

WATCH OUT FOR THOSE TRANSITIONAL PERIODS IN LIFE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Chukas

Watch Out For Those Transitional Periods In Life

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #819, Mayim Geluyim - Uncovered Water - Is There a Problem. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Chukas contains one of the sadder incidents in the life of Moshe Rabbeinu. When the nation arrived at the Wilderness of Tzin, Miriam died and the congregation found themselves without water. The people complained to Moshe and Aharon and again used the arguments, "Why have you brought the congregation to this wilderness to die there we and our animals? Why did you bring us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? This is not a place of seed or fig tree or grapevine or pomegranate tree; and there is no water to drink." [Bamidbar 20:4-5]

Moshe Rabbeinu somehow reacted inappropriately and this caused him to lose his opportunity to enter Eretz Yisrael. Rav Simcha Zissel in his Sefer Sam Derech on Bamidbar asks a very interesting question: According to the Ramban, the incident of Korach occurred right after the incident of the Spies. This means that all the events in Parshas Shlach and Korach occurred in the second year after the Exodus. However, Parshas Chukas occurred in the fortieth year after the Exodus, approximately 38 years later. They were now on the threshold of entry into the Land of Israel.

All the troubles and complaints up until now occurred in the first 18 months in the Desert. However, the incident at Mei Meriva in Parshas Chukos occurred in year 40. Rav Simcha Zissel asks, "What happened in between?" Rav Simcha Zissel answers that we see from the Mishna in Avos and the Gemara in Eruchin that for the 38 intervening years, they were perfect. How do we know this? The Mishna [Avos 5:4] lists 10 specific "challenges" that our forefathers tested G-d with in the Wilderness and quotes the following pasuk as a source text for this number "And they tested Me for these ten times" [Bamidbar 14:22]. The Gemara in Eruchin [15a] spells out what those 10 challenges were: Two by Yam Suf, two involving the manna, two with the Quail, two with water (one in Refidim and one in Mei Meriva), one with the Golden Calf, and one in Wilderness of Paran (the Spies). These all happened in the first year and a half, with the exception of Mei Meriva which happened at the very

end. Rav Simcha Zissel derives from this that in the intervening 38 years, there were no challenges, no complaints, and the Jewish people behaved perfectly!

This is very much in line with our concept of "The Generation of Knowledge" (dor Deah), the congregation who consumed only manna, and lived within the confines of the Clouds of Glory, and learned Torah for 38 years from Moshe Rabbeinu. They did not need to worry about clothes, food, or a job. They could devote their entire lives to spiritual growth. They could make the following proclamation: "We have not done anything wrong in the last 38 years"! (How many of us could make such a statement?!)

If so, Rav Simcha Zissel wonders, what then happened in year one and two and year 40 that caused Klal Yisrael to "act out" so to speak and challenge the Almighty time and again during those particular periods?

Rav Simcha Zissel offers a very important insight into human nature, which is very important for us to know, vis a vis ourselves and vis a vis our children. Years 1 and years 40 were years of transition. They were going from one stage into the next. They left Egypt, where they were slaves and shortly thereafter, they became a Divine Nation. The journey from the 49th level of impurity to Receiving the Torah was a year of tremendous spiritual upheaval and transition in their lives. Now, on the verge of entering Eretz Yisroel, they also face traumatic transition. They were about to go from an existence of eating manna and drinking water that flowed from a rock to a normal existence, having to plant, and hoe, and plow, and make business deals and take care of their families. Again they faced transition.

When a person is in a period of transition, he is not serene. When a nation goes through sudden change, they do not have peace of mind and are not at peace with themselves. This lack of calmness makes people vulnerable to make poor decisions and silly mistakes. Without serenity, people cannot make informed decisions.

The lesson Rav Simcha Zissel derives from this is that one must be extremely careful whenever entering a new situation in life, even if the change is a good change. For the most part, the young men I teach in Yeshiva are in periods of transition in their lives. They are either on the verge of shiduchim or they are in shiduchim or they are engaged or newly married or they are new parents. All these phases represent major transitions in one's life. They are wonderful transitions but the transitions can still easily cause upheaval in a person's life. When things are changing and coming at a person from all directions, he lacks "yishuv ha'daas" [peace of mind] and in such situations, he must to be particularly careful.

Protecting His Sister's Reputation

The Tzitz Eliezer (Rabbi Yehudah Waldenburg) in Volume 17 #41 of his collected responsa states in

the name of the Gerer Rebbe that the text of our daily prayers corroborates the Rambam's understanding of Moshe's avveyra [sin] at Mei Meriva. Rashi (and many others) explain that the avveyra was that he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. The Rambam in Shmoneh Perakim explains that the avveyra was the fact that he seemingly lost his temper with the Jewish people when he lashed out at them saying: "Hear this please, you rebels" [Bamidbar 20:10]. According to the Rambam, it had nothing to do with hitting the rock.

The Tzitz Eliezer, in the name of the Gerer Rebbe, supports Maimonides approach based on the passage we say in Tefillas Geshem [the prayer for rain] (recited on Shmini Atzeres) in which we say, "At the time Your treasured people thirsted for water, he struck the rock and out came water... For the sake of his righteousness, grant abundant water!" The Gerer Rebbe argues that if Moshe Rabbeinu's hitting the rock was a mistake (as Rashi says) this would not be the proper thing to bring up during Tefillas Geshem. Even though one might argue that the reference to hitting the rock does not refer to the incident in Parshas Chukas but rather to the incident in Parshas BeShalach, when he was indeed commanded to hit the rock, but still - as the common expression goes - "Don't go there!"

However, the Tzitz Eliezer himself discounts this question on Rashi's explanation. He provides an alternate interpretation of the phrase used in Tefillas Geshem:

They received the water all of these years in the merit of Miriam. Miriam died in Parshas Chukas and immediately the water stopped flowing. The question must be asked, why did HaShem change His instructions to Moshe Rabbeinu. Why was Moshe told to hit the rock in Parshas BeShalach and to speak to the rock in Parshas Chukas?

The Lev Aryeh asks this question in Maseches Chullin. He answers that originally the Well was in the merit of Miriam. Miriam, as great as she was, was not Moshe Rabbeinu. Therefore, the miracle had to occur in a more "natural" fashion. In other words, it is less of a miracle to hit a rock and have water start flowing than to speak to a rock and have the water start flowing. Moshe Rabbeinu is so great that "his" miracles come in the most supernatural fashion. He had such merit that he could have brought water from the rock through his speech - and that is indeed the way the Almighty instructed him to re-initiate the flow of water from the rock after its suspension with the death of Miraim. Moshe Rabbeinu knew that he could bring forth water from the rock through his speech. However, he was concerned that this would somehow cheapen the reputation of his sister who only had enough merit - so to speak - to have water flow from the rock by force (i.e. - hitting the rock). He did not want to appear to be greater or more meritorious than his sister. Therefore, BECAUSE OF HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS and humility, he hit the rock. This is exactly what we say in Tefillas Geshem.

This then fits in very well. We tell the Almighty in Tefillas Geshem of our need for rain. We tell Him we might not be worthy of this great blessing, but we are desperate for it. We beseech Hashem to go above and beyond His Strict Attributes (to be ma'avir al Midosav). We invoke the memory of Moshe Rabbeinu. He could have spoken to the rock to make water come out. But Moshe Rabbeinu

went "above and beyond". He did not want to take any extra credit for himself and wanted to protect his sister's reputation. For this act of magnanimity on Moshe's part, we ask that G-d to also act magnanimously with us. This is why we mention Mei Meriva even by Tefillas Geshem.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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