

CLOSER TO THE SOURCE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Chukas

Closer to the Source

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 (1788-1868; 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 reason 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 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)

"Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank." (20:11)

Midrash Rabbah relates: Moshe hit the rock once, and water began to trickle out, as is written (Tehilim 78:20), "He struck a rock and water dripped." Bnei Yisrael said to him, "Son of Amram: This is enough water only for a nursing child!" Immediately, Moshe became angry and hit the rock twice. Then the water washed over those who had been mocking, as is written (also in Tehilim 78:20), "Streams flooded forth."

Why did Hashem make the water flow begin as a mere trickle?

R' Eliyahu Hakohen ("Ba'al Shevet Mussar"; Izmir, Turkey; died 1729) answers: The Talmud Yerushalmi (Shekalim ch.6) foretells a day when water will flow from the Holy of Holies in the Bet Hamikdash. That stream will begin as narrow as the antennae of the smallest insect, then it will widen to the width of a grasshopper's antennae, and then it will continue widening and becoming deeper until it is a fierce river. [Until here from the Yerushalmi]. R' Eliyahu continues: Hashem wished to give Bnei Yisrael in the desert a taste of this miracle, so He caused the water to flow in a trickle at first. Had Bnei Yisrael been patient, this trickle would have become a gushing river.

This answers another question, R' Eliyahu writes: The Torah says (verse 12), "Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon, 'Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael . . .'" What did Moshe Rabbeinu do wrong? Why does the Torah accuse Moshe Rabbeinu of lacking faith and preventing the sanctification of Hashem's Name? The answer is that by losing his patience and hitting the rock again, Moshe prevented the above- mentioned miracle from occurring.

R' Eliyahu adds: What is the purpose of this miracle? One possibility is that the appearance of a raging river that began as an almost microscopic trickle coming out of the Holy of Holies--a place where there is no natural spring--will reinforce mankind's belief in Creation "yesh me'ayin" / "something out of nothing." Another possibility is to indicate that the closer one is to holiness, the smaller he appears at first; in the end, however, an overpowering rush of holiness will sweep away the wicked who are distant from holiness. (Aggadot Eliyahu: Shekalim)

"The people spoke against Elokim and Moshe: 'Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this Wilderness, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with the insubstantial food?'" (21:5)

In Parashat Be'ha'alotecha we read that Bnei Yisrael complained about a lack of meat. The question is asked: If mahn could taste like anything, why didn't they imagine that it tasted like meat?

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) answers: In the desert Bnei Yisrael were prohibited to eat meat except when they brought a sacrifice. If the mahn could taste like meat, it would effectively circumvent this prohibition. Therefore, the mahn could not taste like meat. (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

Memoirs

R' Yaakov Halevi Lifschutz z"l (1838-1921) was the long-time secretary to R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1817-1896; rabbi of Kovno), one of the leading halachic authorities of the second half of the 19th century as well as a spokesman and lobbyist for Russian Jewry in the Czar's court. Through his position, R' Lifschutz was a witness to, and a participant in, many important events of that era. His memoirs are entitled "Zichron Yaakov." In last week's excerpt, the author described the fierce literary war that the Haskalah / so-called "Enlightenment" movement waged against the lifestyle of the religious majority and against traditional Torah education, and he asked why the religious did not, for the most part, respond through similar literary means. He explains:

A satisfactory rebuttal is possible only when the person answering has the absolute freedom to express and clarify truth; the disputants must have equal rights to express their logic and understanding. Then the answer is like the healing sun which enlightens the world and penetrates deep into the heart. But, if only a partial answer can be given, not only will it not help, it may do harm. Under the old regime, as I will explain, religious Jews could not express their views even partially because of the danger. Therefore, they adopted silence as the best policy. . . In those days, the Maskilim (proponents of the Haskalah) were strengthened by the [Russian] Government. The Maskilim openly proclaimed: "The Government seeks the good and happiness of the Jewish Nation," and they portrayed themselves as the agents of the Government to educate the Jews and bring them more rights. They claimed likewise that they wanted to teach our people the Holy Tongue and to purify them of primitive beliefs, for this is the desire of the Government, which, in its goodness and mercy, wants the best for our People. This is what they wrote in their prolific literature. . .

To this end, the Maskilim attempted to have every aspect of Jewish life-- physical and spiritual-- placed under the guardianship of the Government: the rabbis, the teachers, the cheders, the talmud Torahs, and the yeshivot--all of which are the foundation and supporting pillars of the house of Yisrael. They wanted these institutions to be entirely supervised and managed by the Government and to be approved by them, and only then they would be permitted to teach and educate the youth of Yisrael in Torah and religion. Likewise, they wanted all of the charitable societies to also be supervised by the Government, for only then [the Maskilim claimed] would these institutions be

operated honestly. Their literature was overflowing with these claims over a period of 70 years, as is so well known that citations would be superfluous.

Our experience, however, proves as clearly as the sun shines in the afternoon that the truth is precisely the opposite. First, the sole desire of the Government in those days [the mid- and late-19th century] was to cause Jews to apostatize so that all physical and spiritual vestiges of Judaism would be uprooted. . . Second--which also is as clear as the day-- the old regime was like S'dom and Amarah: its ministers made decisions solely based on bribery. For a payment of silver, mountains could be turned into valleys, while truth, justice and honesty were trampled upon. Because of this, this resource-rich nation [Russia] operated like one of the backward nations of Asia. If justice was done, it was done quietly, without the knowledge of the central government. . .

In these circumstances, would it have been possible for even the best writers among our religious brethren to say publicly that we were not rejecting wisdom; we were rejecting the attempts to destroy our religion?!

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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