

SYMBOLISM OVER SUBSTANCE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In one of the most difficult episodes in the Torah, this week we read how Moshe loses his entitlement to enter the Land he so desired to inherit. What happened is as follows: during the desert journey, a miraculous well traveled with the Jews. This well existed in the merit of Miriam. When she died, it ceased to flow. The Jews complained bitterly that they were thirsty. Hashem commanded Moshe to "take his staff and speak to the rock," thereupon the rock would disgorge water to nourish a parched people. Moshe did not end up speaking to the rock. The nation was upset and impatient. When Moshe chose the wrong rock they chided him. "He in turn turned to them and said, "Listen you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?" (Numbers 20:10) Immediately Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it and water flowed from it.

Hashem is angered by Moshe's actions. "Because you have not sanctified me in the eyes of the nation, you will not enter the the land of Israel. (Numbers 20:12) Rashi, the classic medieval commentator, departs from his standard text-based explanation and bases his explanation of this verse upon the Midrash. "Imagine," said Hashem, "if the Jewish nation would have seen that scenario. A rock, that does not talk nor hear and does not need sustenance, produces water by the request of the Almighty. Surely, they would have taken heart when Hashem speaks to them! The impact would have been far more reaching!

Moshe's prelude to his action is noteworthy: "Listen, you rebellious folk. Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?"

The nation just wanted water, they did not ask for miracles or rock-wells. It was Hashem who told Moshe to approach the rock. Moshe knew that the water would come. Then why was his admonition given in the inquisitive mode, rather it should have been decreed in the declarative mode! Listen you rebellious folk! I am going to extract water from a rock? It seems that Moshe, himself, (Heaven-forbid) doubted his own authority. (Though many commentaries explain the question as rhetorical.)

Surely, the rock-water connection cannot be taken at face value. All who have merely dappled in the writing of our sages are familiar with the water as Torah and the rock dry and parched. Obviously, Hashem meant to send a message that even the driest stone can produce water. Why then did Moshe not play on that lesson to the rebellious folk and tell them that even the driest amongst them could become a wellspring of Torah?

Reb Shraga Faivel Mendelovitz was the founder of Yeshiva Torah Voda'ath. Once he stayed in Miami

for Shabbos at the home of a former student. The man escorted the Rebbe home from synagogue, but when he opened the door the young man was shocked and embarrassed. His wife, exhausted from a week's worth of child rearing, and the responsibility of keeping a home was sprawled on the couch. The Shabbos table was half-set, the dishes placed in a pile next to the kiddush cup and wine. In front of the head seat were two large challos sitting uncovered.

The custom is to cover the challos when making kiddush. As the blessing over bread normally precedes that of wine it is a somewhat an metaphorical embarrassment to the bread thus it is covered during the kiddush.

The student, who was embarrassed at the state of affairs, called out to his wife in a somewhat demeaning manner. "Please let us prepare the table in its entirety." Turning to his mentor, he exclaimed, "I'm sure that leaving the bread uncovered was an oversight! Everyone knows," he exclaimed shifting his self-inflicted embarrassment upon his wife, "that we must cover the challah before the kiddush.

Reb Mendelovitz was annoyed at the man's self-righteous behavior and turned to him. "Over the years, I have heard many problems that people faced. Students, couples, and adults from all walks of life have entered my office to discuss their personal situations with me. Not once did a challah ever enter my office, suffering an inferiority complex because it was left uncovered during kiddush! Do you know why?

Because we are not concerned with the challah! We are concerned with making ourselves cognizant of feelings. We worry about challos because the goal is to worry about people. How than can you embarrass your wife over not covering the challah when the act of covering is supposed to train you in sensitivity?"

Moshe understood the valuable lesson that Hashem wanted to teach His nation. But if all that was on their minds was water to drink and not the great lessons for eternity, he questioned his mission. Listen you rebellious folk," he questioned. "Do you expect me to draw water from this rock?" Do you expect that the lessons of the great parable can be taught to those whose minds are only set on the parable itself? Perhaps that is why Moshe cast the great lessons aside and hit the rock, thus disobeying Hashem's initial command. Perhaps he felt that a nation that focuses solely on the flow of drinking water couldn't understand the wellsprings of its spirituality.

In the corporeal world that our sages call a "foyer to the World To Come," we must realize that everything is a preparation for eternity. All of life's experiences can teach us how to grow and how to strive. But like extracting water from a well, we must all dig a little deeper.

Dedicated in memory of Joseph Heller by Beth and Ben Heller and family L'iluy Nishmas Reb Yoel Nossou ben Reb Chaim HaLevi Heller -- 9 Tamuz.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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