

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

Parashat Chukat: Leadership and Self-Reliance

By Rabbi Dov Linzer



Transitions are hard. As the period of wandering in the desert begins to draw to a close, *Bnei Yisrael* encounter many changes, and they can anticipate many more to come.

Their leaders begin to die, Miriam and Aharon in this week's *parasha* alone, and the final one, Moshe, will pass away a few months hence. They are also facing a shift in the very nature of their lives and their reality. For the last forty years, they have been living an otherworldly existence – in the wilderness, existing in a vacuum, with all their needs being provided for directly by God in miraculous ways. Soon they will be living in the Land of Israel, fighting wars, planting and harvesting crops, living in a real society, and building a country.

Will the people be ready for this change? What is necessary for a transition that is as smooth as possible, and what is required?

Perhaps the first answer is that a new leadership is needed. Moshe and Aharon were the perfect leaders to bring the people out of Egypt, but they may not be the perfect leaders to bring them into the Land of Israel. They have led with the aid of ongoing and direct communication with God and with God's direct intervention through miraculous acts. Now, however, the people need leaders who don't have this option available to them: leaders who cannot turn to God and expect an answer, leaders who will be forced to work out real-world solutions for themselves. They need leaders who will be self-reliant and who can teach the people to be self-reliant as well.

Just as Moshe and Aharon have developed a reliance on God, the people have grown habituated to a reliance on Moshe and Aharon. This is not a healthy relationship – not for Moshe and Aharon, and certainly not for the people.

Consider: They have now spent forty years in the wilderness, and yet our *parasha* reads like a replay of their complaints as they left Egypt at the beginning of *Beshalach*: no water, no food, words against Moshe and God, and asking to go back to Egypt.

But shouldn't they know better? They presumably know by now that God is able to provide for them. They also have presumably learned that if they complain, only bad things will result. And yet what do they do? They whine; they repeat the old line, "Why did you take us out of Egypt?" Their request for water at least reflects legitimate need, even if they asked for it inappropriately, but the grumblings about the *man* is nothing but ingratitude and small-mindedness. And the divine response is predictably deadly. Really, don't they ever learn?

The truth is that it is one thing to learn intellectually and quite another to change the dynamics of a relationship. We so often fall back into old patterns and old roles, even when we know better. A person could be a mature, accomplished professional, but when she goes back to her family for Thanksgiving or Pesach, all of a sudden she is playing her old role of middle sister and interacting with her parents and her siblings just like she did when she was a teenager. A couple could have worked through a difficult relationship, learning the behaviors that set one another off and that need to be avoided. But without a lot of effort, when those old triggers are encountered, they will again act in their old, counterproductive ways.

Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael* have been working on their relationship now for forty years, and it seems like those old patterns are not going to break. *Bnei Yisrael* somehow
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fall back into their teenage, child mode when facing challenges and turn to Moshe. And Moshe falls back into his familiar mode – turning to God for an answer:

And Moshe and Aharon went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them (Bamidbar 20:6).

Moshe may not be aware of how little his own behavior has changed, but he certainly sees the people as failing in this regard: “Hear ye rebels, must we fetch water for you out of this rock?” (20:11). The word for rebels, *morim*, is echoed in his valedictory address to the people in a way that makes explicit the sense that the people’s wayward behavior is hopeless and unchanging: “Rebels, *mamrim*, you have been against God, from the day that I have known you” (Devarim 9:24).

This, then, might be what the sin of Moshe and Aharon is all about. It is all so mysterious. What was their sin? Was it hitting the rock rather than speaking to it? Was it calling the people rebels? Was it getting angry? Even if it is all of these, do they really justify the punishment of dying in the wilderness without entering the land?

The answer might be that their sin is all of those and none. It lays not in the acts themselves, but in what they demonstrate. For each one of these things shows that Moshe is still the leader of old and is not able to adapt to the changes ahead. Think of what he could have done differently: He could have engaged the people rather than running to the Tent of Meeting and calling on God to help. God even told him to break the old patterns and commanded him to speak to the rock, not to hit it, but he couldn’t do it. Instead, he fell back into what was familiar, hitting the rock rather than speaking to it.

There is a lot of symbolism in the choice of whether to speak or to hit. Does one speak, trying to engage, thinking that there can be a meaningful connection with the other side, believing oneself and the other are open to the change that can emerge when two sides are in open and reflective conversation? Or does one hit, believing

that no true conversation can take place and that behavior can only be modified by brute force from above? If after all this time Moshe still sees the people as incorrigible rebels who can only be beaten into submission, then it is time that Moshe step back and allow a new leader to take over.

And, lo and behold, even though Yehoshua is not selected yet, as soon as Moshe and Aharon are told that they will not take the people into the land, the people start acting in a more mature and self-reliant fashion. After Aharon’s death, Israel suffers an attack by the king of Arad. Their response? Not to turn to Moshe, but to take matters into their own hands:

And Israel vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities (21:2).

They prayed to God, they went to battle, and they were victorious. This was no replay of the war with Amalek, another parallel to Parashat Beshalach. The people here were not dependent on Moshe and on a miracle wrought by his hands raised to heaven. This war was won by the people themselves, by their skills in battle, their prayers, and their relationship with God.

Perhaps the event with the poisonous serpents represents a relapse, with their complaining about the *man* and turning to Moshe to pray to God to save them. But in the end, even with the miraculous intervention, there was something more empowering this time around. Moshe didn’t save the people with his prayers and Aharon didn’t save them with the incense. Moshe made a physical object, a serpent on a flag, which the people then used to save themselves. Each person’s healing was in his or her own hands. This healing may have been a little too miraculous for the real world they would soon be encountering, and in the end the brass serpent was destroyed by King Hizkiyahu (II Kings 18:3). But in the wilderness, where the supernatural was taken for granted, this was how healing took place. And they did it themselves.

And so it continues. The song that they sing, *az yashir*,
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echoes the song sung by Moshe and Miriam back in Beshalach. But now it is not *az yashir Moshe*, but rather, *az yashir Yisrael* (21:17). And by the time they are

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encountering Sichon, it is no longer Moshe who is sending the messengers, as was the case with Edom (20:14), but rather, the people themselves: "Then Israel sent messengers to Sichon the king of the Amorites..." (21:21).

The people are learning what it means to be responsible for themselves. They are growing up. And sometimes to grow up and escape all those old behaviors and dynamics, you have to leave the parental home. Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam are left behind in the people's childhood home, in the desert where the people were raised. The people are now ready to leave home, to become adults as they learn independence and self-reliance, and as they prepare for the challenges that lie ahead in the Land of Canaan.

GUEST D'VAR TORAH

Digging to Find the Oral Torah
By Rabbi Zachary Truboff (YCT '10)

God miraculously provides water for the Jewish people in the desert at least four times after they depart from Egypt. Perhaps the most well known of these episodes occurs in Parashat Chukat, when Moshe decides to hit the rock, contradicting God's instructions to speak to the rock in order to bring forth water. There is, however, a lesser known narrative that takes place towards the end of the *parasha*, when the Jewish people once again find themselves without any water to drink.

God commands Moshe to gather the people together so that He may once again provide for them. What distinguishes this moment from the previous occurrences is that no overt miracle takes place? Instead, the people find water by digging a well themselves (Bamidbar 21:16-20). While only five short verses, it appears to be an event of great significance in the development and growth of the Jewish people. Up to this point, it is Moshe who

acts on behalf of the Jewish people in order provide water for them. At this moment, the Jewish people take responsibility for themselves and dig the well. Their success culminates in a joyous song sung by the entire people.

In Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905) writes that water in this narrative is to be understood as a metaphor for Torah. He specifically sees this event as representing the interplay between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. Up to this point, Moshe has led a people entirely dependent on God's mercy and care. The Sefat Emet explains that Moshe's leadership embodies the Written Torah because he was responsible for transmitting God's divine word to the Jewish people. Under Moshe's leadership, the generation that left Egypt leads a miraculous existence, much like the written Torah itself, but one in which the Jewish people take little responsibility for their own welfare.

This moment, however, is not about Moshe or the generation that left Egypt. Rather, it is about a new generation of Jews born in freedom. It is a generation that will be responsible for its destiny; therefore, it will be not only be a receiver of the Written Torah but a creator of the Oral Torah as well. The Sefat Emet explains that this is the reason why the Jewish people must dig the well through their own efforts and without Moshe's assistance. They must do so as a people because the Oral Torah is not to be found in heaven or in the hands of rare individuals: It is only through the Jewish collective here on earth that the Oral Torah can emerge.

In fact, the Sefat Emet is careful to point out that, in addition to taking no part in the digging of the well, Moshe refrains from participating in the singing that follows. After the splitting of the Red Sea, Moshe led the Jewish people in song, but the Jewish people sing alone in this instance. It is the song of the Oral Torah, a song that emanates forth from a people joyously acknowledging their unique partnership with God. It is a song that has never ceased, and, when one listens carefully, one can hear its harmonious symphony echoing forth from the Jewish people until this very day.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

Bring Back Our Boys... and Our Girls: The Trauma of Life Taken Away

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



The Jewish People and our friends all over the world have prayed hard and pled for the return of the three yeshiva students kidnapped in Israel nearly two weeks ago.

There have been *tefilla* gatherings, rallies, and special learning sessions to raise awareness and to put pressure on the powers that be in the hope that they will get Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali released from captivity. We Jews see these boys as our own children.

Yet in Riverdale this past Sunday, at a rally partially led by YCT *musmakhim* Rav Steven Exler and Rav Ari Hart, several Jewish organizations teamed up with African American organizations to plead not only for the release of “our boys,” but also for the freedom of the 219 Nigerian Christian girls who remain captives after being kidnapped nearly three months ago by the extremist Muslim group, Boko Haram (which figuratively means “Western education is sin”). It was incredible to see Rav Avi Weiss standing together with rabbis and African American leaders Ruth Evon Idahosa and Professor Mojubaolu Okome, singing and reciting Psalms and calling for the end of terrorism against innocent civilians and violence against women.

As a participant in the rally for our boys and our girls, I felt two things simultaneously. One was the sacredness of all children – of all people – and the importance for us, as Jews, to wake up a sleeping world that ignores the plight of children everywhere, especially in faraway places. The second was that the more we plead for the children far away – in Nigeria, Sudan, North Korea, or Myanmar – the more we feel the closeness for our boys, Eyal, Gilad, and Naftali; the more we speak up for the Christian Nigerian school girls, the more we understand how much the Jewish yeshiva students are a part of our lives and how much we love them.

Just as the Gaon of Vilna advocated the study of Western sciences – *hochmot hitzoniyyot* – in order to gain 70 times more Torah, we need to advocate for activism against human suffering on our planet as a means of understanding just how near to us our brothers and sisters in the Land of Israel – or anyplace that Jews live – are.

I ask our friends and supporters: Let us sing our *tehillim* out loud; let us learn more and speak out more for the sake of our boys – bring them home! And at the very same time, let us think of all those children and adults, boys and girls, wherever on Earth they may be, who need our prayers, our love, and our passion. Whether we sing at protest rallies in unison with other peoples or we simply emit the right universal *kavana*, let our love for our own help us shape a better humankind, and let our responsibility for the entire world remind us that our hearts are connected at the deepest levels to our brethren in Israel.

May the Guardian of Israel, who neither sleeps nor slumbers, help our boys come home, help the girls come home, and end oppression, terror, and hatred everywhere.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Name: Jacob Seigel
Graduation Year: 2016
Special Interest: Sacred Skills
Home Town: Apple Valley,
Minnesota

About Jacob:

Jacob became interested in the rabbinate after working in direct service for people in need in Washington, D.C. When he noticed many of his peers facing regular burnout, he recognized the need individuals and communities have for help in making their holy work more sustainable.

To read more about Jacob Siegel's work, his aspirations, and how he intends to make a difference in the Jewish community, please see our weekly email newsletter. If you do not receive our newsletter but would like to, please send an email to slevee@yctorah.org.

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