

TO BE WISE

by Shlomo Katz

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Dr. and Mrs. Irving Katz
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on the 35th yahrzeit (12 Tammuz)
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This week's Parashah opens with the Mitzvah of the Parah Adumah / red heifer, which our Sages teach is a "Chok" or "Chukah" / a decree whose reason we cannot comprehend. Midrash Rabbah quotes King Shlomo, "the wisest of all men," as saying about this Mitzvah (in the words of Kohelet 7:23), "All this I tested with wisdom; I said I could become wise, but it is beyond me." King Shlomo said: I comprehended the entire Torah, but when I came to this Mitzvah, I studied it, I examined it, and I inquired about it, but I did not understand it. "I said I could become wise, but it is beyond me." [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Yeshayah Horowitz z"l (the Shelah Hakadosh; rabbi of Prague and Yerushalayim; died 1630) comments on this Midrash: One who studies and investigates and ultimately comes to the realization that he cannot understand is a truly wise person. Our philosophers made a similar statement about studying the Creator: "The ultimate knowledge of You is the knowledge that we cannot know You." This, continues the Shelah Hakadosh, is alluded to in the verse (Shir Ha'shirim 1:8), "If you do not know, beautiful among the women . . ." The Jewish People are Hashem's bride, so-to-speak. What makes us beautiful to Hashem? The knowledge that we cannot know Him. Similarly, regarding Parah Adumah, when I understand that it is beyond me, that I cannot understand it, then I am wise. (Shnei Luchot Ha'berit)

"Miriam died there and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon." (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 women 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 often 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)

"Take the staff and gather together the assembly, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, so that it shall give its waters . . ." (20:8)

This was the second occasion on which Hashem commanded Moshe to obtain drinking water for Bnei Yisrael from a rock. The first occurred almost 40 years earlier, when Hashem said to Moshe (Shmot 17:5-6): "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Yisrael . . . Behold! -- I shall stand before you at the rock in Chorev; you shall strike the rock and water will come forth from it and the people will drink."

R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania, and a prolific author in all areas of Torah study) notes a number of differences between Hashem's commands on these two occasions, among them: (1) Moshe was commanded to hit the rock on the earlier occasion (in Shmot) and to speak to it on the later occasion (in our Parashah). (2) In Shmot, Moshe was not commanded to have Aharon beside him, while he was so commanded in our Parashah. (3) In Shmot, Moshe took only "some of the elders" with him, whereas here, he was commanded to "gather together the assembly" (the whole nation). (4) In Shmot, Hashem said, "I shall stand before you at the rock," while here there is no such statement. Why these differences?

R' Chaver explains: In the desert, Bnei Yisrael's existence was completely miraculous; they existed outside of the laws of nature. Once Hashem "decides" to disregard the laws of nature that He created, as happened here, it makes no difference to Him whether water comes out of a rock because it is hit or spoken to. However, the nature of the miracle does depend on the merit that Bnei Yisrael possess.

At the time of the incident in Shmot, the Torah had not yet been given, so Bnei Yisrael lacked the merit of Torah study and Mitzvah performance (even though a few Mitzvot had been given already). That is why Hashem had to "stand" at the rock and also why Bnei Yisrael's presence was not required; they had nothing to contribute to the miracle. Only a few elders were needed as witnesses to the miracle. Moshe was instructed to hit the rock, as if, in the absence of merit, force was needed to make the miracle occur.

In contrast, at the time of the incident in our Parashah, Bnei Yisrael already had received the Torah and performed Mitzvot. Moshe was the symbol of Torah study and Aharon was the symbol of Avodah / Divine service, so they both were called upon to be present at the site of the miracle. Moshe was told to take his staff and hold it while speaking to the rock -- the staff, representing action, Mitzvot; speech, representing Torah study. The entire congregation was instructed to gather because the miracle was occurring in its merit. (Siach Yitzchak p.352)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

“Bnei Yisrael, the whole assembly, arrived at the Wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moshe and Aharon.” (20:1-2)

Rashi z”l comments on the words “There was no water for the congregation”: “From the fact that this statement follows immediately after the mention of Miriam’s death, we learn that during the entire forty years [they were in the desert, until now] they had the ‘well’ in Miriam’s merit.”

Rashi (to Pesachim 54a) writes: “Miriam’s well” is the rock from which Moshe drew out water, and it used to travel with them wherever they traveled.

Where is this rock now?

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Ketubot 12:3, as explained by the commentary Korban Ha’eidah) states, “If one ascends Mount Yeshimon, he will see a collander-shaped rock in the Sea of Tiveryah [usually a reference to the Yam Kinneret / Sea of Galilee]. This is the ‘well of Miriam’ that traveled with Bnei Yisrael in the desert.” [The identity of “Mount Yeshimon” is not clear. Some identify it as Mount Tur’an, approximately halfway between Haifa and Tiveryah as the crow flies, from which one can see the Kinneret.]

The Talmud Bavli (Shabbat 35a) records what appears to be a different tradition: “If one wants to see the ‘well of Miriam,’ he should ascend Mount Carmel, and he will see a collander-shaped object in the sea; that is the well of Miriam.” On the same page, the Gemara identifies Mount Carmel as being a short walk from the Mediterranean Sea.