

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

HUKAT

Haftarah: Shoftim 11:1-33

JULY 15-16, 2016 10 TAMUZ 5776

DEDICATIONS: Happy birthday Ellen

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Editors Notes Perfect Vision and Life

Why does one portion follow another, especially when they appear to be out of order? Rabbi Abittan often taught us that the parshiot, the weekly portions and their order as set by Moses and their division as ordained by the rabbis offer profound lessons.

This week we read the portion of Chukat. Chukat follows Korach, Shelach and BeHaalotecha and their myriad problems. Chukat seems to offer the solution to the sins of the portions which preceded it.

In Avot we read: "Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: Jealousy, lust and the [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world."

Just as we find these three fatal sins among the first stories the Torah teaches, we find them in the portions we learned over the last three weeks.

At the very beginning of the Torah we are introduced to the first siblings, Kayen and Havel - Cain and Abel. The brothers both brought sacrifices to G-d. Hashem accepted the sacrifice of Abel but he did not accept the sacrifice of Cain. Blinded by a jealous rage, Cain killed Abel. Hashem tells Kayin, that he is to be cursed from the ground which opened its mouth to accept his brothers blood.

Twenty five hundred years later Hevel returns as Moses and Kayin as Korach. Korach has a chance to subdue his emotions but fails and is again blinded by jealousy. He begins a revolt against Moses and poetic justice is meted out as this time the ground opens up to swallow Korach, his cohorts and all that belongs to him. Again jealousy leads to death.

At the end of the first portion of Bereshit, the Torah begins to tell us the story of the generation of Noah. The world is filled with Chamas and will eventually be destroyed. Some rabbis describe the sin of the

generation as one of lust. Mankind in the pre-flood era cannot control their passions, lusts and desires. The rabbis tell us that not only did they commit adultery and form same-sex unions, they went so far as to formally betroth animals. This sounds crazy. A formal ceremony and marriage contract is written for Mr. Smith and Miss Piggy. An invitation is sent for the wedding of Ms Jones and Mr. Ed (a horse is a horse of course...) But scarier is the question we must ask as to how far our own generation is from this? (Last year, New York Supreme Court Justice Barbara Jaffe decreed that a pair of chimpanzees held at a university research facility are covered by the same laws that govern the detention of humans, effectively rendering the animals as legal "people" in the eyes of the law covered by a writ of habeas corpus — a basic legal principle that lets people challenge the validity of their detention. Luckily she came to her senses and later amended her court order to remove the habeas corpus language, essentially reversing the earlier decision. Still the Nonhuman Rights Project continues to battle in dozens of courts around the world.)

In the portion of BeHaalotecha we see that the people went after a different lust. The Jewish people complained against the manna which fell from heaven. They longed for the produce of Egypt, the garlic, the onions, the melons and the cucumbers. They lusted for meat and the consequences were bitter. They died with the meat in their mouths and descended to the graves of desire - Kivrot HaTaavah. Lust too ends in death.

And after the flood we come to the story of the Tower of Bavel. We call them the dor haflaga [generation seeking aggrandizement], and what did they want? "Let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose peak is in the heavens, AND LET US MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES..." They wanted all humankind to forever praise them. They yearned for Kavod; for honor and respect; for a name.

In the same way, the sin of the Meraglim, the spies, was related according to the rabbis as predominately a sin of those reaching for Kavod or honor. The Zohar explains that the Meraglim gave an evil report because they feared that by entering the land, they would be removed from their political positions. Therefore, by keeping the nation in the desert for as long as possible, they would retain their high-ranking

status. Their desire to maintain their honor leads to their death.

When we are driven by our heart, by our emotions and our passions, we become blinded and find ourselves descending in paths of self-destruction.

Last week we were discussing the paragraph of *sisit* which we read twice each day and which comes at the close of *Shelach*. "Do not follow (*losh taturu*) after your heart and your eyes after which you go astray."

My friend Jack asked if the command should have been reversed. Shouldn't the eyes precede the heart? Doesn't out eye see and the heart desires?

The rabbis explain that the Torah in its infinite wisdom understood human nature. Man sees what our minds condition us to see, or simply, we see what our thoughts make us see. We have all either taken or seen others take a Rorschach test. The Rorschach or inkblot test is a psychological test in which subjects' perceptions of inkblots are recorded and the analyzed. These inkblots take shape because of the way we think. Our thoughts shape our observations.

In other words, when our emotions of jealousy, lust and pursuit of honor take over, we think we see. In reality we are seeing a self-created mirage. We are seeing a false reality.

So how is one to control ones heart? How do we turn down the emotions? How do we regain our vision?

Rabbi Abittan would tell us to turn to the Torah. He would explain that the manner of attaining purification of character traits and the cleansing of man so that all our qualities, propensities, ambitions and longings in life are in accordance with the ultimate truth is through the study of Torah and by dedication to the learning and practice of all the details and minutia of its requirements. This fact is exemplified by *parshat chukat*.

The opening words this week state: "This is the *chukat hatorah*". There are laws we understand and there are those we don't. *Chukim* are the laws we don't comprehend. And even those (*mishpatim*) we think we understand and all mankind would practice even without a commandment to do so, we follow specifically because of the commandment. All the more so the ones we cannot understand.

The solution lies in a commitment to the *Chukat HaTorah* and through its study and practice man can achieve the ultimate goal of self-control; of not

becoming a slave to his desires, his emotions and his heart. Through the Torah man can achieve his fundamental goal in sublimating his ego. From the Torah, its laws and directives, man can draw the strength and wisdom necessary to ascend to the peak of spiritual heights and maintain perfect vision to boot.

Hallel Yafa Ariel was a 13 year old child asleep in her bed when she was murdered by a terrorist.

The parents of Hallel Yaffa Ariel z"l own and operate a vineyard (Ariel B'Yehuda). The Jewish community in Englewood is organizing a wine order from them to show support to the family after their tragic loss. Amichai and Rena, Hallel's parents, asked to express their gratitude to anyone who orders for this demonstration of love and solidarity. They invite everyone to visit their vineyard for a tour and to learn more about Hallel's life when you are next in the area. You can sign up to order here and you can also take part in creating an order for your own town:

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9 Facts You Need to Know about Hallel Ariel, Who Was Murdered in Bed by an Arab Terrorist By: JNi.Media / July 1st, 2016

1. Hallel Yafa Ariel, 13 and a half years old, was on summer vacation, having just finished the 8th grade.
2. Hallel was related to Israeli Minister Uri Ariel.
3. The terrorist-murderer was 17 years old, Muhammad Taraiyre, from the village of Bani Naim. He climbed the fence at 8:44 AM, was spotted by security cameras, but made his way quickly to the Ariel house and murdered Hallel Yafa by stabbing her dozens of times while she was asleep in her bed.
4. The terrorist was neutralized by a member of the civilian Rapid Response Team. Another member of the team, Yehoshua Gilboa, was severely injured. The determination and drive of the RRT stopped this terror event from spreading any further.
5. The funeral will begin at the family's home in Ramat Mamre "Kharsina" neighborhood of Kiryat Arba. The procession will conclude at the Ancient Jewish Cemetery in Hebron where the burial will take place. The funeral is expected to draw Ministers, Knesset Members, Rabbis and other spiritual and cultural leaders.

6. The Jewish Community of Hebron puts the blame for this murder squarely on the heads of the Palestinian Authority. The Jewish Community of Hebron calls on the State of Israel to cease supporting the PA and Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the murderous organization behind the incitement and today's barbaric act. The PA was created by the State of Israel under the Oslo Accords, and continues to survive daily only due to the support of the State of Israel. It is ridiculous to support this Jihadist monster and then accuse it of terrorism.

8. The local Arab population works in Kiryat Arba without any sense of discrimination. Even thirty minutes after the murder, Arabs were seen working in the town unhindered. Our fight is not with the Arabs, but with the Jihad — a supremacist ideology.

9. This morning Rina Ariel, the mother of the victim, spoke at the hospital, saying, "My daughter was simply asleep, calm and serene, she was happy, and a terrorist came to her bed, in Kiryat Arba, and killed her... I want everyone to see our pain and to come console us. Hallel, may your memory be a blessing."

Israeli Lives Matter

July 6, 2016 By: Ellen Hershkin

National president of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America.

Within hours after the terrorist attacks in Brussels earlier this year, landmarks around the globe — including the Eiffel Tower, Brandenburg Gate, Trevi Fountain and the World Trade Center — were bathed in lights showing the red, yellow and black of the Belgian flag.

Belgian colors likewise adorned hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Facebook pages — much as the French tricolour appeared after the Paris attacks last November.

My heart goes out to the families of the victims and to the people of Belgium — a nation that is one of the pillars of European unity, stability and democracy. Political leaders, media and the informed public routinely, unambiguously and rightly condemn terrorist attacks against American, Belgian, French, Danish or Indonesian targets.

But when it comes to terrorism, not all victims are equal.

Since October, more than 30 Israelis have been murdered in a wave of premeditated knife and shooting attacks, with more than 200 injured. Israelis today are on constant alert as they conduct their daily lives — working, going to school, grocery shopping, waiting for a bus or walking down the street. Parents have been murdered with knives or hatchets in front

of their children. Attack victims have included pregnant women, teenagers and toddlers. When an attack takes place in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, there is often a deafening silence from the world, an effort to conflate the killing of Israelis — mostly civilians — with a broader "cycle of violence" or, at worse, a pivot to suggest that Israel bears responsibility. These are textbook cases of blaming the victim.

This double standard is often reflected in news reporting. A typical headline (from The New York Times) reads "Terrorists Kill Dozens in Brussels." Last December, the Los Angeles Times failed to note that two of the Palestinians referred to in the following headline — "Four Palestinian Teens Killed in Israeli Violence" — were killed as they carried out stabbing attacks against Israelis and that the other two died in a violent demonstration on the Gaza-Israel border. Israel has seen attacks on civilians take the form of airline hijackings, suicide bombings, cross-border raids and the murder of its Olympic athletes. It has been the victim of large-scale attacks and now the protracted wave of knifings. Proportional to the country's population, those 30 Israeli fatalities over the past six months are the equivalent of 1,200 American lives.

Many American political leaders have expressed solidarity and spoken out for Israel's right to defend its citizens from attack. Vice President Biden's recent expressions of U.S. sympathy for the victims and support for Israel have been especially forceful and eloquent. But where is the global sense of outrage? Just as Israel is often deemed uniquely qualified for criticism over exercising self-defense, it also appears to be uniquely unworthy of outrage in the face of terror attacks. But no person or nation's position against terror can stand scrutiny if it excludes one country — explicitly or by omission.

The cruel irony is that many countries have been able to improve security — from airport screening to intelligence gathering to the functioning of hospital trauma centers — by relying on Israeli experience and expertise.

The people of Israel need our help. The United States must lead the international community, calling on political leaders of all nations that purport to fight terrorism to speak out loudly against attacks on its citizens, and to pressure Palestinian leaders to do all they can to stop the targeting of Jews for murder. I urge all who read this message, in any city or nation, to insist that your leaders and local media give the same consideration to Israeli terror victims that they would give to victims in your own community, or in any country other than Israel. I issue this call as someone who has seen the carnage first hand. Hadassah's two hospitals in

Jerusalem — hospitals renowned for treating all patients alike — have treated more than 170 victims, as well as many of the perpetrators, during the six-month wave of brutal attacks from knives, guns, hatchets and cars.

If our hospitals can practice non-discrimination toward people who seek to do us harm, the world can act the same way to support people in harm's way. Discrimination is odious when it denies people their right to life — or the recognition of our common humanity — based on race, nationality or religion. It's time for the world to understand that Israeli lives matter.

Summary of the Perasha by Rabbi Aron Tendler

1st Aliya: The laws of the Parah Adumah- the Red Heifer, are detailed.

2nd Aliya: In Nissan of the 40th year, Miriam died. The well dried up and the nation gathered against Moshe and Aharon to complain.

3rd Aliya: The "hitting of the rock" occurred and Moshe and Aharon were refused entry into Eretz Yisroel.

4th Aliya: Moshe requested from Edom permission to travel through their land on the way to Eretz Yisroel. Edom refused.

5th Aliya: Aharon died and Elazar succeeded his father as Kohain Gadol. They encountered the southern Cannanities (13 miles west of the Dead Sea) and bested them in battle. Following Aharon's death the protective clouds departed and the nation began to complain about the living conditions. Hashem sent poisonous snakes to attack the nation and Moshe was instructed to create the "copper snake on a stick" o miraculously save the bitten.

6th & 7th Aliya: The nation traveled to Yeshimon — northeast of the Dead Sea. In the conclusion of Chukas, the nation was refused access to the lands of Sichon and Og and Moshe led them into victorious battle against them.

FROM THE JERSEY SHORE NEWSLETTER "There was no water for the assembly." (Bemidbar 20:2)

Our perashah records the passing of Miriam, the sister of Moshe and a prophetess in her own right. Immediately after that the Torah says that there was no water to drink, which teaches us that it was in the merit of Miriam that the Israelites had water from a miraculous well all those years. Now that Miriam

passed away the well dried up. The Gemara (Gittin 60a) states that the law of the red cow mentioned in the beginning of the perashah was given to Israel during their second year in the wilderness on the day the Mishkan was erected. Miriam died during the fortieth year.

Rabbi Simha Zissel Broide zt"l (quoted by Rabbi O. Alport) points out that the perashah starts with the law of Parah Adumah and then skips thirty-eight years to the incident of Miriam's death. In the episode of Miriam's death, Moshe and Aharon made an error regarding the rock and Hashem said they would not enter the Land of Israel. In Pirkei Abot (5:4) it says that Israel on ten occasions tested Hashem's patience. The Gemara (Arachim 15a) enumerates the ten challenges, all of which occurred during the first eighteen months in the desert with the exception of the incident involving Moshe bringing forth water from the rock which happened in the final year.

In other words, all of the tests to which the Jewish People subjected Hashem occurred either during the first eighteen months after the exodus from Egypt or in the final year just prior to their entry into Eress Yisrael. What happened in the thirty-eight years in between? Rav Simha Zissel explains that the entire nation remained perfect during that period. The obvious question is: if the entire nation was able to remain pure and unsullied for thirty-eight consecutive years, what happened during the first two years and the last year that caused them to repeatedly challenge and test Hashem?

The answer is based on a powerful insight into human psychology. The first year and a half and the final year were periods of transition, as the Jewish People were switching from one state of life and spiritual development to the next. The initial entry into the desert was right after the exodus and the end was just before the entry into the new Land, where they would have to live a more natural lifestyle.

The common thread is that both the first year and the last were periods of tremendous upheaval in their lives. When the person is in the state of flux, he is not at peace and therefore is vulnerable to errors. Therefore when a person is about to transition into a new situation in life, whether it is a new job, a new home, getting married or becoming parents, the person should be aware that upheaval, even for a good cause, inherently reduces a person's tranquility and a sense of balance. At such moments he must exercise additional caution to prevent himself from stumbling. It's a lesson in life.

Now we are in transition into the summer months and the potential for renewal and growth, and unique challenges present themselves. Let's use that time to our advantage. Rabbi Reuven Semah

The symbol for healing that we are all familiar with is a serpent on a staff, and this comes from the perashah of the week. When the Jewish people spoke against Hashem and Moshe, they were bitten by snakes and other animals, and turned to Moshe for help. Hashem told him to fashion a snake onto a staff and let the Jewish people look at it, and they will be cured. The Rabbis ask, "Does a snake on a stick cure just by looking at it?"

The answer is that as they looked up, their heart turned to Hashem, and they realized that our Father in Heaven can do anything, and they rededicated themselves to Him. Then Hashem removed the illness because it was just a tool to get them closer to Him.

As we go through life today, we invariably have to go to doctors and use medicine. Although we don't see the serpent on the staff, we must "look upwards" and remember that Hashem is the Master Healer. He is the one who sent the illness and He is the one who can remove it. Every time we take even an aspirin, we should say a small prayer that Hashem should bring us to a complete recovery. We should also rededicate ourselves to Him and to His service so that the need for the illness will not be there, and this way we will have a full recovery. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Two against One

When several people get together, it is not unusual for one to interrupt another's sentence with a quick "I know what you mean." Individuals even do this during a one-on-one conversation, impolite as it may be. But, very often, "know-it-all" really do not know what others mean to say. In fact, their guesses are frequently contrary to what is intended. Think back to situations when someone cut you off while you were trying to express an idea, and you will realize that more often than not, the interrupter did not understand what you wanted to convey.

The "interrupt syndrome" is caused by people wrongly assuming that everyone thinks the way they do. Our Sages teach, "A hacham (wise person) does not interrupt when another is speaking" (Pirkei Avot 5:9). Wise people spend their time listening and learning from all those whom they meet. The wisdom of Creation suggests that Hashem gave us two ears and one mouth so that we would understand that listening is more beneficial to our growth than speaking. It's two against one!

When someone is trying to get a point across and you think you've got it, don't interrupt. Your assumed conclusion may be correct, but it may also be wrong. Listen

and learn. The minute of self-control will help you grow wiser as you opt for silence rather than fast talk. (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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Believing in Repentance

Parashat Hukat tells one of the most perplexing stories in the Humash – the story of Meh Meriba, when Moshe Rabbenu struck a rock in order to produce water for the people. G-d reacted angrily to what Moshe did, and decreed that he would die in the wilderness and not cross into the Land of Israel together with the rest of Am Yisrael. Numerous different interpretations have been offered to explain the precise nature of Moshe's sin, and why he was punished so severely.

There is one answer that has been suggested which presents us with a very important lesson. When Moshe assembled the people by the rock, he spoke to them indignantly, shouting, "Listen, O rebellious ones!" (20:10). This was an inappropriate insult which the people did not deserve. Our Sages teach us that if we ever see a righteous person sin, we must realize that he immediately acknowledges his wrongdoing and repents. Undoubtedly, then, Moshe Rabbenu, one of the greatest Sadikim who ever lived, repented immediately after making this inappropriate remark to Beneh Yisrael. He recognized that he had spoken improperly, and regretted this mistake. This sin disturbed him to the point where he could not bring himself to fulfill G-d's command to speak to the rock to produce water. After having sinned with his mouth, Moshe assumed that his mouth was now tainted and thus incapable of producing water. And so he lifted his staff and struck the rock, instead.

Moshe's mistake was that he did not, for that brief moment, trust in the power of repentance. We must all believe with firm conviction that once we regret our mistake and sincerely resolve never to repeat it, G-d accepts our repentance. One of the most dangerous weapons in the Satan's arsenal is the notion that we are too sinful to repent, that we are permanently tainted, or that G-d despises us because of our sins. Nothing could be further from the truth. Any parent can attest to the fact that he or she continues to love, cherish and care for the child no matter how many times the child misbehaves. We are all G-d's children, and so certainly after we sincerely repent, G-d welcomes us back with open arms and loves us just as He did before. Teshuba, as the Rambam writes, has the ability to change a person's status, from being repulsed by G-d to being beloved by G-d.

The Satan wants us to believe that our repentance is useless, so that we will continue acting wrongly. We must constantly reinforce our belief in the power of repentance, in G-d's loving mercy and compassion, and realize that we are always able and encouraged to repent.

And so G-d responds to Moshe's act by saying that he failed to "believe" – "Ya'an Lo He'emantem Bi," and that he failed "to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel" (20:12). By momentarily losing faith in the power of Teshuba, Moshe conveyed the dangerous, mistaken message that Teshuba does not always work. And for this he was punished.

Too often, the heavy weight of our baggage from our past hinders us from advancing and moving forward. The story of Meh Meriba should remind us that Teshuba is always an option, and an option we must pursue. If we ever feel that G-d despises us and is no longer interested in us, we must immediately recognize these thoughts as the Satan's clever scheme to ensnare us in the trap of despair.

King David famously exhorts in Tehillim, "Sur Me'ra Va'aseh Tob" – "Turn away from evil and do goodness." This has been explained to mean that we must turn away from the thought that we are evil, and instead convince ourselves of our innate goodness and potential for greatness. This is the mindset we are to have, regardless of the mistakes we have made, trusting in our ability to change and in G-d's infinite mercy and compassion.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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**Rabbi Wein
A MESSY WORLD**

It is fairly obvious to any unbiased observer of our current world scene that things are pretty messy right now. The economic markets are reeling from the unexpected decision of the British electorate to leave the European Union. The sectarian wars in the Moslem world in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Saudi Arabia continue without mercy, without abatement and with no exit strategy in sight.

The United States is experiencing a period of racial tension, a throwback to a similar situation a half-century ago. The difference being that back then the naïve amongst us thought that legislation,

governmental programs and other social initiatives would solve the problem of racial friction and discrimination. But currently, no one really believes that the underlying issue of race and the legacy of slavery that shaped it are really on the way to solution and amelioration.

Iran blatantly continues its aggressive military buildup, certainly ignoring the spirit, if not even the letter, of the nuclear disarmament agreement that it signed. And, the world powers that agreed to that treaty are powerless to truly enforce it. All in all, the world scene is fraught with difficulties and dangers. And there is certainly no strong leadership present in the United States or the Western world that seems able to deal with this messy situation.

In the midst of all of this there is an election campaign beginning in the United States to elect a new president with neither of the candidates currently inspiring much confidence or hope for the future. It seems that we have literally painted ourselves into the proverbial corner.

Here in Israel we are living under the shadow of a possible earth shaking political scandal that will certainly end the life of the present fragile coalition government. I hope that there is nothing to the rumors currently circulating in the Israeli media regarding this potential scandal. But, we have witnessed before how the mighty and powerful have been brought down by their misdeeds, greed and bad judgment.

It would be naïve in the extreme to think that this scenario cannot repeat itself once more. In the best of circumstances, the mere possibility of this potential disgrace is disturbing and undoubtedly will have political and social effects.

Here in Israel, as in the United States (as pointed out above,) the ugly specter of ethnic discrimination and strife has reared its head once again. In Israel we also thought that the bad, old days of the 1950s and 1960s were behind us and that we were past the worst parts of the Ashkenazic-Sefardic ethnic divide. However, some of the enlightened ones amongst the Israeli Left have reignited the fires of attack and discrimination against the Sefardic population by disparaging, insulting and demeaning their society, culture and beliefs. This naturally has led to a heated back-and-forth debate that really accomplishes nothing and only infects old wounds once again. All of this makes for a truly hot summer.

The difficulties outlined above will eventually work themselves out for good or for better. Life constantly

brings problems and issues to the fore. The main thing is to be able to isolate the truly existential problems from the passing distractions that will always abound. The distractions are usually more fascinating than having to deal with the pertinent, basic issues involved in national and personal life.

Survival of the Jewish people, as a uniquely Jewish people, is the major issue that confronts us in this generation. All of the distractions may impinge upon the central issue and perhaps even influence its direction and solution, but the distractions should never become the key issue itself.

So, governmental leaders here in Israel will come and go, ethnic frictions will continue to exist even though we hope they will be lessened and ameliorated, the world economy will eventually stabilize itself and today's distractions will enter tomorrow's books of history. But the issue of Jewish survival, here in our ancient homeland and in the Diaspora, is capable of being dealt with only by our continuing efforts and consistent fortitude.

We should invest more of our resources and talents in dealing with the central issue and let some of the distractions die on the vine from benign neglect. Our efforts should be concentrated in building Jewish loyalty and traditional knowledge in the next generation of Jewish youth. The great maxim of Hillel applies here – if I am not for myself than who will be for me? And so it is

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks 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 Chukat. 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. Chukat 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.

Life after death and the resurrection of the dead are fundamental, non-negotiable principles of Jewish faith, but Tanakh is conspicuously quiet about them. It is focused on finding God in this life, on this planet, notwithstanding our mortality. "The dead do not praise God," says the Psalm. God is to be found in life itself 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, Hilkhos Avel 13:11.

[3] Sefer ha-Hinnukh, command 16.

[4] Maimonides, Eight Chapters, ch. 7, based on Pesachim 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.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

“They shall take for you a red heifer, perfect” (19:2)

Included in “perfect” is also the requirement that also the color should be perfect without any hairs of a different color. Here we see the possibility of understanding this mystifying procedure of the purification by the Parah Adumah. This heifer, with a beautiful coat of red hair without a blemish even in the perfection of its color, was therefore a rarity, and it was so expensive that its owner became wealthy when he sold it to the public use (Kiddushin 31A).

Yet despite its striking beauty, this enormously costly creature could accomplish nothing of the purification procedure while it was still in a state of its beauty. Only after slaughtering it and then burning it into ashes could it achieve the purpose of purifying the unclean person or object.

This symbolizes a vastly important parallel: The Israelite is to Hashem the most precious object in the world. Even one Israelite is more valuable to Hashem than the entire Universe (“For my sake the world was created” – Sanhedrin 37A). Yet throughout his life he is susceptible to sin or even to entire self-ruination, no matter how perfect he is. The most beautifully righteous man becomes truly purified

only when he dies and is interred and his body turns to ashes, exactly like the Parah Adumah.

“Greater are the righteous after their death, more than in their lifetime” (Hullin 7B) and the procedure of the Parah Adumah comes to emphasize the importance of the Afterlife as the culmination of all men's efforts to gain true excellence in the eyes of Hashem. The righteous, that bask in the splendor of Hashem's favor, perceive that their death and destruction of their bodies constituted the final purification.

The Israelite individual is the most precious object in the entire Universe while he is alive. Yet his ultimate and most sublime excellence is achieved when he becomes ashes in the earth.

Quoted from “Journey Into Greatness” by Rabbi Avigdor Miller Z'TL

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