

JewishTimes

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ANGEL OF DEATH

It's real, but
what is it?

WHEN THE GOOD SUFFER

When and
where?

HITTING THE ROCK

Impact of
the leader's
actions

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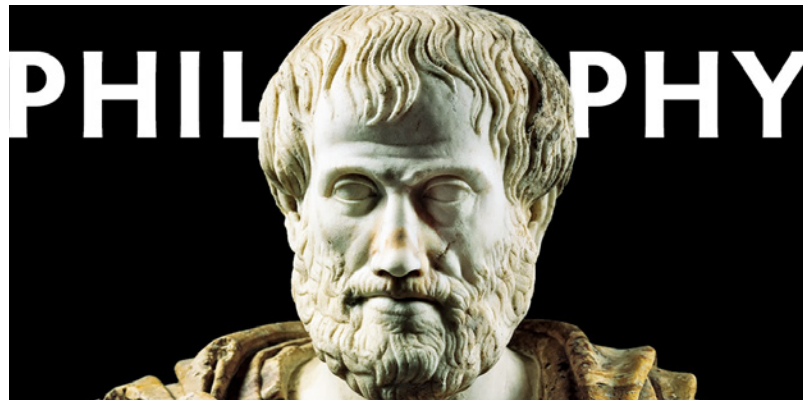
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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

What is the “Angel of Death?”

RABBI: The angel that Aaron seized (Rashi) during the Korachian revolt halted the plague. Satan afflicted Job. With these metaphors, the rabbis teach that “*human instincts, Satan and the Angel of Death refer to the same matter.*” The rabbis mean that our 1) instincts cause us to 2) turn aside—“Satan” means to veer off the proper path—and this ultimately leads us to 3) death if followed. Aaron “seized” the false opinions of the Jews (their angels of death) which halted the need for the plague (Aaron corrected their flawed views). Satan harming Job means that Job’s instincts (his own Satan) caused God to distance Himself from Job. Job’s instincts harmed himself.

Yes, the “Angel of Death” exists, but it refers to our instincts, for if we follow them, we earn possible physical death, but certainly spiritual death. ■

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When the Good Suffer

YESHIVA STUDENT: “Once permission is given to the destroyer it does not distinguish between good and evil.” I never understood this in light of Psalms: “Though the misfortunes of the righteous be many, God will save him from them all, keeping all his bones intact, not one of them being broken” (Psalms 34:20,21). “God is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity. He fulfills the wishes of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and delivers them” (Psalms 145:18,19). And many other verses in Psalms. If one is perfectly righteous, he does not deserve any evil. How then do we understand that statement about the destroyer? Thank you.

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT: Psalms refers to individuals. The destroyer refers to masses, where even the righteous will suffer. Baba Kama 60a:

“And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning” (Exodus 12:22). If the [firstborn] plague [in Egypt] was not decreed upon the Jewish people, why were they not permitted to leave their homes? Once permission is granted to the destroyer to kill, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. And not only that, but it begins with the righteous first, as it is stated in the verse: “And I will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked” (Ezekiel 21:8). The righteous precedes the wicked in this verse, teaching they were killed first. Rav Yosef cried and said: “Are all these righteous people also compared to nothing when calamity strikes?” Abaye said to him: “It is goodness for the

righteous that they die first, as it is written, ‘The righteous is taken away because of the evil to come’ (Isaiah 57:1), so that he will not have to endure the suffering that will befall the people.”

The righteous were not saved. But once they too had to die along with the other Jews, God exhibits kindness and kills them first to spare their witness of the tragedy. “Chanoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him” (Gen. 5:24) Rashi says, “He was a righteous man, but his mind was easily induced to turn from his righteous ways and to become wicked. The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore took him away quickly and made him die before his full time.” God killed him earlier than his time to spare him from turning evil.

But the righteous not being spared is a good question. Why must God wipe out the righteous as well? We don’t know why. We can’t know certain areas. Moshe asked God to reveal the concept of the good suffering. We don’t know what God told him. We are not ready for an answer.

Gur Aryeh was one of the 4 commentators on Rashi. He says (Gen. 6:13), “Once permission is granted to the destroyer to kill, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked” applies only when the righteous person is together with the wicked. But if he is not, he is spared.” God doesn’t perform a miracle to spare the righteous when the masses are killed. Pinchas was given God’s “Treaty of Peace.” Had God killed only those sinning sexually, it would have removed free will [which God never removes. Seeing a sinner die forces one not to sin, but not out of free will. It’s akin to anyone eating non-kosher suddenly being struck by lightning. No one would continue eating non-kosher.] Pinchas acted to make a kiddish Hashem and killed those

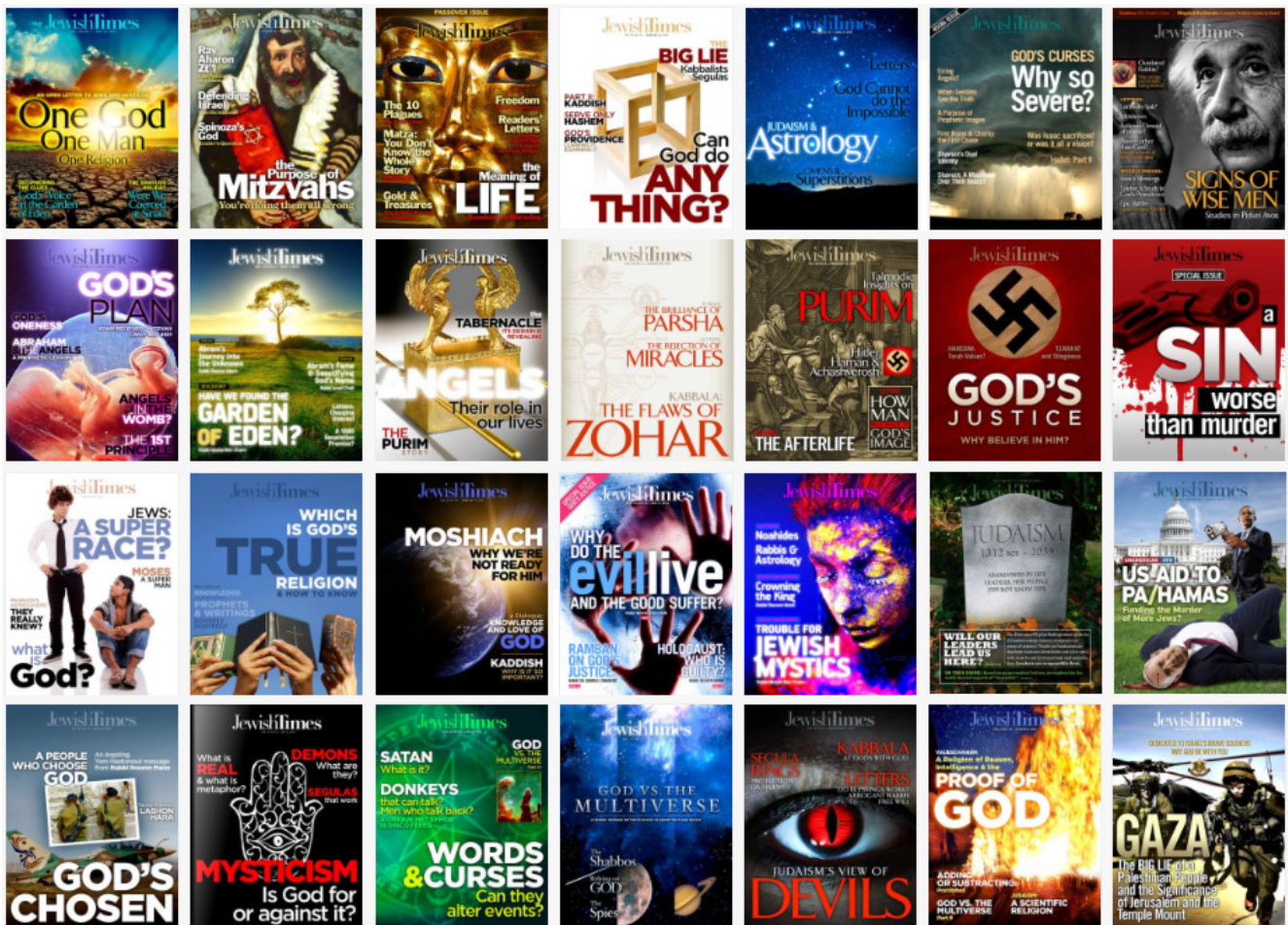
sinners, performing what God could not. God recognized his proper act through granting him the treaty. Avraham inquired of God’s justice for Sodom. But below a certain number of righteous people, God would not spare even the righteous. (Lot was spared for extraneous reasons.) But the righteous not being spared is a good question. ■



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RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The first Rashi on the Parsha explains the word “chukas.” The root—chok—is typically understood to refer to a law that has no reason behind it, including the Red Heifer. And on the surface, Rashi appears to comply with this sentiment:

Because Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel saying, “What is this command and what is the reason for it?” Therefore it is written “chukas”: “A decree from before Me (says God) and you have no permission to be suspicious about it [to find a flaw].”

A simple reading of Rashi would imply that we are told not to think into this law of the Red Heifer. But we must take a step back and realize a Torah fundamental.

God's universe reveals astounding brilliance. From the atom to galaxies we find the greatest wisdom: in the substance of matter itself, in creation's designs, and mostly in natural laws. This indicates God's desire to share His wisdom with beings designed to perceive it. And one of the most astounding creations is the human intellect and man's sense of self-awareness. Therefore, to suggest that chukim (statutes) are bereft of any wisdom, denies this fundamental that God permeates all with His wisdom, as He desires man to appreciate His wisdom. Both, nature and Torah, were designed with the intent that man recognize the Creator's brilliance in both.

A wise rabbi once distinguished between mitzvah and a chok. Mitzvah is a law which a person would arrive at with his own thinking, such as murder and stealing. But chok is a law that man would not arrive at on his own, such as wearing black boxes (tefillin), resting on Sabbath as a way of recognizing God, or laws of kosher. However, this does not mean that these laws do not share the same brand of brilliance as every other law. Chok is distinguished from mitzvah only in the fact that man would not have innovated such a structure, but not that they are bereft of great wisdom. What then is the reason behind the Red Heifer? The rabbi said that a human being cannot

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state with any certainty what the primary goal is of any mitzvah or chok [only God knows for certain], but we can identify benefits.

What Rashi means by not being “suspicious” about this law, is that one should not view it negatively or emotionally or make one’s understanding the determinant of following it. But certainly one should intelligently investigate every law and seek its profound ideas, just as one seeks wisdom in nature. We learn that King Solomon knew the reasons for all laws and chukim except for some element of the Red Heifer. That means that he understood the ideas contained in all other chukim.

It is also notable that the beginning of Rashi where he says that Satan (i.e., man’s instincts) and the nations of the world (those nations lacking understanding) are the only ones that find fault with the Red Heifer. Thus, the intellect and the Jewish nation does not find fault with it. This supports the idea that even a chok reveals God’s brilliance. Let’s now understand the Red Heifer.

Mitzvahs with Shared Principles Offer Clues

I understand that a person who speaks evil and degrades others (Lashon Hara) has committed a crime. Thus, remedial action is required. But what about fulfilling a mitzvah of burying the dead? Why is there a “response” of sprinkling the ashes of a Red Heifer on one who was in contact with the deceased? Meaning, why should a mitzvah—a positive act of burial—require a remedial act? Remedy for what? Additionally, why were the Jews in Egypt who fulfilled the command of the Paschal Lamb required to paint their doorposts and lintels with the lamb’s blood? In these two cases, the Jews fulfilled God’s command. A remedial act suggest the presence of some flaw in mitzvah. That is unreasonable. Again, Torah has no remedial act after one prays, makes a blessing, or performs any other mitzvah: the mitzvah has no follow-up activity or need for correction! Yet, one who buries the dead or sacrificed the Paschal Lamb requires some additional act. It’s difficult to grasp a remedial response to a mitzvah. As always, God’s generous clues are found in all mitzvahs.

When burning the Red Heifer into ashes, Torah commands us in a very

unusual activity: we must throw into its flames a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. Ibn Ezra writes:

This [the cedar, hyssop and red string] is just like the leper, and there I hinted to a principle (Ibn Ezra, Num. 19:6).

Ibn Ezra is referring to his commentary on Leviticus 14:4:

Behold, the leper, the leprous house, and the defilement by contact with the dead are related...and behold, they too are similar to the form of the Egyptian Exodus.

Just as these three items—the cedar branch, hyssop plant, and the red string—are used in the Red Heifer rite, Leviticus 14:4 commands that the leper’s remedial practice also include these three items. Nowhere else in Torah is this found. What’s the connection? Regarding the leper (the speaker of Lashon Hara), two birds are taken, one is killed, and the live bird together with the cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string are dipped in the dead bird’s blood, and the live bird is let loose over a field. Regarding the Exodus, Ibn Ezra refers to the practice of dipping the hyssop in the lamb’s blood and painting the doorposts and lintel. Here too the hyssop is used, but we note the omission of the cedar branch and red string.

Ibn Ezra points us to three seemingly unrelated institutions that share identical elements, a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. These three are burnt with the Red Heifer, they are bloodied in connection with the leper, but the hyssop alone is used in connection with the Passover Exodus during the plague of the firstborns, as the Torah says:

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side-posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you (Exod. 12:22,23).

What is Ibn Ezra’s “principle” to which he clues us by linking these three areas to the cedar, hyssop and red string? The Rabbis also note that the hyssop is the smallest plant, and the cedar is the largest. What is that clue?

My friend Jessie said, “Death creates distortions.”

I thought about her words and immediately realized she was keying in to the common denominator. All three cases deal with death. The Red Heifer removes ritual impurity from one who was in contact with the dead; the leper’s speech was a crime of character assassination (the Rabbis teach that evil speech equates to murder), and the lamb’s blood saved our firstborns from the Plague of Firstborn Deaths. In all three cases, a person was somehow related to death. The fact that all three cases require some rite, indicate that without that rite, man is left in unacceptable conditions. What are those conditions?

Interesting is that once Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God feared he would eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. Therefore God placed cherubs (childlike figures) and a flaming spinning sword to guard the path to the Tree of Life (Gen. 4:24). Meaning, as soon as man sinned and he received the punishment of death, he immediately desired immortality. But God did not allow man to attain immortality through the Tree of Life. Instead, God struck a balance in man’s imagination: he would perceive his youth (cherubs) while also confronting the unapproachable spinning sword which represented his death. God deemed it proper that in place of the extreme which Adam desired—immortality through the Tree of Life—an equilibrium be achieved.

He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end (Koheles 3:11).

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Ibn Ezra comments, “everything beautiful in its time” refers to death in old age, while “He hath set the world in their heart” refers to the feeling of immortality. While death is a reality and man cannot lie to himself that he is immortal, he also cannot face his death daily; it is too morbid. Man requires a sense of permanence if he is to live happily. A balance is again detected in this verse. How does this apply to our three cases?

Death: The Distortion

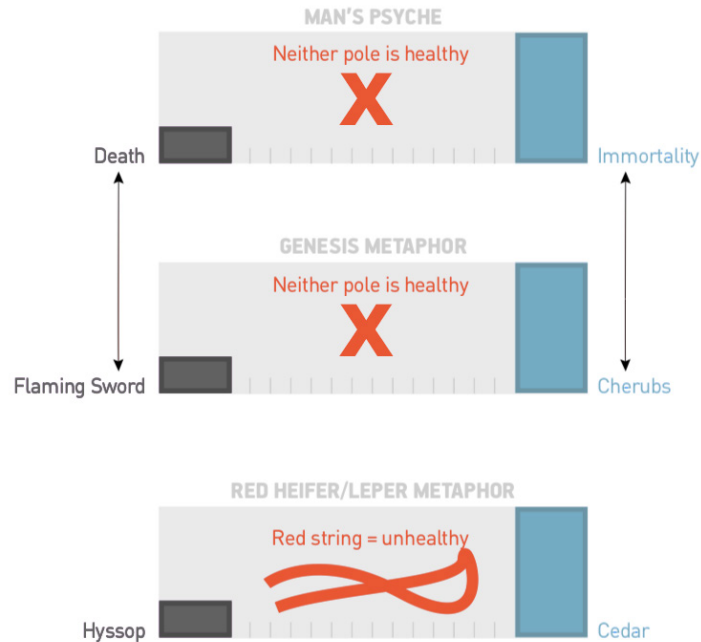
Why does a person who performs a mitzvah of burying the dead require the ashes of the Red Heifer be sprinkled on him? He did nothing wrong, and in fact, he had no choice but to follow God’s command of burial. Furthermore, what is this strange practice?

We must first recognize that it is not only errors or sins that require religious remedial practices, but even positive actions can negatively affect us. Jessie is correct: when one is in contact with the dead, we notice a denial. The tension at funerals evoked by facing one’s own death generates powerful denial. People find eulogies difficult, and will laugh hard at the smallest drop of humor to break that tension. Like Adam be punished with mortality, we “rush for the door” seeking immortality. But that extreme (the immortality fantasy) is as equally unhealthy as harping on our day of death, however true it is. Contact with the dead creates a denial that must be corrected. We are not allowed to deny our mortality. The “ashes” of the Red Heifer signify that a body—human or animal—is but dust or ashes. The body is not the definition of a human being. When confronting the dead, we must immediately correct our denial of our own mortality by embracing the ashes sprinkled on us, to remind us that just as the heifer is but dust, we too ultimately pass on. When faced with death, as we rush to deny it, we must strike a balance.

The one who speaks evil destroys others through character assassination. He did not treasure life, similar to one who murders. In his fantasy alone, he has “set things aright” by maligning another. God does not approve of a person venting his aggression. This extreme requires a fix. The evil talker is smitten with leprosy, which Aaron said is like death (Num. 12:12). He must also shave all his head,

eyebrows and all hair. Why? One’s identity is very much tied to how he wears his hair, and his personality is expressed with his eyebrows. One would have difficulty distinguishing two people who were both hairless. It is safe to say that God created different hair colors and different hairstyles so people are distinguished. Now, when the leper is shaven and has no more hair just like infants at birth, his identity is lost to a great degree. The remedy for his disregard of another person, is cured by his experiencing a loss of his own identity. This is compounded by the law that he must move outside of society.

In Egypt, the Jews sinned through idolatry. Through the Plague of the Firstborns of those Egyptians and Jews who worshipped the lamb (and did not slaughter it) a direct relationship was seen between sin and death, and mitzvah and life. The blood on the doorpost, through which the Destroyer might enter, focussed the dwellers on the truth that worshipping the deity of Egypt caused death, while our mitzvah of the slaughter of that deity secured our salvation. The doorpost of the home, through which the Destroyer might enter was the optimal location for all to ponder the absolute truth about that the lamb: idolatry is absolutely false.



Extremes are Sinful

Death is too morbid to face daily. But immortality too is false. The Rabbis teach the hyssop and the cedar represent two extreme poles of a spectrum: the smallest and the largest of plant life. Sforno teaches these two extremes represent the harm of living at the extremes of any attitudinal spectrum. And the red string represents this sin[1] as it does on Yom Kippur. If one is too courageous or too cowardly, he cannot act properly at the appropriate time. A miser and spendthrift, or a sad or an elated person...any extreme is improper. King Solomon teaches that there is a time for every attitude (Koheles 3), meaning there are times not to follow that attitude. Thus, remaining at the pole of any spectrum is harmful.

God wished to include in the Red Heifer the additional lesson that denial of death or embracing death—either extreme—is sinful.

The evil talker’s carelessness for another person is countered by his reduction of identity. But just as the Red Heifer’s ashes are remedial, and not to be focused on as a permanent ends, the evil talker too must regrow his hair. A remedial rite is temporary by nature, just enough medicine to cure the disease and redirect the person

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back to an equilibrium[2]. We now appreciate the cryptic message: these plants point to a fundamental lesson and remedy. Extremes are harmful.

But why is the hyssop alone used in connection with the Paschal Lamb? This is because there is no extreme in this case from which we must bounce back. Here, the death of the Egyptian deity is an absolute truth: idolatry is absolutely false. Thus, there is no lesson of two harmful extremes, as is so regarding the Red Heifer and the leper. And our fear of death has been calmed by the lesson that sin brings death, whereas mitzvah secures life. The purpose of painting the doorposts with blood has been explained.

Ibn Ezra teaches us that as death affects man uniquely, it requires a unique response, and there are a few related Torah cases that share a bond, indicated by the use of the same three species. Proximity to death frightens man, causing him to flee to the opposite pole of immortality, but this extreme is false. Death is also used regarding the leper where he initially had disregard for life; he must be bent back to the other extreme where “he” loses his identity. But why did God choose the phenomenon of death per se to teach the harm of extremes? I feel this is due to the nature of the immortality fantasy...

Immortality: The Most Primary Drive

Rabbi Israel Chait taught that King Solomon’s work, Koheles, is based on this fantasy. Meaning, all of man’s drives depend on the immortality fantasy. Man would not fantasize about any pleasure, plan, or sense any ambition, if he truly felt he was going to die. Under every emotion lies the feeling of immortality. Rabbi Chait wrote as follows:

“One generation passes, and another generation comes; but the Earth abides for ever (Koheles 1:4).”

The Rabbis teach, “A person does not die with half of his desires in hand. For he who has a hundred, desires to make of it two hundred.”[3] This means that the fantasy exceeds reality. King Solomon addresses one of the two fantasies that drive people. One

fantasy is regarding objects or possessions. The second fantasy deals with man’s feeling of permanence. Man’s fantasies make sense, but only if he’s going to live forever. An idea has two parts: 1) the idea itself, and 2) the emotional effect of the idea. Every person knows the idea that he or she will die. But the emotional effect of death is usually denied. This enables man to believe his fantasy is achievable. It is impossible to live without the fantasy of immortality. It expresses itself one way or another.

The meaning behind this verse is that the average person looks at life as the only reality. He cannot perceive himself as a single speck in a chain of billions of people and events, where he plays but a minuscule role, and passes on. Any feeling man has of greatness comes from the feeling of immortality. Immortality never reaches into lusts; only ego. Here, King Solomon places the correct perspective before us. We look at the world as starting with our birth, and as dying with our death. As soon as one sees that his life is nearing its end, he cannot enjoy things anymore. The enjoyment of things is tied to the belief of an endless lifetime in which to enjoy them. Man’s attention is directed primarily toward his well-being. If a life-threatening situation faces man, this is the most devastating experience; everything else doesn’t make that much difference to him. Once a person faces death, all fantasies of pleasures don’t carry much weight. Rashi says on this verse, “Who are those that exist forever? They are the humble ones that bow down to the ground.” Rashi means there is in fact an eternity: this is for righteous people—tzadikim—expressed as those who humble themselves, “bowing to the ground.” The soul of the tzaddik will endure forever.

As man is most excited about his mortality, and is driven primarily by the immortality fantasy, it is most appropriate that God teaches man not to follow his extreme tendencies in this area.

Summary

Death is disturbing, but we cannot deny it. The Red Heifer’s ashes remind us that our physical life is not permanent: we all return to dust. We need this reminder when we come in contact with the dead: a traumatic moment in which we deny our own mortality. We also cannot disregard the life of another through evil speech. If we do, we have gone to another harmful extreme, and shaving our hair reduces our identity, temporarily, to help us bounce back to a correct equilibrium. God signaled the sinful nature of extremes using plants of extreme size differences, and including the red thread that signifies their sinful extremes.

We are again awed by the perfection and structure of the Torah, where religious practice is designed to perfect man’s flaws. Whether we sin by evil speech, or are negatively affected by a mitzvah of burial or the Paschal Lamb, God includes remedial acts that guide us on a life of truth.

Thank you again Jessie for directing me to this fundamental. ■

Footnotes

[1] On Yom Kippur, the red string represented the Jews’ unforgiven state. And when it turned white, it indicated God’s forgiveness. Torah verses too refer to sin as red: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18).”

[2] Maimonides’ Laws of Character Traits addresses this topic.

[3] Koheles Rabbah 1:13

Hitting the Rock

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This week's Torah reading includes the parshas of Chukat and Balak. The former is perhaps the saddest in the entire Torah. In it, we read about the deaths of three of the greatest people in history, Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe Rabbeinu. While Moshe doesn't actually die in this parsha, his fate of not entering the Land and perishing in the wilderness is sealed here.

This tragic outcome was the result of his failure to properly fulfill Hashem's Will at the Mei Merivah (Waters of Contention). After Miriam's death, a drought ensued, and "there was no water for the Congregation." In response, the Jews quarreled with Moshe and derided him for taking them out of Egypt "to bring them to this evil place." Hashem thereupon commanded Moshe and Aaron to gather the people together and "speak to the rock in their sight, that it give forth its waters and provide water for the Congregation and its animals."

When the brothers gathered the people, Moshe rebuked them and subsequently struck the rock with his staff twice. Accordingly, "much water came forth, and the Congregation and their animals drank." Superficially, things seemed to work out satisfactorily.

But that was not the case. Immediately, Hashem delivered His stunning verdict: "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the sight of the Children of Israel, you will not bring this Congregation to the Land that I have given them." The punishment was harsh and irrevocable. The great leader who had led the Jews out of Egypt, brought down and taught them the Torah, and guided them in their Wilderness trek would not complete his mission by establishing the foundations of national existence in Eretz Yisrael.



It is not clear from the narrative what Moshe did wrong. In addition, we need to understand how Moshe's behavior expressed a lack of belief in Hashem, as well as a failure to sanctify Him before the people.

This is clearly a difficult subject, and no other Biblical topic has garnered more dissenting interpretations. There is a great deal of disagreement as to what was Moshe's sin. Some maintain that he was supposed to speak to the rock and not hit it, while others hold that he wrongfully displayed unauthorized anger toward the people by saying, "Listen now O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Still others find fault with the implication that we (Moshe and Aaron) would bring out the water, as opposed to Hashem.

This complicated and challenging matter has generated even more interpretations than those. In addition to identifying the brothers' exact trespass, we need to understand in

what way they are guilty of a lack of emunah (faith), as well as a failure to sanctify Hashem.

To shed some light on this matter, I am not that concerned about Moshe's particular sin, but rather on the impact his conduct had on the Jewish people. No matter how we characterize his mistake, we need to understand its underlying cause.

It appears that Moshe was frustrated with the people's behavior, because he was greatly concerned that their sins would further delay their entry into the Land. His apprehension is visible in his interaction with the leaders of the tribes of Reuven and Gad.

When they asked to take their inheritance on the Eastern side of the Jordan River, Moshe feared their proposal would undermine the people's morale and weaken their willingness to launch the invasion of Canaan. He very severely chastised them and, in response, they came up with a more reasonable propo-

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sition. But Moshe's deep worry that the people might do something to jeopardize the great conquest is evident in this encounter.

Perhaps that was what affected Moshe by the Waters of Contention. Instead of his typical calm and confidence under the most trying circumstances, he stumbled a bit and deviated from the course Hashem had set out for him.

Leaders' behavior, not their words, has the greatest impact on their followers. Under severe pressure, the Jewish leader must display his absolute belief in Hashem and sanctify Him by not yielding to frustration. In the many instances when Moshe was provoked, he always "kept his cool" and was unaffected by the taunts and accusations of malcontents. He was fully focused on the objective of fulfilling G-d's plans for the people. He had no personal agenda and therefore displayed no sense of nervousness or unease.

Moshe's comportment always demonstrated absolute confidence in Hashem and therefore inspired all who witnessed it. However, at the Mei Merivah, Moshe allowed his concerns to get the better of him, and his performance of Hashem's instructions slipped. Perhaps he feared that the quarreling Jews would once again forfeit their opportunity to inherit the Land, and his leadership mission would remain incomplete. Moshe's ability to sanctify G-d's Name was compromised when he allowed personal aspirations to affect his leadership of the Jews.

Of course this reflects a very high standard that may not apply to ordinary people, but only to unique individuals like Moshe and Aaron. Hashem judges each person in accordance with his capacity. Our task in life is to reinforce the vitality of our emunah, enabling us to face the challenges life hurls at us with strength and equanimity.

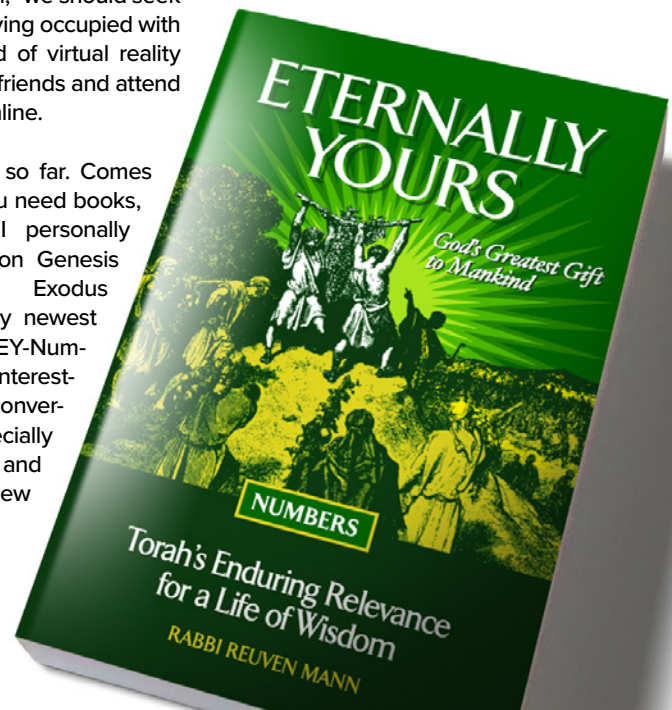
May our behavior under fire be brave and steadfast and inspire others to embrace the pathways of genuine faith.

Shabbat shalom. ■

Dear Friends,

In this time of "social isolation," we should seek ways to avoid boredom by staying occupied with meaningful activity. The world of virtual reality allows us to stay in touch with friends and attend all kinds of classes available online.

But that can only take you so far. Comes Shabbat and Yom Tov, and you need books, especially on the parsha. I personally recommend Eternally Yours on Genesis <http://bit.ly/EY-Genesis> and Exodus <http://bit.ly/EY-Exodus>, and my newest one on Numbers <http://bit.ly/EY-Numbers2>. They are easy to read, interesting, and thought-provoking conversation starters. I am especially interested in your feedback and hope you can write a brief review and post it on Amazon.



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Korach: Why Ketores?

RABBI
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At the outset of Parshas Korach, we are told of the rebellion of Korach and his followers against the authority of Moshe; and the selection of Aaron and his progeny to be the Kohanim with exclusive rights to perform the service in the Mishkan.

Following the miraculous suppression of the rebellion in which the Earth opened its mouth and swallowed Korach, Dasan and Aviram and their followers; and a fire from heaven descended and consumed the 250 men who were offering ketores, we are shocked to discover the Jews once again maligning Moshe and Aaron, accusing them of the killing of the people of G-d.

This allegation calls for explanation as it seems G-d had just supported the veracity of Moshe as his prophet and Aaron as his priest with a miraculous demonstration that would seem to have left no doubt as the truth of Moshe's words, the doubt of his claims and the miscreancy of those who would challenge him. Simply put, what were the people thinking?

The story continues in Chapter 17 with G-d's judgment against the people and Moshe's reaction to G-d's words:

9) The Lord spoke to Moshe saying

10) Stand aside from this congregation, and I shall consume them in an instant, they fell on their faces.

11) Moshe said to Aaron, "Take the censer and put fire from the altar top into it and put incense. Then take it quickly to the congregation and atone for them, for wrath has

gone forth from the Lord, and the plague has begun."

12) Aaron took [it], just as Moshe had said, and he ran into the midst of the assembly, and behold, the plague had begun among the people. He placed the incense on it and atoned for the people.

13) He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague ceased.

14) The number of dead in the plague was fourteen thousand, seven hundred, besides those who died because of the matter of Korach.

15) Aaron returned to Moshe at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and the plague was ended.

In addition to the problem of what were the Jews thinking after witnessing the miraculous punishments of Korach, there are several questions to be set forth regarding this series of events.

- Why does Moshe deem Aaron bringing ketores, incense, as the answer to G-d's decree, what happened to prayer? In every other national transgression, such as the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies, Moshe counters G-d's decree of destruction through prayer, not ketores! Moreover, how can the offering of ketores result in the rescinding of G-d's decree?

- Why does Moshe instruct Aaron to offer the ketores amongst the people? Wouldn't the proper place to have offered the ketores been in the Mishkan, (Tabernacle)?

- What is accomplished by verse 13 stating that Aaron stood between the dead and the living, after the previous verse already said that Aaron took the ketores into the midst of the people and atoned for their sins?

- Why does verse 15 repeat that the plague "was stopped" when it already stated so in verse 13?

- How could Moshe and Aaron disobey the instructions of G-d by going amongst the people when they were specifically instructed by G-d to separate themselves from them?

- Why cannot G-d simply destroy all the Jewish People without Moshe and Aaron separating? Why does he ask them to leave?

To answer these questions, it may be helpful to examine a verse from the story of the sin of the Golden Calf. As G-d speaks with Moshe about the Jewish People's sin he says:

"And now you shall leave me be; and my wrath shall be placed on them; and I will consume them; and I will make you into a great nation." (Exodus Chapter 32 Verse 10).

Rashi there comments:

"We have not yet heard that Moses prayed for them, and yet He [G-d] said, Leave Me alone? But here, He opened a door for him and informed him that the matter [indeed] depended upon him [Moshe], that if he [Moshe] would pray for them, He [G-d] would not destroy them".

Rashi explains that it was from the statement by G-d to Moshe, leave Me be, that Moshe deduced that he had both the right and ability to pray and get the decree overturned. For as Moshe had not yet said anything to G-d, it would seemingly be out of order for G-d to tell Moshe to leave Him be. Accordingly, Moshe understood that by G-d saying, "leave Me be" He was implying to Moshe that if he were to, so to speak "pester G-d" with tefilah, and not leave Him be, it would be possible to have the judgment reversed.

(CONT. ON NEXT PAGE)

In a similar vein it can be explained that when G-d told Moshe and Aaron in our story, “remove yourselves from among this assembly and I will consume them in an instant,” Moshe deciphered that G-d was in fact instructing them to enter amidst the congregation to procure atonement, and that the solution in this instance for the Jews survival, was not to be found in prayer.

This deduction was justified on account of there being no necessity for Moshe and Aaron to leave from amongst the congregation in order to bring about the death of the people through a plague.

(This is unlike the command G-d gave Moshe earlier in Chapter 16 verse 21 to separate from amongst the people so that G-d could destroy them, for in that instance G-d was going to annihilate the sinners through the opening of the land that would suck everything in the vicinity into its midst. Consequently, the instruction to Moshe and Aaron to separate from the area was sensible and no inference that the redemption of the Jews would be achieved by going into their midst could be made. Therefore, in that instance the response of Moshe to the decree of destruction was to pray.)

In his commentary on verse 13 Rashi addresses the question of why Aaron was instructed to offer ketores.

“Another interpretation: Why with incense? Because the Israelites were slandering and vilifying the incense, saying that it was a deadly poison; through it Nadab and Abihu died; through it two hundred and fifty people were burnt. The Holy One, blessed is He, said, You shall see that it will stop the plague, and it is sin that caused their death.”

Based on this Rashi, it can be proposed that the people’s accusation against Moshe and Aaron consisted of these allegations.

- They accused Moshe and Aaron of not appreciating the value of every Jew.
- They accused Moshe and Aaron of bringing an evil substance, the incense, into their midst which resulted in their deaths.

There were many Jews who accepted that it indeed was G-d who had performed the earlier miracles resulting in the deaths of Korach, Dasan and Aviram, and hundreds of other well-known Jewish leaders. However, they accused Moshe of forcing G-d’s hand by proposing the earlier test involving the ketores.

The people claimed that as this was Moshe’s innovation and not G-d’s. Moshe should have proposed a different way to resolve the dispute between him and Korach, that would not have resulted in so much loss of life. In addition, there were those who asserted that Moshe had some special knowledge of a mysterious, mystical, evil force lurking in the ketores that he had somehow manipulated to his advantage resulting in the deaths of the 250 Jews.

By having the plague stopped by the ketores, the people were to learn that the ketores was not the source of the deaths of the Jewish people, rather sin was the cause of their deaths.

It would seem reasonable to take the words of Rashi one step further and to assert that just like it was not ketores that killed - rather it was sin, so too it was not the ketores that cured - rather it was teshuva (repentance).

The repentance of the Jews, came about through G-d alluding to Moshe and Aaron to demonstrate to the Jewish people that they were erroneous and unjust in their accusations.

Aaron takes the ketores and goes in the midst the people to stand against the angel of death fighting for the life of every Jew, despite their malicious accusations against him. The verse emphasizes the efforts of Aaron on behalf of the people by saying that he stood between the dead and the living.

This act revealed the pernicious falsehood of the Jewish people’s accusation that Aaron and Moshe were callous to the lives of Jews. When the ketores was brought among the assembly by Aaron, the Jewish people are given the opportunity to observe the ketores cause a secession of the plague. This event forced the Jews to reevaluate their beliefs about the ketores, as this formerly

believed evil substance, is no longer the cause of their plagues but rather the means of their salvation.

When in verse 13 it states, Vateatzar Hamegefa, and the plague stopped, it refers to a temporary cessation of the plague in which there were no new cases and no further deaths. The Jewish people at that juncture were granted the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and engage in teshuva.

If they would refuse to engage in teshuva, and instead cling to and create other far-fetched interpretations of events that would serve in their anger against Moshe, there would be a resumption and resurgence of the plague.

However, if the people would conquer their anger, realize their mistake, mend their ways and do a full teshuva, they would be fully forgiven and the plague would then vanish. This is why verse 15 concludes with - Vehamagefa Neetzara, the plague was terminated, as the Jews did indeed repent and the plague was vanquished, with the full recovery of all those who were ill and no further cases.

(It should be noted that the objective of this Dvar Torah is not to explain why G-d insisted on the teshuva of the people, and was not open to prayer in this instance. While that is a worthy topic, our goal was only to explain the basis for Moshe’s decision to send Aaron into the midst of the people and offer ketores, which in our view was the very instruction of G-d to separate from the people. This approach can be found in the comments of Nachmanides)

The ending of the plague came about as a result of the actions of the Bnei Yisrael’s leaders guided by G-d during a time of national crisis; and the people responding with the appropriate introspection and resolve to change.

This Dvar Torah is being written in a time of national angst and upheaval in the United States. May G-d grant the wisdom and courage necessary to our leaders and nation, to thoughtfully examine ourselves, bring to light the appropriate issues and lessons, and unite around a commitment to positive and befitting change. ■

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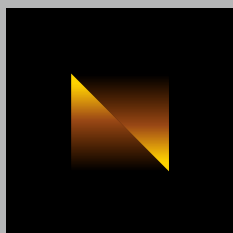
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