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Spiritual Leadership: The Moral Risks

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered March 24, 1973)

I begin this sermon with an apology. I have never liked dramatists who write plays about playwrights, actors who act the roles of actors, or authors who write about novelists. I have always considered this a self-serving kind of literary inbreeding. Similarly, I am weary of rabbis who preach sermons about the rabbinate.

So I beg your leave if this morning I violate my own principle. My reasoning is that, first, I rarely do speak about the subject; second, I tell myself that the nature of the rabbinate and its destiny is of some interest to the congregation at large; third, the role of the kohen (priest) in the special reading of this morning, Parashat Parah, suggests the topic itself.

Religious leadership – whether of the pulpit or classroom or institution – moves between two poles, and the tension between them is characteristic of all spiritual leadership. We may locate it, as I have indicated, in the role of the kohen.

Parashat Parah tells us of the פרה אדומה or red heifer. The law is that if a man had contracted impurity (tumah) and desired to regain the state of purity (taharah), then he must be sprinkled with the ashes of the heifer. The kohen who ministers at this procedure, in which purity is granted to the one who is defiled, himself becomes tamei or defiled. It is for this reason that the red heifer is considered a paradigm of the mysterious or the non-rational in Judaism: מטמא ומטהר, the red heifer purifies the impure and defiles the pure.

What is the nature or the essence of this mystery? Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vorker left us a pithy saying in response: סוד פרה אדומה הוא אהבת ישראל, the mystery or the secret of the red heifer – is the love of Israel. Now, that is a cryptic remark, appropriate to one who is known in Hasidic lore as דער שווייגער, “the silent one.” A student of Reb Menachem Mendel expanded and explained his mysterious statement: it refers to the kohen who embraces

tumah in order to bestow taharah upon his fellow Israelites. Here is this kohen who leads a normal life of purity, as all priests are expected to. And yet we ask him to submit to impurity in order that thereby some other Jew rise from tumah to taharah.

So it is that spiritual leadership involves self-sacrifice, not of a material kind but, more important, that of moral risk-taking, the acceptance of tumah in order to elevate fellow Jews who are defiled. The kohen exercises his spiritual leadership when he takes moral risks for the love of his fellow Jews.

And this is not only true of the kohen or priest but of the prophet too, for both are species of spiritual leadership.

When I was a student, I used to “daven” in the small synagogue of a saintly Hasidic Rebbe, the Kozhnutzner Rebbe, Rabbi Israel Hopstein, of blessed memory. He was a gentle and saintly man. I remember well a talk he once gave, which went something as follows: when Moses came down from the mountain with the Tablets in his hand, and found the people dancing around the Golden Calf, he raised the Tablets over his head and smashed them at the foot of the mountain. Whereupon, according to tradition, the Lord revealed himself to Moses with the words יישר כחך שברת, “I congratulate you, Moses, upon breaking the Tablets!” Now, says the Kozhnutzner Rebbe, that is strange indeed. Moses smashed the Tablets in a fit of temper, and the Lord congratulated him – but do we not know that כעס or temper is always wrong? Did not Maimonides teach us that the cardinal sin of Moses when he smote the rock was that he lost his temper, and for this show of anger he was punished by being banished from the Promised Land? How, then, can the Rabbis say that God congratulated him when, in כעס or temper, he broke the Tablets?

The answer that the Rebbe gave is good Hasidic doctrine and, indeed, good Jewish doctrine. It is that the

הצדיק ירידת הצדיק is necessary for the teshuvah of the people; the leader must be willing to descend to the level of his people in order to raise them to repentance thereafter. Only if the צדיק or spiritual leader himself somehow participates in the sin of his people, can he himself perform the act of teshuvah and thereby draw his fellow Jews along with him. When we speak of the Golden Calf, however, how can we expect of Moses to descend to the level of idolatry and paganism? The answer is, that the Rabbis said כל הכועס זרה כאילו עובד עבודה זרה, one who loses his temper is an idolator, for he shows that he worships his own ego and affirms the centrality of his own emotions and sentiments. Thus, when Moses broke the Tablets in anger, he thereby descended into a kind of idolatry, and was thus enabled to help his people reattain, in repentance, their former eminence. Thus he saved them and that is why God congratulated him upon his show of anger.

That is a quaint Hasidic interpretation, and my more austere friends would probably not approve of it. Yet the idea stands on its own merits. If Moses or the tzaddik or the kohen or the spiritual leader will not risk his own contamination, his people must sink ever lower, until they are irremediably lost. If he is concerned with his own moral integrity exclusively, he must abdicate leadership entirely.

This is the first pole, that of the willingness of the leader to come down and to sully himself. There is an opposing principle: if the leader identifies too closely with his people, ultimately he is not better than they are, and can be of no help to them. The moral risks the leader must take can often result in moral abandon. Indeed, it is a most dangerous idea. It can leave the kohen with a sense of fascination with tumah under the guise of self-sacrificing leadership.

The most blatant historic example of the extremes to which these ideas can be taken is that of the apostate pseudo-Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi. Here was a man who developed to its utmost the theory of “the holy sin,” the idea that the highest kind of individual must descend to the very depths of sin, to the very bowels of hell, and thus raise the world up with him. What happened was that Sabbatai Zevi himself became an apostate, converted to Islam – and instead of raising anyone up with him, left in his wake a train of disaster that began 300 years ago and has still not been completely spent.

No wonder that some of the halakhic commentators (especially חכמה משך) tell us that even though technically the kohen would not be required to undergo טהרה במקוה, purification in water, as a result of his contamination with

the red heifer – on the principle of טומאה הותרה בצבור, that he had been working for the community, that his contamination was for the purpose of the public weal, for the love of Israel – still, he must do so, and undergo his own purification. The purpose of this is to remind himself, as it were, of the risks he had taken, and thus make sure that he will guard against his own further deterioration, and not allow himself to fall into a pattern of impurity.

Contemporary Jewish life offers illustration of these principles. For the tension between the two extremes troubles the spiritual leadership of the Jewry of our times. One the one had, there are some who are characterized by remoteness, by unattainable perfectionism, by an unawareness of the stubborn and irreducible facts of social, economic, and cultural life. And on the other extreme are those who practice identification and involvement with the masses to the point where the leaders are no different from the followers, and they are unable to raise anyone to a higher level.

I grant, of course, the good intentions of each group. And I recognize, too, that each is necessary, within limits, to counterbalance the other.

Thus, in Orthodox Jewish life today, we have the heads of yeshivot who are often spiritual and academic purists. Here are people who are unquestionably sincere, indisputably wise and scholarly, who demand full compliance to all ideals. And this is the way it should be. But often they do not understand the temptations and difficulties of life outside the academy, and therefore they cannot sympathize with it. As a result, they often engage in well-intentioned but misdirected activities.

For instance, twenty or forty years ago it was thoroughly legitimate to strive against Conservatism and Reform. For at that time these groups were drawing away the best talents or Orthodox Judaism. But that is no longer true. The entire situation has changed. Thus, to call a mass meeting for tomorrow (as the Yiddish press has informed us) of Rabbis and Heads of yeshivot to meet with people who are like-minded in order to give battle to a grab-bag of antagonists and enemies – ranging from Conservative and Reform to “Jews for Jesus” and missionary efforts on campus – is to misunderstand the whole structure of American Jewry and to evince profound ignorance of what is happening amongst young Jews in this country. You cannot influence American Jews when you have prohibited your own students from attending colleges, even from working with other young Jews for good Jewish causes

(such as Soviet Jewry), and when you have discouraged them even from becoming Orthodox Rabbis who serve in pulpits because it is *תורה שלא לשמה*, and because it involves the moral risks of which we have spoken. You cannot clean up the situation of American Jewry without dirtying your own hands. You cannot produce taharah without your own tumah. You cannot influence others if you practice insularity. And if you insist upon your ivory tower aloofness and on your inviolate spiritual innocence, you must expect to be a spiritual leader with fewer and fewer followers; or, better, very spiritual but hardly a leader.

And yet, when I consider the other extreme, I find it even more depressing. Those who accept the moral risks and become defiled for the sake of their fellow Jews, often accept that situation as the norm, and proceed to chip away their ideals even more, until before long there are no ideals left, and the fragmented reality is idealized as the perfect state. Jewish spiritual leadership from the pulpit often tends to be so involved, so outgoing, so “relevant,” so concerned, so sympathetic, that it may be leadership, but it is hardly spiritual. There is precious little taharah that can come from a kohen who is altogether tamei or contaminated. I can think of rabbis – and I here specifically refer to Orthodox rabbis – who fall into a dangerous pattern in the pulpit. They are involved in pastoral work, in hospital visits, in consultation, in luncheon talks, in invocations and benedictions, in cocktail parties and meetings and fundraising and administration and golf, in being a “regular fellow” – and who have lost entirely the quality of authentic leadership, and are deaf to that cry of conscience that comes to us from R. Shimon bar Yochai of 1800 years ago, *ותורה מה יהא עליה*, “and what will be of Torah?”

When a rabbi begins to overflow with a love of Israel to the extent that he identifies with them, that he sympathizes with them, that he understands them so well that he feels he no longer can rebuke them, then he will not improve them. He leaves them tamei or impure because he will not get into hot water – or into any water at all.

And what can we say of the Reform rabbinate which, according to the Lenn Report which they themselves commissioned, informs us that some 40% of the Reform rabbinate sanctions (either by direct participation or by referral) mixed marriages? I have spoken to some of these people. Their rationale is simple: *אהבת ישראל*, they love individual Jews and would not cause them heartbreak by refusing to officiate. Furthermore, they love all of Israel: they believe, perhaps sincerely, although I do not see

how this is possible, that ecclesiastic approval of a mixed marriage will keep the people within the Jewish fold and contribute to Jewish survival! Our response? -- *טמא, טמא, טמא* impure, corrupt, vile!

Thus, spiritual leadership – whether of a rabbi or a teacher or the head of an institution or school or any other function that society devises – is full of inner tension, dangers, pitfalls. No wonder that sincere rabbinic students are often perplexed and frightened about their future in the rabbinate. Their major concern is not the material one, but the moral problem. And no wonder that authentic Jewish personalities, from Moses to our days, will never grab at leadership and aspire to power for its own sake, but they worry and brood and mull over it; they are full of doubt and tension and hesitation; they have this painful awareness of the dilemma of failing to spread taharah, which perhaps is their reason for existence and their historic role, against the danger of losing their own soul in tumah.

In a sense, refined Jewish religious personalities feel that this dilemma reflects the tension in our conception of God, who is both far and near, both remote and close, transcendent and immanent, abstract and personal. Spiritual leadership must imitate divine leadership – but it is so, so difficult, so frustrating to try to keep one’s equilibrium and balance and not fall into either extreme, that of *נפשי הצלתי*, *ואני את נפשי הצלתי*, a concern with saving your own soul and ignoring the rest of the world, or – losing your own soul completely.

Perhaps all this can be summarized in a brilliant saying of the Kotzker rebbe. The Talmud declares that God proclaimed *שתיקן עירובין ונטילת ידיים*, “My son Solomon is a wise man, for he decreed the laws of *עירובין* and the washing of the hands before eating bread.” *עירובין* is the act whereby two people who have adjacent property declare their property to be mutually owned so that they may carry from one to the other on Shabbat. The washing of the hands before the meal was ordained by Solomon too.

Why should these decrees mark Solomon as a wise man, *א חכם*? The Kotzker answers: *עירובין* means involvement, sharing, identification. *נטילת ידיים* means the reverse: pulling away one’s hands, the act of withdrawal and renunciation and retirement. A wise man must be able to do both, to keep them in balance, to know when to veer towards either extreme. He must know when to become involved and when to withdraw; when to throw himself into the world and when to tune himself out of it; when to go all the way down to the people and when to stay far away; when to risk

tumah and when to insist upon his own taharah.

So we have been able to establish only the parameters, only the limits. One must never be so remote from his people that, because of his selfish concern with his spiritual integrity, he is willing to risk nothing for their sake. And one must never be so neglectful of his own spiritual status that he is willing to abandon his own soul in the process of helping his people. As to where the point of balance lies, when to incline towards one extreme or the other – for this there are no prescriptions, for this one must have both intuitive wisdom and the experience of leadership. For this

Have a Little Faith

Dr. Erica Brown

One of the most debilitating and consequential moments in Moses' leadership occurs in this week's Torah reading, Hukat. It begins with the death of Moses' sister, Miriam, and ends with the death of his brother, Aaron. In between these tragic losses, Moses struck a rock with his staff instead of speaking to it and strangely lost the right to enter the land of Israel. The loss of family and role in such a condensed time period could have shattered Moses' will to bring the people to the edge of the Jordan River. Nevertheless, he persisted. What gave him strength?

Let's turn to the first few verses of the sedra: "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron" (Num. 20:1-2). We are given no reason for Miriam's death. It is almost recorded as a passing fact of wilderness life. The people moved. A leader died. The people complained about water.

One midrash strings these events together. If water disappeared when Miriam died, it must have been in her merit that water was given to the Israelites in the form of a magical well throughout their travels. This midrash is so familiar that it can distract readers from realizing the actual ignominy of her death. The people, so tired and faithless by this point, said nothing to Moses and Aaron about their loss. They allowed their leaders no personal time to mourn. They thought only of their own needs and pounced on Moses and Aaron with complaints: "Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even

one must be, like Solomon, a חכם.

It is for this balance that a spiritual leader must pray, and pray hard. He must always retain his אהבת ישראל, his love of Israel, by opening up to the world; and his אהבת השם, his love of God, by knowing when to turn away from it. Spiritual leadership requires both loves, clash though they sometimes do. And genuine spiritual Jewish leadership will seek to reconcile them in אהבת התורה, the love of Torah. For only in the Torah, וזאת חוקת התורה, can these two great loves, of God and Israel, reconcile.

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water to drink!" (Num. 20:5).

As a result, Miriam's death was ignored by those she served. It was she who protected their savior, standing by the reeds when Moses was placed in the Nile. It was she who fetched her mother as a nursemaid for Moses, keeping him connected to his family. It was she who celebrated with joy and timbrels when her brother split the sea for the Israelites to cross to safety. But all of these memories were suddenly erased.

Instead of mourning, the brothers fell on their faces before God and awaited instruction: "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus, you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts" (Nu. 20:8). The Israelites weren't censured. They would get what they wanted. In fact, copious amounts of water poured from the stone, making this one of the most dramatic miracles of desert life.

The Israelites got the water they were desperate for but not exactly the way they wanted it: "Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?'" (Num. 20:10). Moses, perhaps stabbed with a grief unacknowledged and lacking patience for more grumbling, did not merely speak to the rock. He did not only hit the rock with his rod. He called the people – his people – rebels (hamorim).

Rashi explains the word as "foolish people." Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra similarly writes that their request was farfetched, prompting Moses and Aaron to reply: "Do we

have the power to bring forth water out of this rock for you?” Nahmanides elaborates on ibn Ezra’s position: “He [Moses] thus stressed their rebellion, telling them they were wanting in faith, and that the reason for their quarrelling with him was because they thought that God would not act wondrously for them.” It is as if, after all of the signs and wonders that the Israelites relished, they still doubted God’s salvific powers. This, Moses could not tolerate.

But Moses did not get the last word in the chapter. God was angry with Moses and Aaron and forbade them from entering the land: “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them” (Num. 20:12). Rashi here is unequivocal: “For had you spoken to the rock, and it had brought forth water, I would have been sanctified before the whole congregation, for they would have said: This rock, which cannot speak and cannot hear and needs no maintenance, fulfils the bidding of the Omnipresent God. How much more should we do so?” If a rock can bring forth water, then we, too, have the capacity to follow the will of our Maker.

Moses, out of anger, hit the rock, but God ultimately punished him because he lost faith in the people he was leading. Once you stop believing in your people, you lose the privilege of leading them. “If you want to be a leader,” writes Bruce Kasanoff in “Leadership in One Word: Faith”

The Snake Pit

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

The people journeyed from Hor HaHor, to go around the land of Edom, and their spirit grew short. They complained against God and Moshe, asking why they were brought out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, with no bread and water, and saying that their souls had reached limits with the “lechem haklokeil,” or insubstantial food, a term they used to refer to the manna. God immediately punished them by sending burning snakes, which bit and killed multitudes of the people. The people told Moshe they had sinned, and asked him to pray to God to remove the snakes. Moshe complied, and God told him to make a burning snake and place it on a pole, “and it will be that anyone who had been bitten will look at it and live” (Bamidbar 21:8). Rabbi Yehudah Sharabi, in his work *Siach Pinu*, points out that the word meaning

(Forbes, July 23, 2015), “your focus needs to be on earning the faith of people around you.” Faith in a leader generates faith in the mission and faith in all those engaged in the mission. The more faith you have, the more belief people will have that they can stretch themselves to do what they never thought possible. “People,” Kasanoff states, “want great leaders to succeed. They want to have faith that if the leader succeeds, they, too, will succeed.” This was not only true for our faith in God, Moses, or Aaron. In “The Leader’s Call to Responsibility,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that, “The deepest mystery of all is not our faith in God but God’s faith in us. May that faith sustain us as we heed the call to responsibility and take the risk of healing some of the needless wounds of an injured but still wondrous world.”

Why did Moses continue, alone and bereft as he was? Because, through the rock incident, God held up a mirror to Moses’ faith to show him the still ‘wondrous world’ after he thought he lost everything. Water can gush out of stone just as slaves can be set free. Just as a people can return home after centuries of exile. Have faith in Me, said God with this water. Have faith in the mission. Have faith in yourself. And, above all, have faith in your people, even when they cannot see your pain or honor your loss. They are still your people. They need you to have faith in them.

Describe a time to you had enough faith to carry out a mission even when it felt impossibly hard.

“and it will be,” used in this verse - *vehayah* - always refers to a situation of joy. Where, he asks, is the joy in this verse? True, God was explaining to Moshe how the snake would cure the people, but the entire situation can hardly be viewed as one of joy! Rabbi Sharabi himself answers that, according to the early commentators, looking at the snake helped cure, not only the previously suffered snake bite, but other kinds of illnesses, as well, so that at least something was gained through the experience. I would like to suggest two alternative answers, based on some broader understandings of the entire incident.

Why, one may ask, was there such a quick, harsh, Divine reaction to the people’s complaint? What was so terrible about their dissatisfaction with the manna? Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, z”l, founding Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas

Kerem B'Yavneh, explains, in his *Asufos Ma'arochos*, that the character of the manna was such that it necessitated the people to constantly turn to God in order to receive their daily sustenance. The Talmud in *Yoma* (76a) asks, why did God provide them with the manna on a daily basis? The answer is that a king who provides his son, on one day, with his needs for the entire year, will not hear from his son again until the next year, when his needs are again in need of being fulfilled. God wanted the people to have to pray to Him, and so He provided them sustenance in a way that forced them to turn to Him every day. Moreover, the Talmud says that if a person acted properly, he would find his portion of the manna on his doorstep, but if he did not, he would have to go out and search for it. Although the kind of life that depended on the manna would seem, at first blush, difficult, it had the distinct advantage of keeping the people close to God.

This basic nature of the manna, and the relationship with God which it generated, contrasted with the situation of the snake, who was punished by having to eat dust, or, as Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffmann explain, food that was covered with dust because it was always laying on the ground. Although, on the one hand, the snake was thus assured of a constant supply of food, on the other hand, as the Kotzker Rebbe and others explain, God was, in effect, telling the snake, 'here is your food, and don't bother me anymore'. By punishing the people with snakes, says Rabbi Goldvicht, he was telling them that their complaints about the manna indicated that they would rather be like the snake, who does not need to turn to God for his sustenance. However, God wants them to have a constant relationship with Him, and the form of food they received was just a means of generating that relationship. Based on Rabbi Goldvicht's understanding of the punishment the people received for complaining about the manna, we can understand why an expression of joy is used. When the people repented, they

did so out of a realization of the importance of bring close to God, and, so, when they looked at the snake on the pole in order to be cured, they did so out of the joy that comes through the renewal of ones connection to God, which is really the greatest joy one can experience in this world, namely, feeling that one is constantly in God's presence.

Another explanation for the gravity of the sin that the complaint about the man constituted is given by the Slonimer Rebbe, z'l. in his *Nesivos HaShalom*. He writes that the people were expressing dissatisfaction with their entire experience in the wilderness, in which their needs were all taken care of for them. Although living in this way provided its challenges, it is necessary for a person to realize that whatever situation he happens to find himself in, that is the precise situation that God wants him to be in at the moment, and it is precisely through that situation that he can grow and be the person he is supposed to be. Although he does not say this, the Slonimer Rebbe's explanation seems to reflect the teaching of the *Bal Shem Tov*, in explanation of the verse in *Tehillim* that is usually translated as "I have placed God before me constantly. The *Baal Shem Tov*, however, gives the word 'shivisi,' – I have placed. – an additional meaning, explaining it as coming from the word 'shaveh,' or equal. All situations in life, he explains, should be viewed equally, because God, with His constant providence, always places us in the situation that we need to be in at that time. If we view the swift divine punishment for the complaint about the manna in this way, we can then suggest a different reason for the use of an expression of joy when it describes the people looking at the snake on the pole. In effect, we are being told that the people looked at the snake on the pole with joy out of an recognition that the situation they now were in was exactly what they needed at the time, and, therefore, was something to rejoice about. In this way, they truly repented for the attitude which had generated the swift harsh divine punishment they had received.

Your Own Grass is Plenty Green

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim given on Jul 4, 2019)

Toward the end of this week's Parsha, we read *va'yidaber ha'am bei-Elokim u-ve-Moshe, lama he-elisunu mi-Mitzrayim la-mus ba-midbar ki ein lechem ve-ein mayim, ve-nafsheinu katza ba-lechem ha-klokel*. They said: We don't have any food to eat. We are sick of

this mon—they wanted real food. *Va-yishalach HaShem ba-am eis ha-n'chashim ha-srafim va-y'nashchu es ha-am va-yamas am rav mi-Yisrael*. And HaShem sent snakes to bite them as a punishment for complaining. And the end of the story is that HaShem saved them from the snakes. So

if they complained about the food, why did Hashem send the snakes to bite them, if Hashem runs the world *midah keneged midah*? Two weeks ago, in Parshas Shlach, they complained about Eretz Yisroel, so HaShem took away their privilege of entering Eretz Yisroel. That makes a lot of sense. But what do snakes have to do with complaining about the quality of their food?

So Rashi here brings two answers from the Medrash. One of them says: *Yavo nachash she-loka al hotzaas diba ve-yifra mi-motzie'i diba*. The nachash was punished for talking negatively, and therefore the snakes were the appropriate punishment for the Jews who talked negatively about HaShem giving them this “inferior food”—*lechem ha-klokel*. And this also presents a bit of a challenge. This incident comes after all the sins of Am Yisroel, in all these parshiyos when they talked negatively about something. In Parshas Shlach, they spoke out against Eretz Yisroel. They grumbled against HaShem for taking them out to die in the desert, and then about HaShem punishing Korach ve-adaso. They were *motzie'i diba* in all these situations. So why did davka this particular *hotzaas diba* incur a punishment of biting snakes?

I heard a very enlightening suggestion. What was the *hotzaas diba* here? It was different from the many other complaints we have seen in the midbar. Some of the other complaints were based on a lack of faith. They complained they could not go into Eretz Yisroel—there were giants there, and it was too hard to conquer, and they would all get killed in battle. However, at other times, they actually had what to complain about—Hashem took them out to the desert, there was no water to drink, and they were all thirsty. They should have had faith, but at least we understand their complaint—their distress stemmed from an immediate danger of dying of thirst. But what did they say in our story? We are sick of this mon. What do you mean we are sick of the mon? I understand that the mon was not the same as the produce of Eretz Yisroel—a real bread made of actual wheat, etc. But we know that mon was an amazing thing! It landed every day outside your doorstep. There was no tircha to get it. It provided all their nutritional needs and satisfied them. And the Medrash says it tasted like anything they wanted. It is true that they didn't have a certain kind of bread they desired, but there was no reason to complain. They had wonderful food, and yet they called it *lechem ha-klokel*, only because of something else they didn't have. There is always something we don't have. No one has everything in the entire world. The basic question is: Do you appreciate everything you have when everything is good, HaShem

provides you with your needs, and you have wonderful things? Or do you find that one thing you don't have (the grass is always greener on the other side) and complain that you don't have it? That was their *hotzaas diba* here. And we find the same thing with the nachash. What did he say? Ahh, that tree! How can you not eat from that tree? Adam and Chava were quite literally in Gan Eiden. They had everything they could possibly want. There was just one tree they could not eat from. And what did they say? We are not satisfied with what we have—because we want to eat from that tree, also. Instead of being satisfied with all the good that HaShem gave them, they complained because they found the one thing they could not have. That was the *hotzaas diba* that the nachash told Adam and Chava in Gan Eiden. And that's exactly why *midah keneged midah* they were being punished now—they were just like Adam and Chava in Gan Eiden. HaShem gave them the mon that could taste like anything, yet they complained because they wanted something else—instead of appreciating what they had. There is an interesting Medrash that a Gemora brings: *Haman min ha-Torah minayan*? Where is a remez to Haman in the Torah? *Ha-min ha-eitz asher tzivisicha le-vilti achol mi-menu achalta*? Did you eat from the Eitz ha-Daas? There are many different pshatim how this is a remez to Haman. But on one simple level, who was Haman? What did he say? *Va-yisaper lahem Haman es kvod oshro ve-rov banav ve-eis kol asher gidlo ha-melech ve-eis asher nis'o al ha-sarim ve-avdei ha-melech*. Haman had everything—he was on top of the world. He was the second most powerful person in the kingdom. He had riches. He had everything he ever wanted. He had everything anyone ever dreamed of getting in their entire life. And, nevertheless, what did he say? *Ve-chol zeh einenu shaveh li be-chol eis asher ani ro'e es Mordechai ha-Yehudi yosheiv be-shaar ha-melech*. But it is all worthless to me because there is one thing I don't have—Mordechai doesn't bow down to me. He had everything, and instead of saying: It's wonderful—I appreciate everything I have, he said: No, no, it's not worth anything because there is one thing I don't have. I want something else. That's *Haman min ha-Torah minayan*! Where does this *midah* come from? The most basic mistake a human being can make. Back in Gan Eiden, we had everything, and instead of appreciating it, we said it was worthless because of one thing we don't have. And that is the *chet* of Am Yisroel here. And that is, I think, a very fundamental existential decision everyone has to make in their life. HaShem is *mashpia* on us so much *tovah*—he gave us so many wonderful things. Unfortunately,

people have tremendous tzaros in life. People have survived terrible persecutions, and they have their own challenges in how to have Emunah. But for many of us, HaShem gave us everything we could ask for. And if you were to tell someone—our alter, alter, zeidi in Russia 150 years ago—about our lifestyle, he would say: That’s amazing—it’s like Gan Eiden! And so many people, instead of thanking

Our Brother Eisav

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

In Parshas Chukas, Moshe and the people send a message to the King of Edom, who was the scion of the kingdom of Eisav, asking for permission to go through his land on their way to Eretz Yisrael. They remind him of their brotherhood and request passage as a brotherly favor. The king of Edom refuses and even organizes his army in response to Moshe’s request. Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael not to pass through the land.

In this story, the Shem Mishmuel sees an important lesson for us as a nation and as individuals.

According to Chazal, the Jewish diaspora in the West is an interaction of the Jews with Edom, the descendants of Eisav. The Roman Empire is descended from Eisav either physically or spiritually.

There are Jewish sources that develop the physical relationship. Certainly, at least spiritually and culturally, the West is the modern analogue of Greece and Rome, who styled themselves after the examples of Eisav and Edom. This story of the Jewish approach to the land of Edom is important to understand. Using the Chassidic method of understanding, we will study this episode with the goal of applying the ideas to our personal lives and our national experience. We will see that the Shem Mishmuel’s analysis of this story is very relevant to us today.

Yaakov’s Precedent

Moshe sent a message to the King of Edom. He said, “We, the Jewish People, are descendants of Yaakov, your brother, and we were slaves in Egypt. Now, we are on our way home. Let us pass through your land, adjacent to the land of Canaan.” The King of Edom refused. Rashi notes that this interaction with Edom had a negative influence on the Jewish People and they sinned. As a result, they were punished with the death of Aharon on the outskirts of Edom.

Eisav, the progenitor of Edom, was such a wicked person

HaShem for what they have, are just complaining because the neighbor has something they don’t, etc. And instead of having a good life, they managed to ruin it for themselves and fall into this trap. We should all remember to appreciate what we have, and not worry too much about what we don’t have—and instead be *same’ach be-chelko*. Shabbat Shalom.

that our Sages call him Eisav Harasha. Edom was equally wicked. Why would Moshe even try to bring his people through that land? Didn’t he know that this could lead to negative influence on the people?

The Shem Mishmuel explains that Moshe was following the model of Yaakov Avinu. Throughout much of his life, Yaakov struggled with Eisav. This struggle was, perhaps, the primary struggle of Yaakov’s life. Even though Yaakov purchased the birthright from Eisav, Eisav was still furious with him. Especially after Yaakov received the blessings from Yitzchak, Eisav was so upset with him that Yaakov had to flee to Charan to avoid a possible assassination attempt by Eisav.

After being away for so many years, when Yaakov finally set out to return to the land of Canaan, he sent a message to Eisav asking for reconciliation. Eisav refused to accept these messengers of peace. Instead, he came with 400 soldiers to attack Yaakov. Terrified, Yaakov prepared three strategies: war, gifts, and prayer.

Along the way, he continued sending gifts until he finally met Eisav. When they met, Yaakov bowed down seven times as he approached Eisav. At that moment, they embraced and kissed, only to part to go their separate ways. Eisav then went to Edom and Yaakov to Canaan.

In the times of the Gemara, Jewish leaders would study the parsha of Yaakov and Eisav before they would visit Rome. Since the Romans were the spiritual heirs of Eisav and the Jewish People are the descendants of Yaakov, this parsha would inspire them to devise wise ways of interacting with the powerful Roman rulers.

What exactly does this story of Yaakov’s messengers to Eisav teach us?

Angelic Messengers

According to the Midrash, Yaakov was hoping that Eisav would repent from his wicked ways. How did Yaakov intend to influence Eisav?

The Torah refers to Yaakov's messengers as *malachim*. This word can mean messengers, but it can also mean angels. Rashi says that Yaakov sent real angels who had taken on human form. Who were these angels?

Yaakov Avinu was a great tzaddik and had done many mitzvos in his life. The Mishnah says that with every mitzva a person does, a positive angel is created to protect him in heaven (Avos 4:11). Yaakov had created many thousands of angels. As a prophet, he was able to harness these angels and sent them in human form to Eisav. He hoped that when Eisav encountered these angels—the products of Yaakov's good deeds—his heart would be penetrated, and then Eisav would choose to do good. This is the power of coming into the presence of kedusha.

Many of us have had that experience when we come to the Kotel, the last place of kedusha remaining from the Beis Hamikdash. Many of us feel inspiration and awe when are in the presence of the holy wall. Many of us feel that way when we come to the Land of Israel or the city of Yerushalayim. People often feel this very strongly when coming face to face with a Torah leader. Yaakov thought that Eisav would be affected by the kedusha of the angels and would repent. Yaakov cared for his brother and wanted him to do teshuva.

But things didn't work out the way Yaakov wanted. Instead of repenting, Eisav actually became worse. When he came into the presence of these angels, he gained a greater feeling of superiority, which he further directed towards evil.

We have a strong belief that evil can be changed and converted into good. This is the idea of teshuva. No matter what kind of evil a person has gotten into, he can repent and attain forgiveness and leave the sins behind. We do not believe in what the Christians call "original sin," a sin that is inescapable. Our Torah teaches us that when a person does teshuva, he is forgiven for his sin. Dovid committed a sin of terrible licentiousness, yet he did teshuva and attained forgiveness. Nevuzaradan was the chief executioner for Nevuchadnetzar. He killed hundreds of thousands of Jews, yet he did teshuva and was accepted by God. Indeed, every kind of sin is redeemable.

Dark Clouds

The Zohar writes, though, there is a certain intractable and incorrigible evil that is almost impossible to be redeemed. Pharaoh represents this level of sin. Amazingly, plague after plague blasted Pharaoh and his people, yet he did not

change. Each time a plague stopped, Pharaoh would go back on his word and keep Bnei Yisrael in Egypt.

The Zohar compares Pharaoh's brand of evil to dark clouds. There are certain clouds that are so dark that even on a shiny summer day they turn the sky black with the rainstorms they bring. Just moments before the clouds come the day is bright but, suddenly, the black clouds block out the light. These clouds represent an evil so bad that it is irredeemable. No matter how much light you shine on this evil, it stays black as night. The Zohar relates this idea to the seven lean cows of Pharaoh's dream, which remained skinny despite swallowing the seven healthy cows. In other words, even if goodness gets into this evil, it will be absorbed and disappear within it, just as the summer sun gets lost in the black clouds of the thunderstorm.

What kind of sin is the Zohar referring to? This is the sin of supercilious haughtiness, of self-centered pride and ego. When a person fills himself with this kind of excessive pride, it is a great sin indeed. It is almost impossible to fix, as we will explain.

The best way to get a person to repent from doing bad things is to have him do good things. It is difficult for a person to directly confront his evil side and to change. The human ego has great difficulty doing that. It is easier and more effective to start by doing good. *Sur mei'ra va'asei tov*. One method of getting away from evil is to just start doing good things. By doing good things, a person weans himself from evil.

As parents, we can apply this method to involve our children in positive behaviors. When a child is doing bad things, a direct confrontation with the child to force him to stop will engender strong resistance and resentment. People, even children, often feel insulted when they hear, "You are bad and you need to change." A better approach would be to give the child a productive project. If, for example, a child misbehaves in school and you want him to behave, don't confront him directly. Instead, give him something else to do. Don't say, "You're terrible, you have to change and behave nicely in school." Instead, inspire the child to start a new project. Have him get involved in a charity project or bring food to the homeless and to the sick. Let him fix things in local playgrounds or help children in the neighborhood. Motivate him to do good things. Once the child gets involved in good things, he will simply leave the bad things. He will say, "I see how important it is for kids to get an education, so I'll get an

education too.” As a teacher and parent, I have seen this happen many times. When children get involved in good things, they naturally move away from bad ones.

Doing good things is a very powerful way to change a person. When Yaakov sent those angels, those mitzvos, he gave Eisav the message of doing good things. If Eisav would get involved in doing good things, he would abandon his evil ways.

The Sources of Sin

Sins can have many sources. *Ta’ava*, passion, is one source. People can have passion for physical pleasures or for honor. Other sins come from a personality of *ga’ava*, an excessive ego. When a person constantly caters to his own ego, he feels that he has to assert this self-centeredness. This is a difficult trait to straighten out. Even if he does good deeds, they will just nourish his ego. He will then say, “Wow! Look, I’m even greater than I thought!” If a person is sinning because of his *ta’ava*, he can learn to redirect the passion to good things. We’ve seen people who have passion for evil switch even that same passion to one to do good things. But if a person’s drive is his ego, that he is better than others, then when he does good things, he only reaffirms his ego. Even his mitzvos serve an evil purpose. This is the meaning of the Zohar’s analogy to opaque black clouds. Even light cannot pierce these clouds. This is the sin of *ga’ava*.

The Failure of Yaakov’s Angels

This is where the messengers that Yaakov sent to Eisav failed. Yaakov sent Eisav the message, “You can do great things, you are a great man!” Eisav said, “Yes, I am a great man, even greater than you think. And I will attack you.”

This is a powerful and troubling lesson. It’s not simple to fix *ga’ava* just by doing good things. When a person has an attitude of *ga’ava*, even the good things he does can turn into an unfortunate expression of destructive ego.

Even though it seems that Yaakov failed to reach his goal by sending these messengers to Eisav, the Shem Mishmuel says he did not fail completely. According to the Midrash, Eisav kissed Yaakov sincerely and lovingly at their meeting as a result of those messengers. Originally, the messengers indeed failed. In our conceptualization according to Chassidus, giving egotistical Eisav the ability to do good things just gave him more power to twist those good things to suit his terrible ego. But good is still good. Initially, Eisav brought 400 soldiers to attack Yaakov. After receiving those messengers, Eisav became even more aggressive. But when

he saw Yaakov, he had a change of heart. He felt an affinity towards Yaakov and kissed him. At that moment, they were close friends. Even though this did not last, the moment was unchangeable. Eisav experienced an appreciation for the goodness that he had seen in Yaakov.

It is difficult to change a *ba’al ga’ava* into a *tzaddik*. *Ga’ava* creates dark clouds that are almost impenetrable. It seems that even good deeds cannot have an immediate desired effect on the egoist. However, this is only at the first level. Eventually, the light will pierce even the darkest cloud. These dark clouds will open up and allow the light to shine through them. Even the egotistical Eisav repented in some way because he met Yaakov. Albeit in a small measure, Eisav was indeed affected by Yaakov’s overtures.

Moshe’s Proposed Brotherhood

Moshe understood this concept. Yaakov had sent messengers to Eisav because he felt it was an important part of his mission in this world. Eisav was a powerhouse and could join the Jewish People in the mission of improving the world. He later created a great kingdom that controlled much of Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and North Africa. Eisav is the spiritual and possibly even the physical founder of Rome, from which came Western civilization, including today’s Europe and America. Eisav is the father of human development over thousands of years. We cannot ignore this.

As descendants of Yaakov, we have a responsibility. We have the message of Torah, holiness, and mitzvos. We have a responsibility to our brother Eisav to help him do teshuva and get on the right path. He has the potential to be a *tzaddik*.

Although Yaakov ultimately failed, Moshe tried again with a different strategy. Hundreds of years later, Moshe sent a message to the kingdom of Edom, the descendants of Eisav. In this message, Moshe said, “*Ko amar achicha Yisrael*. I am your brother Yisrael. I went down to Egypt. This was a decree told to Avraham, our great-grandfather. I paid the price while you, my brother Eisav, stayed in the land of Edom. Now that I have come back, let us develop a brotherly relationship. I have no intention of harming your country. I am going to Canaan, the country promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We will get our country, and you will keep your country. At least let us renew our brotherhood. Let us pass through your land.”

When Yaakov sent his messengers to Eisav, Yaakov used the term *avd’cha* Yaakov, saying, “I am your servant,

Yaakov” (Bereishis 32:5). Our Sages say this was a mistake. Yaakov was pandering to Eisav’s pride. He was saying, “You are my superior, my older brother.” Maybe this came from his fear, but it was a failure. Even though Yaakov sent messengers full of holiness and mitzvos to inspire Eisav to a life of goodness, when Yaakov called himself Eisav’s servant, he essentially motivated Eisav to do more bad deeds, since he acknowledged Eisav as superior.

We have much to teach the world through the Torah. Imagine if we would say to the world of Rome and Western civilization, “You are our superior, we are your servants. But we still have some good ideas for you to learn.” This would be a failure! The Eisav-world would not respect us. Our message would be lost in their ego. They would look at the Jew as an inferior being, and they would think, “How can an inferior being teach us?”

Why did Moshe think that his message would succeed where Yaakov’s message failed? Moshe understood that Yaakov Avinu had made a mistake in using the term *avd’cha*. Moshe didn’t use the term *eved*. Instead, he used the term *achicha*, your brother. The term brother indicates equality. “We have an equality, you and I. Both of us have something important. We can pool our contributions and efforts. I have the spiritual message of the Torah, and you have the ability to build the physical world and imbue it with the spirituality of our teachings. We can be partners in our endeavors to fix the world.”

Equal Partnership Rejected

A brother is an equal, not a slave. Moshe thought there was a difference between Yaakov’s personal situation and Moshe’s. Yaakov was alone, a powerless refugee fleeing from Lavan. However, reasoned Moshe, we came out of Egypt through miracles; we walked through the Red Sea with Hashem’s help and defeated the mighty Amalek. With Hashem’s help, we have demonstrated our strength. Now, we can be brothers with Eisav.

But this also failed, Eisav and the kingdom of Edom wanted neither partnership nor brotherhood with the Jews. Their pride was so strong that they wouldn’t even recognize the miracles of the Exodus. They even had the audacity to think that if they organized their army, they could fight and win against the Jews and the God of Israel. Hashem told Moshe, “I am not interested in a war against Eisav. Move away from them.”

The Hidden Success of These Initiatives

In both of these encounters, the Jew initiated a

rapprochement with the outside world. Yaakov was even ready to let Eisav lead, but Eisav refused to be leader of Yaakov. Moshe said we would join forces, but again Eisav refused. This was due to his intense *ga’ava*. In his exaggerated self-concept, Eisav refuses to give any credit to the Jewish People. Eisav thinks he can do it all on his own, even in the spiritual dimension.

The Shem Mishmuel says something very surprising here. We shouldn’t think that these approaches of Yaakov and Moshe were total failures. Our Sages have taught us that, over the centuries, many righteous converts have come from the world of Eisav. There have been *geirei tzedek*, such as Onkelos, the nephew of the Caesar of Rome. We all know other righteous converts, too. They came as a result of the outreach of Yaakov and Moshe. Even though the *ga’ava* of Eisav led him to reject Yaakov and Moshe and, in general, the world of Rome and Western civilization has rejected direct recognition of the Jewish contribution to the spiritual side of the world, many gentiles have chosen the path of righteousness. There will be a part of the Roman world that will ultimately recognize the Jewish contribution of Torah to the world. They will then become brothers in the advancement and enhancement of spirituality in this world.

We live in tumultuous times. Not long ago, we experienced the Holocaust. This was the worst expression of the supercilious superiority complex of Eisav, the Roman and European attitudes towards the Jews. This was the ultimate rejection of the Jewish contribution to the world. In the last seventy years, however, much has changed. The State of Israel was born. Many of those same Western nations that attempted to destroy the Jews, from the time of the Roman Empire until the Holocaust, turned around and supported the Jews in Israel. They helped the people return to the Land of Israel. Today, many of these nations are supporters of Jews, not just of the State of Israel. Today, there is a different attitude toward Jews as Jews. Many of these gentiles speak highly of Jews and of our contributions to world culture and spirituality.

There are even some Christian clergyman who think that the Jewish religion is valid for Jews. This is a dramatic change, completely different than the historically common inimical Western approach to Jews. These are the rays of light that can penetrate the clouds of Edom and Eisav.

Is this a harbinger of the world to come? Is this a sign of Mashiach’s approach, when the world at large will recognize the truth of the Torah as the true light

for the whole world? Or is this a passing, temporary phenomenon? Is it just as when Yaakov and Eisav met, when their momentary embrace tragically faded?

Only time will tell if the fundamental change Yaakov and Moshe dreamt of and worked for will finally materialize. Let us pray and hope that as we live through

In and Out of the Zone

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

For decades, sports psychologists have used the term “the Zone” to describe a state in which athletes are capable of peak performance. As Dr. Shane Murphy explained it, “the Zone” is a “special place where performance is exceptional and consistent, automatic and flowing. An athlete is able to ignore all the pressures and let his or her body deliver the performance that has been learned so well.” (The Achievement Zone, Putnam 1996, pg. 4; and see Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Harper Collins 1990)

We may (very loosely) borrow the “Zone” concept to understand how Moshe Rabbeinu could miraculously bring water from a stone. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra wrote, “Know that when a piece of the Whole is familiar with the Whole of which it is a part, it adheres to the greater Whole, and it is capable of creating new wonders and miracles.” (Ibn Ezra to Bamidbar 20:8) In other words, Moshe’s close attachment to Hashem enabled him to tap into supernatural abilities.

This description of Moshe echoes an observation by Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk. At Har Sinai, Hashem promised Moshe that the Jews would “believe in you forever.” Rav Meir Simchah asked: How could Hashem know that Moshe would never falter? And he explained, “Hashem removed free choice from Moshe in entirety, such that he remained compelled [to obey], like a malach.” Moshe was completely attached to Hashem. (Meshech Chochmah, Introduction to Shemot, and see Rambam, Shemonah Perakim #7, and Likutei Amarim Tanya Chapter 10)

Moshe’s exclusive attachment to Hashem is manifest across the Torah. Moshe wears a veil after communing with Hashem, because the nation cannot bear his radiance. (Shemot 34:33-35) The Talmud records that Moshe separated from his wife Tziporah to be exclusively available for Hashem. (Shabbat 87a) And a midrash claims that Betzalel had a greater understanding than Moshe of

these tumultuous times, with the Jewish return to Israel and growing recognition of the gentiles of the Jewish contribution to mankind, this will be the beginning of a permanent change for the good. May we see the permanent reconciliation between Yaakov and Eisav, for the betterment of the world and all humanity.

how to create the Mishkan, because he was more grounded in this world. (Berachot 55a, as explained in Gur Aryeh to Shemot 38:22)

In truth, this sort of “Zone” experience is dangerous. Given the importance of social relationships and social mitzvot within Judaism, separating from the community could be religiously catastrophic. Indeed, a midrash describes Hashem criticizing Moshe when he wanted to dismiss the women’s contributions of their mirrors as materials for the Mishkan; in Moshe’s eyes the mirrors were repellent, but to Hashem they represented greatness. (Tanchuma Pekudei 9) But for Moshe, this was the ideal state; he succeeded in harmonizing his attachment to Hashem with his love and care for the Jewish nation.

But given Moshe’s total attachment to Hashem, how did he make the mistake of striking the stone instead of speaking to it? Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra attributes it to emotion, which disrupted Moshe’s closeness to Hashem and took him out of “the Zone”. The nation assembled upon Moshe and Aharon, taking a position of aggression. (Bamidbar 20:2, and see Ibn Ezra to Bamidbar 17:7) Moshe and Aharon then went to the tent of Meeting “from before the community,” and Ibn Ezra explains that they were fleeing, “like fugitives.” (ibid. 20:6) And so Ibn Ezra explained that “they did not speak [to the stone], due to the aggression of the nation against Moshe. And so the portion split off [from the Whole].” Moshe fell away from the Whole, and out of the Zone.

This is why Moshe could not lead the Jews into Eretz Yisrael; he no longer lived in a state of constant, consummate attachment to Hashem. And so leadership switched to Yehoshua, whose reputation was built on his constant total devotion, the fact that he never left the Tent. (Shemot 33:11)

This perspective on Moshe is daunting and inspiring. Until the end of his term, Moshe reached a level at which he

could act in tandem with the Creator of Heaven and Earth! Judaism does not posit a religion in which we are passive subjects cowering in a frightening universe. The Jew must see herself as a literal partner in Creation, capable of partnering

with Hashem. We are not Moshe, but we can approach the Zone. The recipe is for us to do as Moshe did, and as Yehoshua did, exerting our utmost effort to attach ourselves to the Divine. When we do that, miracles may follow.

Is Religion Rational?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The legendary King Solomon was gifted with unlimited intelligence. His fabled intellectual talents drew curious tourists from across the globe. Not only did he master the classic fields of learning, but he also studied the secret languages of the natural and animal kingdoms. Nothing lay beyond his penetrating intellect, except for the logic of one solitary divine commandment, which perplexed him.

Even with his scintillating intellect, Solomon failed to decode the great mystery of parah adumah, or the red hefer ceremony. Ashes taken from a burnt red cow, mixed with natural spring water, applied twice during a one-week interval, eliminates halachik impurity from someone who had contact with a corpse. Once released from this legal state of impurity, the person can return to the Temple precincts.

Understandably, this bizarre service baffled the smartest man to ever live. Not only is the ceremony irrational, but it is also enigmatic and counterintuitive. Though the application of this watery mixture removes impurity from the recipient, it introduces impurity to the officials who administer this sacred suspension. The parah adumah ritual is a riddle wrapped in an enigma, and it bewildered the greatest brain in the history of Mankind.

Surrendering to this mystery, Solomon lamented: “I had hoped to acquire this knowledge but, alas, it remained distant from me”. The red hefer ceremony is the classic model of an irrational religious commandment so inexplicable that it remained impervious even to Solomon’s wisdom.

Though the red hefer ceremony is exceptional, it is also iconic. This ceremony, devoid of any apparent logic, demonstrates, that all commandments, even the so-called logical ones, lie beyond the grasp of human comprehension. The red hefer ceremony merely accentuates the inner illogic of every divine command.

Are Commandments Logical?

Though the Torah rarely provides direct or clear reasons for commandments, each divine instruction possesses a

purpose and provides a benefit, either material or spiritual. God doesn’t issue arbitrary or capricious mandates, but provides us invaluable guidelines for human behavior. Throughout history, supreme confidence in the rational nature of divine commandments inspired persistent efforts to map the hidden reasons behind divine commandments. Some commandments such as moral laws and the rules governing society appear to be rational, while most commandments such as rituals, dietary laws and marital regulations appear to be less logical.

Many scholars, most prominently Maimonides, attempted to uncover the hidden reasons behind all divine commandments. Maimonides’ efforts were highly controversial and elicited significant opposition. Some of the backlash stemmed from concerns that attaching reasons to commandments could, potentially, contextualize them and undermine their authority. Opponents of Maimonides worried that when divine instructions are hinged to a particular reason, they are more easily miscast as obsolete once the reasons fade. For divine commandments to be timeless they must be untethered to any specific context, set of customs, or time period.

Ironically, Solomon himself failed this test, by misconstruing the reason for a Biblical injunction and incorrectly assuming it didn’t apply to him. He justified that the Biblical injunction against marrying an excessive number of wives was only geared to prevent distractions from a king’s national responsibilities. Confident in his own ability to attend to his royal duties, Solomon violated this injunction, married too many women and, ultimately, was sidetracked.

Solomon’s failed gamble is a cautionary tale. Tracing commandments to specific reasons can undermine their timelessness and subject them to selective performance.

Piety and Obedience

Additionally, asserting a rational basis for the performance of a divine obligation may dilute the piety of the experience. Divine mandates condition us toward

unconditional submission to God and His will. Fulfillment of a divine obligation without fully understanding its underlying reason or without deriving any personal benefit fosters obedience and piety. As the 20th century philosopher, CS Lewis, articulated, "when we have said that God commands things only because they are good, we must add that one of the things intrinsically good is that rational creatures should freely surrender themselves to their Creator in obedience. ...the mere obeying is also intrinsically good, for, in obeying, a rational creature... reverses the act by which we fell, treads Adam's dance backward, and returns. " The highest "intrinsic good" is to express our obedience to a Higher being.

For this reason, the red heifer ceremony is intentionally programmed without rhyme or reason. This illogical ceremony, which rescues us from the world of death, underscores the fact, that humans don't possess all the answers. Just as we have no solution for death, we are similarly limited in our understanding of many other truths. Religion asks us to submit our own limited intellects to a Higher authority whose wisdom lies "beyond", whose thoughts aren't our thoughts and whose ways aren't our ways.

Though we strive to discover logic within divine commands we never condition religious observance upon human understanding. Every religious command is similar to the red heifer ceremony: a leap into the unknown, beyond human logic and beyond human comprehension. Ultimately, religion is dependent upon a leap of faith.

Science Never Leaps

The modern world is far too rational for leaps of faith. In an ancient world which was dark and confusing, it was obvious that deeper wisdoms lay beyond the reach of human intellect. In that frightening and unpredictable world, truth could only be found at the delicate intersection between ration and irrationality. Truth was always a blend between observed facts and articles of faith. Great leaps of the imagination were necessary just to survive.

The Strongest Border

Rabbi Efram Goldberg

Parshas Chukas concludes with the story of Benei Yisrael's conquest of the lands that had been ruled by the kings Sichon and Og. This story began with Moshe's message to Sichon, asking the king for permission

Contemporary culture has been completely reshaped by five centuries of scientific revolution. Our rational world only attributes validity to the facts which empirical experimentation and sensory experience confirm. As John Locke asserted "the only true knowledge that could be accessible to the human mind was that which was based on experience". Strict scientific analysis, based upon unprejudiced experimentation is the only pathway to truth. In our world of stark empiricism, irrational

religious leaps of faith seem, to many, foolish and outdated. Empiricism discourages the unverifiable, and therefore, in the modern secular city, religion has gradually collapsed.

Very little about faith can be proven. Ironically, once we assume that God spoke with us at Sinai it is completely logical to obey His commands and His word. However, proof of that foundational moment or of the seminal act of creation lies beyond empirical experimentation. It takes courage and higher intellect to accept non-empirical truth.

Artificial Intelligence and Human Identity

The rise of Artificial Intelligence may have unintended positive consequences for religious belief. Many religious people are legitimately concerned about how AI will affect our religious practice, our view of human identity, and ultimately, our commitment to religion. Ironically AI may help restore the value of non-rational elements of human identity. By creating higher beings of intelligence, whose rational capacities far outstrip human potential, we may more deeply value the non-rational capabilities which make us uniquely human. If rational and cognitive faculties are endowed to machines, they can no longer be viewed as central components of human identity. By offloading rational processing to robots, we may better appreciate human immortality and the distinctly human ability to take leaps of faith and to accept delivered truths from others.

Machines can never discern Higher intellect. We, alone, are touched by God, and we alone can find Him through courageous leaps of our imagination.

to pass through his land. Sichon responded by mobilizing an army and attacking Benei Yisrael, who fought back and took control of all of Sichon's territory. The Torah delineates precisely the territory which came under Benei

Yisrael's control, emphasizing that they did not cross the border to the nation of Amon, כי עז גבול בני עמון – “because the border of the Amonites was powerful” (21:24).

The simple reading of this pasuk is that the people of Amon were militarily strong, such that Benei Yisrael knew they did not stand a chance of seizing their land. Rashi, however, explains differently, writing:

ומהו חזקו? התראתו של הקב"ה שאמר להם: אל תצורם.

The “strength” of this border, Rashi says, lay in the fact that Hashem had commanded Benei Yisrael not to initiate hostilities against Amon (Devarim 2:19). It wasn't that Amon was militarily superior, but rather that Benei Yisrael had been specifically commanded not to violate Amon's territory. And this command made the border with Amon impenetrable.

When Hashem tells us that something is forbidden, the command creates a powerful, inviolable “border,” a mental barrier that we do not even consider trying to breach.

An ordinary trip to the local supermarket illustrates this point very effectively.

Supermarkets invest a great deal of thought into the layout of the store. For example, staple items such as bread and milk are always placed at the very back. Knowing that virtually all customers need those items, the supermarkets force them to pass through the shelves stocked with other, less vital products on their way, hoping that something will

catch their attention and lead to an additional purchase. Likewise, virtually every supermarket places delicious, enticing candy right near the checkout counters, where parents wait on line with tired, kvetchy children who are likely to nudge, complain, yell and scream until their parents give in and buy them the overpriced, unhealthy junk food that they crave. But when an observant Jewish parent is waiting on the checkout line, and the child sees something he or she wants, the parent – often – can avoid this problem by checking the label. If it turns out that the product is not kosher, the parent simply has to tell the child, “It's not kosher,” and the child stops whining...

כי עז גבול בני עמון. Neither the candy's cost, nor its high sugar content, is enough to convince the child that it is off-limits. But once the child realizes that Hashem does not allow eating it, the argument is over.

Parshas Chukas teaches us about חוקת התורה, our unconditional and unquestioning commitment to Hashem's commands. The very fact that Hashem forbade something is enough of a reason for us to comply, regardless of whether or not we understand why He forbade it. While we are encouraged to study, inquire and analyze, so we understand the mitzvos to the best of our ability, ultimately, our attitude toward mitzvos must be כי עז גבול בני עמון, that Hashem's command is the final word, and we must obey without any hesitation.

How to Market G-d!

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In the first of this week's parashiot, parashat Chukat, the Israelites, who are soon to complete 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, are rebellious once again. The Israelites are upset by the fact that their beloved High Priest, Aaron, has just passed away at Mt. Hor. Additionally, the nation has recently been instructed to take a roundabout detour, rather than take the much shorter route by passing through the land of Edom. Even though the Edomites showed a great lack of appreciation by not allowing the people of Israel to cross through their land, G-d has forbidden Israel to attack them.

The Israelites fear that, since they are now being told to travel in a direction away from the Promised Land, they, like their ancestors, would be denied entry into Eretz Yisrael, and would also perish in the wilderness. The rigors of so many years of travel have taken its toll on the people,

and they begin to complain, without justification, once again provoking G-d's anger. The people speak against G-d and Moses saying (Numbers 21:5): לָמָּה הֵעֲלִיתֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לָמוּ: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this wilderness, for there is no food and no water, and we can no longer tolerate this insubstantial food?”

The medieval commentator Abarbanel maintained that the people's complaint about food and water, was really about the manna and the miraculous well water that had followed the nation in the wilderness. The people argued that these “heavenly” foods, might have been appropriate for the wilderness, but are surely inappropriate for the agricultural environment they would encounter once they enter the land of Israel.

G-d perceives this outburst as another in a long litany

of rebellious acts and an arrogant display of lack of faith on the part of the people regarding G-d's ability to properly provide for them. Consequently, the Al-mighty sends fiery serpents to attack the rebellious hordes, and a large number die.

When the Israelites come running to Moses begging for forgiveness, Moses prays. In response, G-d instructs Moses to build a fiery serpent and place it on a tall pole so that those who are bitten will look at the serpent and live. Moses proceeds to make a copper serpent, places it on the pole, and all those who look at the serpent live.

The rabbis of the Talmud, tractate Rosh Hashana 29a, ask with regards to both this case of the fiery serpent and a similar incident, at the end of Exodus 17, where Moses' hands are held aloft during the battle with the Amalekite nation, "Does a copper serpent cause death or life? Do the hands of Moses win battles or lose battles?" In effect, the rabbis are troubled that these seemingly "supernatural" rituals, which smack of magic and voodoo, appear to be truly out of character with Judaism!

The rabbis respond that it was not so much the serpent or the hands of Moses that heal or prevail in battle, but rather the fact that the serpents and the hands of Moses caused the Israelites to look upwards, resulting in the people subjecting their hearts to their Father in Heaven. It was not the serpent or the hands at all, but rather the faith of the people in G-d that healed the Israelites from the serpents, and allowed Israel to prevail in the battle with Amalek.

If that's the case, why was it necessary to resort to copper serpents and to utilize the hands of Moses in order to direct the people to focus on G-d?

Actually, this question is quite germane today, since we face very much the same problem. With all the distractions and the pervasive blandishments of America--obsession

with career, wealth, pleasure and entertainment, how and where does G-d fit in? How do we market G-d? How does Judaism attract the attention of its "clients," and get them to at least give G-d a chance? Surely, it's not the serpent or the hands of Moses that are the determining factors! They are but a means to a very important end--a way of persuading the people to look up toward heaven, to focus on G-d. But, if the serpent and the hands themselves become the central focus, then we have failed abysmally in our mission.

Many persuasive and resourceful methods have been used by outreach organizations to attract alienated and marginally-affiliated Jews to Judaism: Bible codes that presume to prove the Divine authorship of the Torah, Kabbalah and mysticism, and focus on the imminent arrival of Moshiach (Messiah). If these methods are properly utilized to attract unaffiliated Jews, they are a blessing. If these methods become an end in-and-of themselves, then they become a veritable idolatry and will ultimately prove not only useless, but destructive.

We need to always keep in mind the immortal words of the Psalmist 19:8, הַיּוֹרֵת הַשָּׁם תְּמַיְמָה, which declare that the purity of G-d's Torah is really the essential element of Judaism. We must not get distracted by the marketing gimmicks that are only ephemeral, and forget that G-d's words are the essence. Too often we fail to realize that Torah can sell itself--just studying one or two remarkable verses of the Torah text can result in a significant spiritual epiphany.

Especially with the arrival of summer, with more leisure time for vacations and pleasure, we need to more fully embrace Torah, to make certain that our own portable Torah scroll accompanies us through our summer activities, to make certain that we do not find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, subject to the venal attacks of serpents who seek to seduce us away from G-d.

When the Para Aduma was Misunderstood

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

There is a rabbinic tradition (see Rashi's commentary to Shemot 15:25) that the law of the Para Aduma (Red Heifer) was first taught as a concept to Bnei Yisrael when they arrived in Mara immediately after leaving Egypt (nb. a possible reason as to why Bnei Yisrael needed to be taught this law even prior to arriving at Mount Sinai could be related to the fact that the

Ancient Egyptians considered a bull either to be a deity, or to be associated with deities).

However, there is a problem with this theory, as a further rabbinic tradition (see Midrash Tanchuma Chukat 8, quoted by Rashi to Bemidbar 19:22) teaches us that the law of the Para Aduma was established in order to atone for the sin of the Egel HaZahav (the Golden Calf). As should

be clear, if the law of the Para Aduma was given before the sin of the Golden Calf, then it cannot be claimed that its purpose was to serve as an atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf.

Admittedly, various commentaries have attempted to address this question, with some – such as Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi - arguing that these rabbinic traditions simply do not align with one another. However, I would like to suggest a possible solution to this question by presenting what I think is a radical approach to the story of the Egel HaZahav. But in order to explain this solution, we need to go back to what happened in Mara.

You may recall that when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they journeyed for three days without water. Then, having arrived at Mara (which, significantly, means ‘bitter’), they discover that while water is found there, it is so incredibly bitter that it is undrinkable! At this point the people feel aggrieved and disheartened and they complain to Moshe, who then prays to God. In response, God instructs Moshe to throw a tree into the water (which, according to the Mechilta was itself a bitter tree). Miraculously, the water became sweet, and the people then drank the sweet water.

Interestingly, some commentaries note that one of the associations between Mara and Para Aduma is that just as it seems illogical how the bitter tree immersed in the bitter water transformed the water to be sweet, so too, aspects of the Para Aduma ritual are similarly illogical (eg. the fact that the priest who purifies someone who has been in contact with the dead through the waters of the Para Aduma himself becomes impure). A further parallel is the fact that just as water is a life force, the purpose of the Para Aduma is to spiritually transform someone who has come in contact with the dead. Still, whatever the connection between what Moshe does with the tree and the transformation of the water, it is in Mara where the people learn some conceptual aspects of the Para Aduma ritual.

Let us now fast-forward to the moment when the people are at Mount Sinai. They’ve heard the Ten Commandments, and they are now awaiting Moshe’s descent. However, Moshe doesn’t descend at the time when the people expect him to do so. Instead, Bnei Yisrael have a premonition that Moshe has actually died (nb. on this point see Rashi on Shemot 32:1).

Once again feeling aggrieved and disheartened, yet this time without Moshe to turn to, the people are unsure what to do. But then they remember the concept of the Para Aduma, how this was something that they’d learnt from

Moshe, and how it had miraculous powers to turn impurity to purity and be a source of life in a similar manner to how the water in Mara was turned from bitter to sweet. Given this, using the gold worn by the men (which, significantly, had a reddish look to it), and while asking Aharon to help, the people melted the gold and built the Golden Calf as an attempt to somehow bring Moshe back to life.

Clearly, this was a gross misunderstanding of what the Para Aduma is all about. But what happens next is itself fascinating, because when Moshe descends Mount Sinai he ‘throws’ down (‘vayashlech’) the tablets (nb. the word ‘vayashlech’ used here is the same word used in Shemot 15: 25 when Moshe ‘throws’ the tree into the water - thereby reminding them of what took place in Mara). Moreover, he then ‘grinds up and sprinkles the gold into water’ (Shemot 32:20) - which itself is what is done with the ashes of the Para Aduma. Rather than the law of the Para Aduma coming to atone for the sin of the Egel HaZahav, the sin of the Egel HaZahav emerges from a misunderstanding and misapplication of the law of the Para Aduma.

With this in mind, when Bemidbar 19:1 recounts how God instructs both Moshe and Aharon to review the laws of the Para Aduma with Bnei Yisrael (which itself is significant given Aharon’s involvement with the Egel HaZahav), this law is emphasized as ‘Chok’ – meaning a statute. And why? It is as if to say that if people misinterpret the purpose of statutes, bad things can happen - as evident from the sin of the Egel HaZahav.