

A PERPLEXING FAST DAY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #335, Postponing A Funeral. Good Shabbos!

Dedicated This Year Le'eluy Nishmas Chaya Bracha Bas R. Yissocher Dov - In memory of Mrs. Adele Frand

A Guide To The Perplexing Fast Day Of Erev Shabbos Parshas Chukas

The Magen Avraham cites a 'practice of individuals' to fast on the Friday prior to the reading of Parshas Chukas [Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim Chapter 580]. In general, it is an anomaly to have a fast day scheduled for a Friday. Of even greater significance is the fact that most fast days are established on a specific calendar date, while this one is not. The Magen Avraham writes that no matter what day of the month the Friday prior to Parshas Chukas falls, that is the day when 'individuals' fast.

What is the significance of this fast day? It commemorates the burning of 20 wagon-loads of the Talmud and other Sefarim [Rabbinic books] in France. When the event happened, it occurred on the 9th day of Tammuz. However, various Rabbinic authorities of that day learned through dreams that the 'cause' of the incident was not related to the day on the calendar, but to the fact that it was the day before the Torah reading of Parshas Chukas.

The Magen Avraham explains that the Aramaic Targum of the opening words of the parsha [Bamidbar 19:2] "Zos Chukas HaTorah" [This is the law of the Torah] is "da Gezeiras Oraiysa" [this is the Torah's decree]. This was understood to be a Torah decree that such a tragic event would occur on the Friday before this Torah reading.

The Imrei Shammai supplies additional historical background to this incident. He says that in the exact place where the Talmud and other Sefarim were burnt, the Jews of that town had in previous years publicly burnt the Rambam's Guide To The Perplexed (Moreh Nevuchim).

The Moreh Nevuchim was a controversial work. In those days, the Rambam did not yet have the unquestioning allegiance that he gained in later generations. As surprising as it may seem to us, he had his detractors and there were authorities who were highly critical of the Moreh Nevuchim. In fact, there were even some places where his Book of Knowledge (Sefer HaMadah) (the first volume of his Major Work "The Yad HaChazakah") was not accepted.

As a Heavenly punishment for this earlier burning of the Rambam's works, 20 cart loads of Torah books were now publicly burnt. When the Jewish community saw this, they recognized their earlier misdeed and repented by establishing a fast day. They prayed for forgiveness and subsequently there was no more controversy about the Guide To The Perplexed.

In this way they were very fortunate. They had a clear Sign from Heaven in terms of what they had done wrong. It did not take a genius to put two and two together and draw the appropriate conclusion. The connection was obvious. This is the historical background of the custom of 'individuals' to fast on the Erev Shabbos preceding Parshas Chukas.

Absence of Moshe's Name From Song: A Negative Note or a Positive Note?

In Parshas Chukas there is another Shirah [Song] recorded in the Torah -- the Shirah of the Well. Just as Parshas B'Shalach contains the Shirah that Moshe and the Children of Israel sang on the Yam Suf after their miraculous deliverance from the pursuing Egyptian army, Parshas Chukas contains a Shirah of Salvation [Bamidbar 21:17-20]. This Shirah was sung in honor of the miraculous 'Well' which had accompanied them throughout their 40-year sojourn in the desert.

There is a glaring distinction between the Shirah of the Sea and the Shirah of the Well. The Shirah in Parshas B'Shalach begins with the words "Then sang Moshe and the Children of Israel this Shirah..." [Shemos 15:1]. The Shirah of the Well, however, begins with the words "Then sang Israel this Shirah..." Moshe's name does not appear. This is a glaring omission.

Some commentaries explain that the reason why Moshe's name was deleted from this Shirah was because the 'Well' served as the only slight blemish on his otherwise impeccable record as the leader of Israel. However we understand the incident of 'Mei Merivah', it was through these 'Waters of Dissension' that Moshe Rabbeinu was punished and was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel. Since this 'Well' was associated with Moshe Rabbeinu's small 'slip' (if we can say such a thing), his name is not mentioned in this Shirah.

I saw a beautiful insight in the Shemen HaTov that suggests another reason why Moshe's name is omitted. One of the differences between the Shirah of the Sea and the Shirah of the Well is that the former was sung at the beginning of the sojourn in the desert and the latter was sung at the end of

this sojourn. One marked the beginning of Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership of the Jewish people and the other marked its conclusion. (At the time of the events described in Chukas, Balak and Pinchas the Jews were actually already at the threshold of the Land of Israel.)

The Shemen HaTov suggests that the absence of Moshe's name from the Shirah of the Well is the greatest testimony to the success of his mission. Forty years earlier, it was necessary for Moshe to instruct his flock "Ladies and Gentlemen we have just witnessed a miracle!" He had to take them by the hand, so to speak, and instruct them "My children, this is what you do when you witness a miracle". That is why the Torah has to emphasize "Then sang Moshe and the Children of Israel".

However, at the end of the forty years, Moshe Rabbeinu was so successful that he was able to sit back, as it were, and watch the Jewish people initiate -- on their own -- an appropriate spiritual response to the miracles that they had witnessed. This says it all. The deletion of his name does not speak to the detriment of Moshe. On the contrary, it testifies that he was successful.

This is the job of a leader in Israel. The leader's job is to get the people to the point where they know what to do on their own. This is really the job that we have as parents as well. When our children are younger, we must take them by the hand and explicitly spell out what should be done and what should not be done. If we are successful as parents and our attempts at education are successful, at a certain stage in life we should be able to stand back and say, "OK -- You can do it yourself now".

The relationship between parents and children is unique. It is the only loving relationship that if it is successful, then the people that love each other achieve independence from one another. If we are to be successful as parents, then as much as we love our children, we must want to see them grow up and become independent.

This can be very difficult for parents to grasp. It is often hard to let go. We expect most loving relationships to grow and increase, such that the loving parties become closer to each other. In a healthy Parent-Child relationship, however, we ultimately want there to be a separation. This is very unique.

If we are really good at parenting, then at some time we should be able to look back -- 20 years, 25 years later, or whatever it takes -- and find that the child is "complete". We should then be able to sing 'Shirah' for themselves. This is what the pasuk [verse] is emphasizing here: Then THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL sang - at this point they did not need Moshe Rabbeinu anymore. His educational mission was accomplished successfully.

Salivating Over The Opportunity of Restoring Domestic Tranquillity

Finally, I wish to share a Rashi in Pirkei Avos, which is based on a Medrash. When Aharon died, the pasuk says "the entire House of Israel wept for him for 30 days" [Bamidbar 20:29]. Our Sages point out that Aharon was especially beloved because he was a lover of peace who dedicated his life to making peace in domestic disputes and in various social controversies.

Sometimes when a great sage of Israel dies, the Torah scholars who learned from him and who appreciated his Torah greatness feel the loss. However the masses who did not fully appreciate what the Torah scholar accomplished with his Torah, do not mourn as much. In the case of Aharon, everyone felt the tremendous loss.

The Medrash relates the following: Rav Meir delivered a Torah lecture on one Friday night. There was a woman in the audience who arrived home from the Torah lecture late and by the time she arrived home, the Sabbath candles had already burnt out. Her husband was angry with her and told her "I do not want to see you again until you spit into the eye of the person who was giving the lecture that you attended".

The woman, unfortunately, sat outside her house for several weeks. All the women saw her and asked her what was going on. She explained the story. The women went to Rabbi Meir and related the situation to him in hope that he would have a solution. The Medrash states that Rabbi Meir saw the problem through Divine Inspiration even before the women approached him. When the women arrived, Rabbi Meir told them that he had an eye ailment which could only be cured by having a woman "whisper into his eye" (a type of "medicine" which was believed to be effective in those days). He asked them if they knew of any woman who was expert in this technique.

The women offered the services of the estranged wife. She approached Rabbi Meir and confessed that she knew nothing about the technique of "whispering into eyes" as a medicinal cure. He told her "Do not worry. I'll tell you what to do. Just spit into this eye seven times and all will be well". She spat into the eye 7 times and her husband (who by this time regretted his rashness) took her back.

Rashi [Avos 1:12] quotes a similar incident about Aharon himself. He brings this as an example of the lengths to which Aharon went to promote and restore peace between husband and wife. Even if a husband would get angry with his wife and make a vow that he would not take her back unless she spat into the eye of the High Priest, Aharon would humiliate himself and ask her to spit in his eye. Aharon was willing to do whatever it took to reestablish Shalom Bayis [domestic tranquillity], even if it involved his personal disgrace. That is why "the entire House of Israel wept for him for 30 days".

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