

"KNOCK YOURSELF OUT"

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Chukas

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Nat and Rikki Lewin on the 70th yahrzeit of his grandfather, Harav Aharon ben Harav Nosson z"l Hy"d (R' Aharon Lewin, the "Reisher Rav")

Today's Learning: Tanach: Tehilim 119:20-30 Mishnah: 12:2-3 Daf Yomi (Bavli): Chullin 6 Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Eruvin 49

We read in our parashah (20:14-17), "Moshe sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom: 'So said your brother Yisrael--You know all the hardship that has befallen us: Our forefathers descended to Egypt and we dwelt in Egypt many years, and the Egyptians did evil to us and to our forefathers. We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice; He sent an emissary and took us out of Egypt; now behold! We are in Kadesh, a city at the edge of your border. Let us pass through your land! We shall not pass through field or vineyard, and we shall not drink well water; on the king's road we will travel--we will not veer right or left--until we have passed through your borders'." Why did Moshe appeal to Edom (the descendants of Esav) as a "brother"? Also, why did Moshe mention Bnei Yisrael's suffering in Egypt? R' Chaim Palagi z"l (Chief Rabbi of Izmir, Turkey) explains:

Eretz Yisrael's holiness derives from the fact that it is where Creation began. Being closer to the Source, it receives the Divine flow of goodness more directly and it therefore is more complete. (This, writes R' Palagi, is reflected in the fact that Eretz Yisrael contains a little bit of nearly all of the world's climates.) In matters of spirituality, also, Eretz Yisrael's goodness is more authentic and complete.

Halachah dictates that younger siblings honor their firstborn brother. This is for exactly the same reasons that Eretz Yisrael has a special status, i.e., each of them is closer to its source. Moshe's message to Edom was: Do not worry that we will harm you as we pass through your land. For the same reason that we desire Eretz Yisrael, we honor you as descendants of our firstborn brother, Esav. If so, why are we claiming Eretz Yisrael for ourselves? Because, by being enslaved in Egypt, we paid-off the debt created by Hashem's covenant with Avraham, while you did not. (Artzot Ha'chaim p.28)

"He shall purify himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day he will become pure; but if he will not purify himself on the third day, then on the seventh day he will not become pure." (19:12)

Literally, this verse teaches that one who has become defiled by contact with a corpse must be sprinkled with water containing the ashes of the parah adumah / red heifer on the third and seventh days.

R' Chaim Tirer z"l (1760-1817; rabbi in several Bessarabian cities and early chassidic figure) offers an additional lesson:

The "third day" refers to the Torah, which the Gemara (Shabbat 88) refers to as the "Tripartite Torah." [Some interpret this as referring to the three parts that make up the acronym Tanach -- Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim.] The "seventh day" refers to Shabbat. The only way for a person to purify his soul is through study of Torah and observing the sanctity of Shabbat. (Be'er Mayim Chaim)

"He shall put upon it mayim chaim / spring water in a kli / vessel." (19:17)

The Torah is referred to as "mayim" (see Yeshayah 55:1) and as "chaim" (Mishlei 3:18). "Kli" is an acronym of Kohen, Levi, Yisrael. Here we have an allusion to the custom of calling a Kohen, a Levi, and a Yisrael up to the Torah. (Da'at Zekeinim Mi'Ba'alei Ha'Tosafot)

"Why did you have us ascend from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? Not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate; and there is no water to drink!" (20:5)

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) writes: There are different opinions as to where Bnei Yisrael obtained wood to build the Mishkan. According to a midrash, Yaakov Avinu brought cedar trees to Egypt and planted them, and he commanded his children to chop down those trees and carry them out when they would leave Egypt. According to Ibn Ezra and other commentaries, Bnei Yisrael found the trees growing in the desert. Indeed, according to the Ba'alei Tosafot, there were large forests in the desert.

This is difficult to understand, writes R' Lewin. First of all, since when do deserts contain forests? Moreover, our verse indicates that *nothing*, not even seeds, grew in the desert?

The answer to this question may be found in the Midrash Shir Ha'Shirim Rabbah, which, commenting on the verse (Shir Ha'Shirim 4:13), "I have sent you a pomegranate orchard with luscious fruit," teaches that, wherever the traveling "Well of Miriam" went, a forest sprouted around it. Our verse, however, cites Bnei Yisrael's complaint after Miriam passed away and the well disappeared. At that point, it was true that the desert was "not a place of seed." (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

"Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, 'Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them.' They are the waters of strife . . ." (20:12-13)

Our Sages teach that the reason that Pharaoh commanded that all male babies be drowned was that his astrologers foresaw that the redeemer of Bnei Yisrael would meet his downfall through water, as in fact happened to Moshe in our parashah. Why water? asks R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (the Maharal of Prague; died 1609). Moreover, how could the astrologers foresee something that was dependent upon Moshe Rabbeinu's free will?

Maharal explains: Obviously the astrologers did not foresee the exact event that occurred in our parashah. [If they had, they would not have thought that the redeemer could be drowned as an infant.] Rather, they saw that the nature of the redeemer (Moshe) would be the opposite of the nature of water. How so?

The world consists of "chomer" (the raw "materials" of nature) and "tzurah" (the "forms" that are developed out of that raw material). In all of history, Moshe Rabbeinu was the person who came closest to perfection--the ultimate tzurah. In contrast, water has no tzurah at all. Moreover, the nature of water is to dissolve a tzurah with which it comes in contact back into chomer. This is why Noach's generation was punished with water; having corrupted their tzurah in the worst way possible, their fate was to be turned back into chomer. And, this is what the astrologers saw--the redeemer of Bnei Yisrael could meet his downfall only through water. (Gevurot Hashem, ch.17-18)

"*They* are the waters of strife, where Bnei Yisrael contended with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them." (20:13)

Rashi z"l comments: "These are *they* that were alluded to, though unwittingly, on another occasion. It was these waters [which caused Moshe's death] that Pharaoh's astrologers foresaw, saying that Israel's deliverer would be punished through water. For that reason they had decreed (Shmot 1:22) 'Every son that is born shall you cast into the river'."

R' Menachem Ben-Zion Zaks z"l (rosh yeshiva in Chicago) observes: The evil Pharaoh could not kill Moshe. Indeed, Pharaoh's own daughter made a mockery of his decree by raising Moshe in the royal palace. But the "waters of strife"--the infighting of the Jewish People--were able to kill Moshe. This, writes R' Zaks, is a recurring problem in our history. Whereas our enemies fail to destroy us and to implant seeds of impurity within us, we manage to inflict these wounds on ourselves. This is true in particular when we attack our own leaders, actions which have far-reaching consequences and which cause lingering hatred. This characteristic of our People was noted long ago by the prophet Yeshayah (49:18), "Those who cause your ruin, and your destroyers, are from you."

We read in Tehilim (81:8), "I will test you at the waters of strife, selah." This is the ultimate test that G-d places before us constantly: Can we overcome that failing which led to the "waters of strife" and killed Moshe and Aharon? (Menachem Zion)

Pirkei Avot

He [Rabbi Elazar Ha'kappar] used to say: "Those who are born are destined to die, and those who die are destined to live, the living will be judged--in order that they know, teach, and become aware that He is G-d . . ." (Ch.4)

R' Pinchas Altshul z"l (1747-1823; rabbi of Polotsk, Poland) writes: Man is born in order to die, for the only way to enter the banquet hall (Olam Ha'ba) is to first pass through the foyer (Olam Ha'zeh).

Alternatively, man is born in order to "kill himself" studying Torah, for only with such effort can one succeed in his Torah studies, as the Zohar teaches. Those who "kill themselves" in this world are destined to "live" in the next world. What does it mean to "kill oneself" over his Torah studies? It means to desire nothing that could distract one from his learning; to recognize that whatever clothes one has are better than burial shrouds, and whatever home one has is better than the grave. Our Sages learned this from the verse (in our parashah -- 19:14), "This is the Torah--a man who dies in a tent"--in whom is Torah found? In one who "kills himself" in the tent of Torah study.

Alternatively, those who are born must die "in order that they know, teach, and become aware that He is G-d." If man did not die, he would see himself as Divine. Moreover, man cannot know G-d's Essence as long as man lives, as it is written (Shmot 33:20), "No human can see My face and live." However, on the day of his death, he does know. This is the meaning of our Sages' comment on the verse (Bereishit 1:31), "Very good"--This is death. (Maggid Tzeddek)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://www.torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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