

DEEP WATERS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Chukas

Deep Waters

Volume 26, No. 35

Sponsored by Martin and Michelle Swartz on the thirtieth yahrzeit of Martin's grandfather John Hofmann a"h (12 Tammuz)

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (18:4-6), "The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the source of wisdom is like a flowing stream." Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi z"l (Spain; died 1263) explains: This verse teaches us that when a person is sitting among a group of people who are conversing, if they are speaking about mundane matters or are exchanging idle words, he should consider their words like a deep well, whose waters are useless to a thirsty person because they are too far away to be reached without a rope and bucket. On the other hand, if they are speaking words of wisdom or mussar / character improvement, he should drink up their words like a thirsty man at a flowing stream.

Alternatively, R'Yonah writes, the first part of this verse can be interpreted in connection with our parashah [which opens with the law of the parah adumah, a decree whose logic we cannot understand]. "The words of a Man's mouth are deep waters." "Man" refers to Hashem, as in the verse (Shmot 15:3), "Hashem is the Man of War." Hashem's words - His mitzvot - that are so deep we cannot grasp their reasons.

In fact, R' Yonah notes, mitzvot can be divided into three groups. One group consists of mitzvot that we would have observed even without a Divine command, for example, honoring parents and not murdering. A second group consists of mitzvot that we would not have thought of ourselves, but which we readily accept as G-d's Will. These include eating kosher, not shaving certain parts of the head, and others. Finally, there are mitzvot that the yetzer hara argues will subject us to ridicule, for example, the parah adumah, hanging strings from our clothes (tzitzit), and not wearing mixtures of wool and linen (sha'atnez). We must remember that these too are G-d's will. Moreover, one who becomes wise can discover some of the reasons for these mitzvot. (Derushei U'perushei Rabbeinu

Yonah Al Ha'Torah)

"Miriam died there and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon." (Bemidbar 20:1-2)

R' Shlomo Ephraim of Lunschitz z"l (rabbi of Prague; died 1619) writes in his commentary Kli Yakar that the lack of water was a punishment for Bnei Yisrael's failure to mourn Miriam adequately. In contrast to Moshe and Aharon's deaths, the verse does not say that Bnei Yisrael cried over her death. Rather, the verse implies, she was "buried there" and forgotten. Accordingly, Bnei Yisrael had to be shown that the spring that had traveled through the desert with them had been in Miriam's merit.

R' Ben Zion Rabinowitz shlita (the Biala Rebbe in Yerushalayim) teaches that we must learn a practical lesson from the Kli Yakar's comment: When one receives a gift in the merit of a second person, then the recipient is obligated to show gratitude to the person in whose merit the gift was given.

He observes further: We have a tendency to not show proper gratitude to our mothers and wives. King David extols the tzniut / discrete nature of Jewish woman in the verse (Tehilim 45:14), "All of the honor of the king's daughter is inward" - the consequence, however, is that the low-key, behind the scenes contributions of mothers and wives go unnoticed. When this happens, the "spring runs dry," as in our verses. (Mevaser Tov: B'zchut Nashim Tzidkaniyot p.292)

"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' Tuvia Goldstein z"l (1917-2003; rosh yeshiva of Yeshiva Emek Halachah in New York) writes: Bnei Yisrael spent 40 years in the desert, most of them after they had received the Torah. Presumably, therefore, they were already obligated to observe mitzvot. Yet, our verse suggests that there was no vegetation in the desert--if so, from where did they get a lulav and etrog? Perhaps one might argue that the desert miraculously produced plants while Bnei Yisrael were there (see Tosafot to Chullin 88b). However, we read (Yirmiyah 2:2), "Thus said Hashem, 'I remember for your sake the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days, your following after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown'." Thus, it seems more reasonable to maintain that Bnei Yisrael did not observe the mitzvah of lulav and etrog in the desert.

R' Goldstein continues: This would explain a seeming anomaly in the verses regarding the festivals. Regarding Pesach we read (Vayikra 23:6), "On the fifteenth day of this month is the Festival of Matzot to Hashem; you shall eat matzot for a seven-day period." Here, the festival and the commandment

to eat matzah are mentioned in the same verse. Not so regarding Sukkot, about which we read first (ibid verse 34), "On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the Festival of Sukkot, a seven-day period for Hashem," and only later (ibid verse 40), "You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a citron tree . . ." The festival and the mitzvah of lulav and etrog are separated in the Torah because, at one time at least, Sukkot was observed without a lulav and etrog. [Nevertheless, after discussing other aspects of this question, R' Goldstein suggests that a definite conclusion is impossible.] (She'eilot U'teshuvot Emek Halachah, vol. 2 no. 42)

"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.' (20:12)

R' David Halevi z"l (Taz; 1586-1667) writes: Many ask: Didn't Hashem previously tell Moshe that he would not enter Eretz Yisrael because he questioned how Hashem was going about redeeming Bnei Yisrael from Egypt? (See Rashi to Shmot 6:1)

He answers: Moshe's sin in Egypt was committed privately. Therefore, his punishment was annulled when all of Bnei Yisrael were sentenced to die in the desert, lest it appear that he was no better than they. Now, when Moshe sinned again in a very public fashion, he was punished anew. (Divrei David)

R' Yehuda He'chassid z"l (Germany; died 1217) asks: Hashem has many ways of punishing one who sins. Why did Moshe Rabbeinu have to *die* for this particular act?

He answers: It is noteworthy that Moshe's downfall came about through the very same implement that he used to perform so many miracles -- the staff. This is meant to serve as a lesson to us that Hashem does not show favoritism. Despite all the good that Moshe did, he too was punished severely--with death--for his sin.

Also, this teaches that, although Moshe Rabbeinu said (Devarim 30:20) that clinging to Hashem is "your life and the length of your days," he meant this to refer to Olam Haba, not to This World. Thus, if a tzaddik dies young--Moshe Rabbeinu died at a younger age than any of his ancestors going all the way back to Adam Ha'rishon--no one should think that the Torah's promise was not kept. (Sefer Ha'chassidim No.355)

"When the entire assembly saw that Aharon had died, they wept for Aharon for thirty days, the entire House of Yisrael." (20:29)

Rashi z"l writes: "The entire' - both men and women, because Aharon used to pursue peace and promote love between contending parties, and between man and wife."

R' Yitzchak Dadon shlita (Yeshivat Merkaz Harav in Yerushalayim) illustrates the degree to which a person can go to prevent bad feelings between people with the following story:

R' Avraham Elkanah Kahana-Shapira z"l (1914-2007; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav and Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) was invited to attend a bar mitzvah, but when the day came, he felt ill. Reluctantly, he agreed to his family's entreaties that he remain at home.

Suddenly, R' Shapira asked whether the bar mitzvah boy has an older brother and, if so, whether he (R' Shapira) had attended the older brother's bar mitzvah. When both questions were answered in the affirmative, R' Shapira got up and said, "In that case I must go. Otherwise, the bar mitzvah boy could be hurt because I came to his brother's bar mitzvah, but not to his." (Rosh Devarcha p.436)

Letters from our Sages

The following letter was written by R' Shlomo Wolbe z"l (a leading teacher of mussar in the last 50 years; died 2005) to his grandson. It appears in the pamphlet Igrot U'ketavim, published on the occasion of R' Wolbe's shloshim.

To my beloved . . . peace and a blessing!

R' Yisrael Salanter, may his merit protect us [founder of the mussar movement and a brilliant scholar] said, "I know that my head is equal to that of a thousand men; this merely obligates me to do the work of a thousand men."

We learn from this that one is obligated to recognize the strengths and talents that G-d has given him. One certainly did not receive these for nothing, only in order to use them to serve his Creator through Torah and through sanctifying His Name in the world.

To be full of pride over one's talents makes no sense, for we did not give ourselves these talents. The reason that G-d did not give everyone the same talents is that not everyone has the same task. If one takes pride in his talents, it is a sign that he does not believe that G-d gave them to him. In so doing, he is taking pride in G-d's garment, as the verse says (Tehilim 93:1), "Hashem donned grandeur."

Grandeur [which shares a root in Hebrew with "pride"] belongs only to the Creator, not to the created.

When a person does recognize his talents, he needs to know that he is obligated to exhaust them for the sake of Torah and service of G-d. Who can believe that he is fulfilling his obligation? Everyone is obligated to do infinitely more than he is doing, using whatever talents he has. . . . Indeed, in contrast to a multi-talented individual, one who is not talented but works hard to understand and know [the Torah] is using his talents. A talented individual should feel shame, not pride, in the presence [of a person whose talents are limited]. . . .

With love,
Grandpa Shlomo

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

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