

## Chukat: The “Cost” of Life in Israel

Moshe Taragin

Never a man bestrode our planet of the caliber of Moshe Rabeinu- our greatest leader. This man, born of flesh and raised by an Egyptian mother, ultimately scaled the heavens and split the sea. He snatched the word of G-d from its celestial vault and gifted it to the chosen people. He fearlessly defied the greatest tyrant and brought an oppressive empire to its knees. He began his life as a foreign “ish Mitzri” but concluded it as an “ish Elokim”.

Yet, for all his accomplishments and spiritual feats, he was denied entry into the land of his dreams. He wistfully gazed upon its hills and valleys from a remote mountain perch. His feet would never tread upon the pathways of this land and his hands would never caress its tones. In one of the saddest tragedies of the Torah he passes before arriving at the land of milk and honey. All because of the showdown at the rock. What was so criminal about his behavior to warrant such a severe and tragic sentence?

The midrash points to the harsh language Moshe addresses the people with. Moshe had hoped that a new generation, edified by a forty-year journey in the desert, would show more compliance and less complaining. You can imagine his frustration when the whining and protesting once again begins. He barks at them by dubbing them as “morim”. This label has multiple meanings-none of them complimentary. This term either refers to rebels, incorrigible people, or complainers. Either way, Moshe’s terminology is insulting to this new generation. By utilizing this language, he can no longer be their leader.

Moshe’s entire career had been staked upon selfless commitment to the Jewish people. From the day he left the comfort of his Egyptian palace and witnessed a defenseless Jew suffering at the end of an Egyptian whip, Moshe was relentless in his dedication to his people. After the egel debacle Hashem made him an “offer you can’t refuse”; the current nation would be dismissed and a new one would be chosen with Moshe as its founder. Unwilling to sacrifice his people, Moshe issues what amounts to an ultimatum: either forgive the Jews or Moshe, himself, would voluntarily recuse himself from the Torah and from history. This snapshot typifies

forty years of selfless leadership. Currently a new and younger generation arose, one that he hadn't shared the formative experiences of Mitzrayim and Har Sinai with, and one that he momentarily chided with an offending term. One "word" is all it took to sink his lifelong dream. Such is the heavy price of a righteous life. The greater the spiritual level the more delicate; righteous lifestyles leaves little margin for error.

Dedication to your people comes at a cost. One of my Rabeim – Harav Binyamin Tabory z"l noted that the parah adumah mystery contains a coded message about dedication to the Jewish people. One of the enigmatic aspects of this ceremony is that the official who performs the ritual- which removes tumah impurity from the 'subject'- himself becomes ritually impure and barred from the Mikdash. Basically, for one Jew to be ritually rejuvenated, a second Jew becomes ritually invalidated. It takes selflessness to overcome the impurity of death. Dedication to Jews comes at a cost. For one Jew to enter another must voluntarily absorb a religious "cost".

Dedication to Jews certainly comes at a cost in the modern State of Israel. Life outside of the land of Israel exile doesn't always come at a "cost" to personal religious standards. Of course, every Jew is responsible for every other Jew regardless of geography, but life in exile more easily allows for personal "ivory towers of piety". Dedication to other Jews is often expressed at communal levels. Within a community of similarly religious people, the cost of "interaction" and engagement is often minimal.

Life in Israel is very different. Aiming to breath religious spirit into our country, we frequently pay a heavy "price" regarding our own religious standards. If we want to live alongside Jews of different religious "stripes" we may be endangering our own religious standards. For example, extending kashrut food nationwide may dilute kashrut standards. Likewise creating a "shemittah umbrella" to enable basic shemittah observance may entail adopting fragile halachik leniencies. Living in Israeli society at large among the less-religious may challenge our own values and lifestyles. It is ironic – and to some confusing- that life in the holy land should potentially come at a cost to religious standards. Dedication to the Jewish people doesn't always come free of charge. Are we selfless enough to pay that price?