

Parshas Chukas: An Inexplicable Sin, A Practical Lesson

In this week's *parsha*, *Parshas Chukas*, we learn of the death of righteous Miriam, the prophetess and leader of the women; we learn of the death of peaceful, loving Aharon *ha'Kohen*, high atop *Hor Ha'Hor*; and we learn of the predicted death of our leader, teacher and faithful shepherd, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, who was to die and be buried on the eastern side of the Jordan River - forever a Jew of *Chutz la'Aretz*.

This is a *parsha* of mourning and confusion, fear and worry, thirst and water. A *parsha* of drama and pathos, leadership and greatness, mistakes and humanity within greatness. This is a *parsha* that changed the destiny and future of our people, for had Moshe entered the Holy Land, R' Soloveitchik zt'l explains, he would have been *Moshiach*, the *Beis Ha'Mikdash* would have been built and never destroyed, and Jewish destiny would have been fulfilled. No destruction or wars, no enemies through our Land, no weeping and wailing, no exile and suffering, no Tisha'a B'Av and *churban*...

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יעו לא-האמנתם בי, להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל--לכן, לא תביאו את-הקהל הזה, אל-הארץ, אשר-נתתי להם
- *Because you did not believe in Me, to make a kiddush Hashem before the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore, you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given to them* (Bamidbar 20:12).

What occurred in our *parsha* that banned Moshe *Rabbeinu* from the Holy Land and changed the course of our national history? And it was in the 40th year of wilderness wanderings that righteous Miriam died. And when she died, the miraculous well that sustained the people with water for all their desert years dried up. And the people thirsted for water and they quarreled with Moshe, "*Why did you bring us into the desert, that we and our animals should die here; and why did you bring us up from the land of Egypt to this bad place, and there is no water to drink!*" (Bamidbar 20:1-5)

And Hashem commanded Moshe to take his staff, gather the people before the rock, and speak to the rock - and it would give forth its water. And Moshe took his staff, as he was commanded, and Moshe and Aharon gathered the people before the rock, and then... and then... and then! Moshe said those infamous last words: שמעו-נא המרים--המן-הסלע הזה, נוציא לכם מים - *Listen O you rebels! From this rock shall we bring forth water for you!?* (v.10) *And Moshe lifted his hand and struck the rock with his staff, two times, and water gushed forth and the people and animals drank* (v.11).

The commentators wonder, and debate, over what Moshe's error was. Rashi indicates that his sin was in striking, instead of speaking to, the rock (Rashi to 20:18). Ibn Ezra explains the sin was in saying נוציא - we will bring forth water for you, instead of attributing the miracle that would occur to G-d (Ibn Ezra 20:10). Rav S. R. Hirsch explains that Moshe's actions indicated a momentary, fleeting, decline in *emunah* (RSRH, commentary to Bamidbar 20:12).

Rav Soloveitchik teaches that, "May theories have been advanced by our commentators concerning Moshe's death in the desert, but none of the answers satisfy. *It is humanly*

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impossible to grasp the rationality of Moshe's death. Death in general, and Moshe's death in particular, belongs to the realm of תּוֹרַת הַתּוֹרָה - [this is the great mystery of the Torah, Bamidbar 19:2].”

Though we cannot understand or grasp that Moshe sinned, and thus was punished, we can still learn real-life lessons from this shattering incident.

וה"ר רבי משה (סוף פ"ד משמנה פרקים) סבר בו סברא ואמר כי משה רבינו ע"ה חטאו הוא שנטה לצד הרגזנות באמרו "שמעו נא המורים" דקדק עליו הש"י, שיהיה אדם כמוהו כועס לפני עדת בני ישראל במקום שאין ראוי בו הכעס וכל כיוצא בזה בדין האיש ההוא חלול השם מפני שמתנועותיו כלם ומדבריו היו למדין, והיו מקוין להגיע בהם אל הצלחות העולם הזה והעולם הבא. ואיך יראה עליו (Rambam quoted by the Ramban to 20:8).

According to the Rambam (quoted above), Moshe's sin lay in the words he uttered when he addressed his thirsty and tired flock: שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הַמְרִים - *listen O you rebels!* For his expression of anger, when there was no place for anger, he was punished. As the Rambam explains: Such behavior in such a person of Moshe's stature constituted a *chillul Hashem* (desecration of G-d's Name)... and how could he exhibit anger toward them, which is one of the flawed forms of behavior...

R' Mordechai of Neshchiz (1740-1800), Poland, deeply desired a pair of *tzitzis* from *Eretz Yisrael*. He wanted *tzitzis* from the wool of a sheep that ate from the grass of E"Y. Though in the 1700's in Europe, this was more likely to remain a dream than a reality, with much determination and hard work, R' Mordechai procured a woolen garment from E"Y.

He gave the garment to a *talmid* (student) to make a pair of *tzitzis* for him. The *talmid* diligently worked at the task, when, to his horror, he realized he had cut two openings for the head of the *tzitzis*, instead of just one! The garment was ruined and could not be used for *tzitzis*.

When he shamefully brought the garment to R' Mordechai he expected a harsh rebuke. When R' Mordechai first saw his garment, which should have been his precious *tzitzis*, his face turned red, reflecting his anger and anguish. After a few tense moments, he smiled and said, "This pair of *tzitzis* was indeed supposed to have two openings. One opening for putting my head through and one opening to test me whether I could control myself, or if I would fly into a rage! I will keep this pair of *tzitzis* to remind me every morning not to get angry at anybody throughout the day."

We cannot understand Moshe's sin, nor can we fathom the harshness of his punishment. Yet from his actions, we can derive important lessons...

Perhaps we too, should each have a (proverbial or literal) pair of *tzitzis* with two openings... one for the head, and one to remind ourselves that anger has no place.

בברכת מנוחת נפש ושבת שלום