to curse the Jewish people, God forces him to utter words of blessing instead! The Talmud (Sanhedrin 105b) comments on this, saying, "From the blessings of that wicked man, you learn what was in his heart." Apparently, Bilam's true intentions were not completely disguised by the blessings he was forced to speak. How can we deduce Bilam's original intent?

The verse tells us, "God, your God ... transformed the curses into blessing, because God, your God, loves you" (Deut. 23:6). Blessings are the opposite of curses. Therefore, we should be able to deduce Bilam's true intentions by simply reading the opposite of what he said! For example, Bilam says, "He did not see any sin in Yaakov or any crookedness in Yisrael. The Lord his God is with him, and the King's friendship is within him" (Numbers 23:21). This blessing, like many of Bilam's blessings, implies a very close relationship to the Divine - a connection of warmth and attachment. From here we can deduce that Bilam would have preferred to curse us with utter separation and detachment from God.

Before Bilam utters his final blessing, the

Torah tells us that he "saw the Jewish people dwelling together in their tribes" (Numbers 24:2). This paints a picture of a nation that lives in harmonious, tight-knit communities. According to the Netivot Shalom, such a feeling of closeness and attachment stems from love - since, when we love someone, we want to be with them all the time. This teaches us an important lesson. In order to achieve a level of close relationship with God, we must first cultivate it among ourselves. Our efforts to develop deep connections with other people are an exercise to help us ultimately develop a deep connection with God.

We see a proof to this idea in the famous verse, "Love your fellow as yourself, I am God" (Leviticus 19:18). Why does God need to identify Himself at the end of this verse? Don't we know by now that God, the source of all the Torah's commandments, is the source of this commandment as well? The Netivot Shalom explains that the verse is not intended to teach us the source of the mitzvah; rather, it is teaching us the progression of our relationships. Only after we develop the ability to love other people as ourselves can we know how to experience closeness with the Divine.

ONE PLUS LOVE

We see a hint to this idea in the Hebrew word *echad* (literally, "one"), which symbolizes unity, oneness, attachment. The numerical value of the word *echad* is 13, and the value of *ahava* (love) is also 13. If we add *echad* to *ahava,* the result is 26: the same numerical value as the four-letter Name of God. We can learn from here that when one person attaches to another person with closeness and love, it ultimately leads to the same relationship with God.

A practical way of creating closeness and love in our own lives is to bless each other. By giving blessings, we can create an environment of love, acceptance, and connection. This brings us closer together, leading to the possibility of achieving closeness with God as well. If, however, we curse each other instead (God forbid), we create division and disunity among ourselves, which cuts us off from God, leaving us unprotected from negativity.

This is exactly the scenario that Balak hoped for when he hired Bilam to curse us. He did not want Bilam's curse to stand alone. Rather, Balak hoped that Bilam would incite us to curse each other, thereby driving a wedge between the Jewish people and God and making us susceptible to all the negative energies of the world.

May we never forget what happened in the times of Balak and Bilam. May we learn that the only way to protect ourselves from negative energy is by attaching ourselves to God, and that we can achieve closeness with God only by bringing ourselves closer to each other. May we learn that blessing each other creates a powerful force of unity, and may our blessings constantly pour forth and flow among us lovingly, protecting us from any calamity.