

PENINIM ON THE TORAH PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT CHUKAT

And they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish. (19:2)

Rashi cites his rebbe, Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan who explains that symbolically, the Red "Cow" came to atone for the sin of the Golden "Calf," as if to imply, "Let the mother come and clean up the mess left by her child." This explains why the commandment was directed to Aharon, the one who contributed to the creation of the molten calf. This explanation begs elucidation. What does making the Golden Calf have in common with the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, which serves as the paradigm of a chok, a mitzvah for which the rationale is not even remotely discernable. If so, how does the "mother" clean up for her "child?"

The commentators explain that we must first delve into the nature of the Golden Calf and Klal Yisrael's sin in creating it. Moshe ascended Har Sinai due to return in forty days. According to the people's calculations, he was late in returning. Immediately, the people conjectured that he was not coming back. Moshe was gone. They could not wait, and they proceeded to replace him with a golden calf, which they subsequently served amid frolic and debauchery. What do these unconscionable actions teach us? It tells us that during this time, machshavah, rational thought, seichel, common sense, was suddenly suspended. They did the irrational and absurd. Without thinking, they allowed their emotions, their inclinations, to take hold and guide them. Had the people stopped to think - even momentarily - they would have realized that Moshe would return. He was late, but he would return.

It is not as if they did not have other potential leadership. Aharon was available, and so was Yehoshua. Why ignore them in order to create a golden calf? Is this not ludicrous? The people were not thinking. They had lost all sense of rationality.

Hashem rewards and punishes middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. Thus, when the people acted in an irrational manner, Hashem gave them a mitzvah which is beyond human comprehension, one for which there is no sensible rationale. Hashem gave Klal Yisrael a mitzvah which they cannot question, which they have to accept with complete equanimity. It is as if Hashem is telling the Jewish People, "When you were prepared to sin with the Golden Calf, you did not think; you did not care; you just acted. I am giving you a mitzvah which you will not question; you will act in accordance with My wishes."

There are many acts in life which we perform without knowing or understanding the reason. We take medicine without knowing how it works. Yet, we take it because we trust our physician. Are

mitzvos any different? This should be especially true when we place our trust in the true Physician, the One Who truly heals us all.

And the people settled in Kadeish; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. (20:1)

The Midrash Tanchuma notes the juxtaposition of the death of Miriam upon the laws of the Parah Adumah, Red Cow. They suggest that it comes to teach us that just as the ashes of the Red Cow procure atonement, so, too, does the death of the righteous bring about forgiveness. How are we to understand this relationship? Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, offers a meaningful explanation. The Torah teaches us that "a ritually clean man (Kohen) should collect the cow's ashes...and they should be guarded for purification waters" (ibid. 19:9). Likewise, it is understood that the passing of a tzaddik, righteous person, leads to atonement only when the nation stops to "collect itself" to compose themselves and think about the impact this great individual has had on their lives and what mitzvos his life epitomized. Otherwise, there is no effect. We must take a cognitive approach to his death.

We should remember the life of an outstanding and devout person. His trials and challenges, his achievements and successes, as well as how he reacted to failure, should all be preserved in our minds. Otherwise, it is like burning an object such that all that remains are the useless ashes. The memory of such a consummate life, a life that epitomized Judaism at its zenith, should be eternally placed before the nation and forever maintain a special place in the hearts and minds of the people. In this sense, death is not considered as someone's demise, but rather as his being gathered in to the spirit and lives of the nation. In this manner, the passing of a tzaddik parallels the procedure of bringing the Red Cow, including the atonement it engenders.

We find that Chazal make two statements regarding the passing of a tzaddik, which seem to contrast each other. The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah 18b describes the death of a tzaddik to be as great a loss as the burning of the Bais Hamikdash. In contrast, we find the Midrash Eichah 1:39 asserting that when a tzaddik is "removed from the world," it is considered to be worse than the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. Which one is accurate?

Rav Rogov explains that the difference lies in how much of the memory of the tzaddik is assimilated into our lives. When a righteous person passes from this world, but his memory is still guarded in our souls, we remember his achievements, and they serve as a source of inspiration, Chazal compare this to the burning of the Bais Hamikdash. The structure may be gone, but its influence endures. This is not true, however, when we forget a tzaddik, when his memory becomes a blur, and we relegate his many accomplishments to antiquity. This is a catastrophe of epic proportions, much like the complete loss of the Bais Hamikdash. Memories are a wonderful vehicle for preserving the past, but only if one take the time to learn from the lessons of the past and the achievements of those who preceded him. By immortalizing their lives, we give greater meaning to our own lives.

There was no water for the community...The people quarreled with Moshe... "And you shall speak to the rock in full view of the people, and it will produce water"...And he (Moshe) said to them, "Listen now, o' rebels! From this rock shall we bring forth water for you?!"... and he (Moshe) struck the rock twice with his staff... "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me...therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land." (20: 2,3,8,10,11,12)

The sin of Mei Merivah, the waters over which the people quarreled with Moshe, is recorded as the sin for which Moshe lost the opportunity to enter Eretz Yisrael. When we read the

account of the events, we find it difficult to discern the actual sin which Moshe perpetrated. Various opinions abound among the commentators. We will focus on four of these opinions. Rashi posits that Moshe disobeyed Hashem's command to speak to the rock. He had no right to lift up his staff and strike the rock. His action diminished the sanctification of Hashem's Name, for had the people received water through an act of speech, the nation would have derived a powerful moral lesson. They would have seen one of Hashem's creations willingly responding to a command without coercion or physical force. By extrapolation, they would have applied this lesson to their personal lives. Each person would have understood his obligation to serve the Almighty with acquiescence and enthusiasm, unbidden and unforced. Moshe's act of striking the stone aborted the potential for this heightened spiritual understanding. The Rambam takes issue with Rashi's reasoning, suggesting that the sin lay in Moshe's critical response to the people's request. The derogatory terminology used, "Listen now, o' rebels," was too strong an expression to use against the nation.

Rabbeinu Chananel focuses upon a grammatical nuance which he feels is in concert with Moshe's error: *Notzi lachem mayim*, "Shall we bring forth water for you?" With these words, Moshe was subtly implying that he had some sort of power through which he could bring forth water. Certainly Moshe did not mean to convey such a message, but in the mind of the trusting Jew, it might have left room for erroneous belief.

The Ramban supplements his explanation commenting that Moshe had hit the rock twice. One might not think that one time represents a human achievement, but twice leaves room for an unsuspecting person to err. In explaining this further, Horav Yosef Leib Bloch, zl, suggests that we might recognize striking the rock once as a miraculous feat. In contrast, since he struck the rock twice, it gave the impression that it was the force of hitting the rock that caused the water to flow. Thus, people might have thought that Moshe played a role in catalyzing the flow of water.

Sforno delineates three categories of miracles: The first class is a *nes nistar*, concealed miracle. Basically, this refers to the "laws of nature," such as rainfall, the curative powers of medications, etc. in what we refer to as natural occurrences veil the miracle. Veritably, nature is a miracle in which Hashem conceals His Divine manipulation.

The second form of miracle is clearly a supernatural occurrence, which takes place only after certain actions have been performed. These actions, such as the transformation of Moshe's staff into a serpent, serve to conceal the Divine element of this occurrence.

The third type of miracle harbors no secrets or hidden strings. It is clearly and unequivocally a miracle, with no foreshadowing action.

The fundamental distinction that seems to be discernable is the premise that a miracle that nature obscures is not usually recognized as a miracle. A miracle which needs an action as a precursor is clearly a miracle, but it can lead the innocent bystander to believe that the agent who performs the action has also contributed toward the success of this miracle. People then view the agent with awe and reverence. In the final type of miracle, the people respect only Hashem, since it is clear to all that He is the sole initiator of this extraordinary event.

This principle has great significance as it relates to Moshe and Aharon's sin. Klal Yisrael's distinguished leadership felt that the people lacked the complete worthiness to experience a miracle that was totally without restriction and human participation. The mere fact that they were dissatisfied with their journey in the desert, their complaining about a lack of water, indicated that they were not yet on the elevated spiritual rung necessary for this commitment. This is why Moshe addressed the people in such a derogatory manner. A miracle of the second type, whereby an agent participates in the miracle's

initiation, would be more congruous with their present spiritual level. It was necessary to obscure subtly the intense illumination manifest by an overt miracle, creating the impression that, to a limited extent, this experience reflected human involvement. Hashem chastised Moshe for this assumption and his consequent "participation" in the miracle. Apparently, Klal Yisrael was ready for a miracle in which the fuller sanctification of Hashem's Name could be manifest.

There seems to be some overlap between the four explanations. They all apparently suggest that either Moshe minimized the sanctification of Hashem's Name or his Kiddush Hashem could have been greater had he acted differently. Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, suggests that Sforno's explanation actually encapsulates the other explanations. Rashi's view that Moshe's sin lay in striking the rock, rather than speaking to it, can now be understood with added depth. Indeed, Moshe's action transformed the entire character of the miracle. It became a second degree miracle, instead of the third degree, the overt miracle. The fundamental change was effected as a result of Moshe's lowered estimation of the nation's spiritual standing.

The Rambam focuses on the words, "Listen now, o' you rebels!" as the catalyst for Moshe's punishment. Moshe reflected his feeling that the higher degree of miracle could not be affected due to the nation's spiritual deficiency. Thus, he hit the rock reducing overtly the supernatural character of the event. He, in turn, expressed himself to the people, "You have caused this change as a result of your lack of total conviction. Otherwise, the miracle would have been even greater."

Rabbeinu Chananel's explanation adds an additional dimension to the picture. By attributing power to himself, Moshe played an active role in the miracle in a manner deemed inappropriate by the Almighty.

Last, the Ramban's interpretation, which asserts that the sin was Moshe's hitting the rock twice, leads one to believe that the actions of the agent have some bearing on the final result, thus veiling the clarity of the miracle.

All four of the interpretations are based in the words expressed by Sforno. Each, however, views the event from a different perspective. In one way or another, they each imply that Moshe's actions reduced the effect of the miracle. This is the story of life. Hashem has messengers and agents who do His bidding. We make the grievous error of attributing the positive results to the intermediary and, regrettably, when the conclusion is not positive, we attribute it to Hashem. We must learn to integrate into our minds that the intermediaries are nothing more than an illusion. Only Hashem has the power to effect and achieve results.

Rav Miller relates a humorous, yet penetrating, anecdote about a man who had been childless for many years. He approached a Chasidic Rebbe for a blessing. Not satisfied with merely one blessing, he approached a second Rebbe for his blessing. One year later, the man and his wife were blessed with a child. Upon hearing the wonderful news, the chasidim of each respective Rebbe celebrated their Rebbe's incredible powers. This, of course, led to a heated dispute between the chasidim concerning whose Rebbe was the real miracle worker. They decided that they would consult with a gadol, Torah giant, to settle their dispute. This gadol would, once and for all, tell them which Rebbe's blessing had achieved fruition. The answer they received was terse and eye opening: "The man was blessed with a child because of the Almighty's blessing. Unfortunately, the Almighty does not have any chasidim!"

The people spoke against G-d and Moshe... Hashem sent fiery serpents against the people... The people came to Moshe and said... "Pray to Hashem that He remove from us the serpent" ... "Make yourself a fiery (serpent)... so that if the serpent bit a man, he would stare at the copper serpent and live." (21:5,6,7,8)

The text of the people's request is enigmatic. Upon asking Moshe to pray to Hashem to remove the serpents, they say, "that He remove from us the serpent," in the singular. Hashem sent more than one serpent against them. The Chafetz Chaim, zl, explains that the sin for which Hashem was punishing them was the sin of lashon hora, slanderous speech. It is well known that one's sinful activity creates a prosecuting counsel. This "prosecutor" does not need to articulate his criticism of the sinner. His mere presence at the "trial" before the Heavenly Tribunal is sufficient to incur a verdict of guilt. When Hashem is filled with compassion, He removes the kateigor, prosecutor, thereby allowing His boundless mercy and kindness to find the defendant innocent.

This concept applies only when the prosecuting counsel is created by any sin other than that of lashon hora. The kateigor that is created by slanderous speech has a "mouth" and a "tongue." Since it has been created through the medium of speech, it stands up and, without inhibition, declares and describes the sin to its fullest, darkest, essence. Thus, such a prosecutor cannot simply be removed. When the prosecutor just stands there quietly, he can be glossed over. Not so, when he is screaming for attention. One cannot ignore such a prosecutor. The Heavenly Tribunal must listen to his appeals and, regrettably, find the defendant guilty.

We now understand why the people asked to have the "serpent" (in the singular) removed. They were referring to the proverbial serpent created by their sin of lashon hora. When that kateigor is removed, the fiery serpents will also disappear. Hashem replied that such a prosecuting counsel cannot simply be removed. He stands there and demands that justice be done. He neither is interested in compassion nor an advocate for kindness. "Guilty! Guilty!" he screams! The only advice that can help the people at this point is to make a copper serpent which will serve as a medium for them to look upward to Hashem and subjugate their hearts to their Father in Heaven. While, indeed, they could have been healed without the copper serpent, they would have thought they had been cured through natural means. It is important that "natural" cures do not effect a cure for the sin of speaking lashon hora. It is a sin that defies the physical dimension, both in punishment and in its remedy. The power of speech distinguishes man from all of the other creatures. To defile that ability is to denigrate the spiritual gift which Hashem has given him for the purpose of expressing himself in a manner that honors his Creator.

This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded, saying. (19:2)

One of the close chassidim of the Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, recounts that he had the "privilege" to be with the Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto prior to their transfer to Auschwitz. It was Shabbos Parashas Chukas, 1944, as the Rebbe sat down to deliver his Torah lecture during Seudah Shlishis. He cited the opening pasuk of our parshah, then continued with the following. "Zos is an acronym for (zayin) (aleph) (taf), Z'chor al tishkach, 'Remember and do not forget.'" If one has the desire to retain his Torah study, to hold it in his memory, he can follow three suggestions as guidelines for not forgetting what he has learned. First, tzivah, "was commanded." The gematria, numerical equivalent, of tzivah is 101, alluding to Chazal's maxim that one should study everything that he learns 101 times. Indeed, they add that one cannot compare what one studies 100 times to that which he reviews 101 times. That one extra time makes a world of difference.

The second suggestion is Hashem. One should conjure up in his mind that he is standing before Hashem. This will enable him to remember his learning better. Third is leimor, "saying." He should articulate that which he is learning. This will also assist in the process of internalizing the Torah knowledge into his memory bank.

The purpose of citing this d'var Torah is to emphasize the saintly Rebbe's ability to think and remain immersed in Torah, despite the pain and deprivation to which he was subjected. It also demonstrates the commitment and devotion of his chassidim who listened and remembered this Dvar Torah sixty years later.

This is the (Torah) teaching regarding a man who would die in a tent. (19:14)

In the Talmud Berachos 63b, Chazal derive from this pasuk that the words of Torah firmly endure in a person who kills himself for it. This is a reference to those who give up their lives, who devote themselves fully to the study of Torah. Nothing stands in the way of their commitment to Torah study. The venerable Rosh Hayeshivah of Mir Yerushalayim, Horav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, zl, sustained a major heart attack two years prior to his passing. A number of days after the event, he was visited by Horav Shlomo Lorinz, Shlita. The Rosh Hayeshivah lamented that he had no time to sleep because he had to study seven blatt, double pages, of Talmud and ten chapters of Rambam. "Perhaps the Rosh Hayeshivah should ask the cardiologist if it is advisable to strain oneself under such conditions," Rav Lorinz suggested. Rav Leizer Yudil (as he was fondly called) replied, "The Rambam clearly states, 'Everyone is obliged to study Torah, even the elderly and the sick.' Why do I have to ask a doctor, if the Rambam, who himself was a physician, has rendered the decision for me?"

This has been the attitude of gedolei Torah, the giants of Torah, towards its study. They have not looked for excuses, nor have they accepted them. They did what they were supposed to do, and this is the reason that they have become gedolim. No shortcuts, no excuses, just Torah study as if their life depends upon it.

Therefore, it is said in the Book of the Wars of Hashem: "The gift of the sea (Yam Suf)." (21:14)

In those days, it was common to detail the events surrounding the famous battles that took place. This was recorded in prose or aphorism. The Splitting of the Red Sea would surely have been recorded in that book. This is the simple explanation of the pasuk. Horav Shmuel Halevi Vosner, Shlita, takes a more hashkafic, philosophic, and halachic approach to rendering an explanation of this pasuk. Not every war and battle in which the Jewish people were involved is recorded in Tanach. Only certain battles achieve this distinction. Why?

Rav Vosner explains that only those battles whose purpose was to increase kavod Shomayim, the honor of Heaven, by catalyzing within Klal Yisrael an elevated state of ahavas and yiraas Hashem, love and awe of the Almighty, were included in Tanach. Otherwise, those battles had no eternal value and, thus, did not merit being recorded for posterity. This is intimated by the pasuk which is cited above, Es vaheiv b'sofah, "Those wars whose end purpose (sofah) brings about an increase in ahavas (vaheiv) Hashem." This is consistent with Chazal's exegesis in the Talmud Kiddushin 30b, which refers homiletically to the milchamta shel Torah, "war," spirited discussion between two study partners of Torah literature. They study Torah together, and while their discussion may, at times, become passionate and even intense, they do not stir from their place until they come to "love each other."

This is why the milchemes haChashmonaim, war of the Chashmonaim, which preceded the miracle of Chanukah, is not recorded in Tanach. They used their victory to inappropriately seize the

monarchy for themselves, an act which certainly did not increase kavod Shomayim. This is consistent with the Ramban's commentary to the pasuk Lo yassur shevet m'Yehudah, "The scepter shall not depart from Yehudah" (Bereishis 49:10). Malchus, monarchy, belongs to the descendants of Yehudah. No one else may seize the monarchy for himself. The Chashmonaim were pious and virtuous. They were the individuals who saw to it that Torah would not be forgotten by the Jewish People. Yet, this family was gravely punished for seizing the monarchy of Klal Yisrael for itself. It is important to emphasize that this was their only transgression, and, while it was not done with malice, it was still counter to the Torah. Their war was not recorded in Tanach, since it did not ultimately reflect Hashem's Will.

The war that the Jews of Persia fought against Haman and his anti-Semitic henchmen catalyzed spiritual rejuvenation, joy and unparalleled happiness. It stimulated an unprecedented return and commitment to Torah and mitzvos. Thus, it was recorded for posterity in Tanach.

This is the decree of the Torah. (19:2)

The parshah begins with a declaration concerning the nature of the Torah and proceeds to address one particular mitzvah - the Parah Adumah, which has become the standard for chok, mitzvos for which the rationale is beyond comprehension. It should have rather written, Zos chukas ha'Parah, "This is the decree of the Parah Adumah." What is the relationship between this mitzvah and the rest of the Torah? The simple explanation is that, essentially, the Parah Adumah is paradigmatic of the nature of the entire Torah. Hashem neither wants us to search for reasons nor to serve Him in response to a specific rationale to which we can personally relate. We serve Him because He has instructed us to do so. Our approach toward the entire Torah parallels that of the Parah Adumah: chok, with no rationale. It is Hashem's decree.

Horav Simcha Wasserman, zl, expounds on this thought. The word chok has two connotations. First, it is a reference to something whose reason is hidden from us. Second, it refers to something which endures, which lasts forever. We often use the term chok, v'lo yaavor, "It is a chok that cannot be surmounted." It persists; it has permanence. What is the connection between these two meanings?

Simply, a law for which we have no rationale, cannot be abrogated. In contrast, law which is predicated on a specific reason can be dismissed once the reason is no longer applicable. On the other hand, if the reason is beyond our ken, we can never nullify it. Hence, the elusory nature of the reason preserves the subject from extinction. It becomes the basis for its permanence.

Rav Simcha suggests a more profound relationship between the two definitions. We know that every material substance is comprised of two facets: chomer and tzurah, its essential matter and its form. It is beyond simple knowledge to perceive the essence of an object without its accompanying form. We have to behold the object to develop an understanding of its chomer, essential makeup. Additionally, some chomer takes different forms in various situations. For example, a liquid, such as water, becomes a solid mass when it freezes. When it is heated, it takes the form of vapor or mist. Its essence has not changed; only its form has been altered as a result of external conditions.

We perceive the world that Hashem created through the spectrum of tzurah. We see the form that Hashem has given to its inhabitants and its various creations. What, however, is the chomer from which Hashem created all of this? Chazal teach us that Hashem gazed at the Torah and then created the world. In other words, the world was created in sync with the Torah. The world and the Torah are to be

in total harmony. Torah is the chomer of creation. Thus, the Torah and mitzvos are here forever. The tzurah, image, of the world may change with time, but the Torah is immutable and stays the same, despite all of the changes which take place around it.

This is the meaning of chok with regard to the Torah. It is chok v'lo yaavor. It will never change. Yes, in every generation there are those who seek to make radical alterations to the Torah, claiming that the mitzvos do not blend with contemporary society. The Torah will never change. It was created to harmonize with every society and every generation. It is the chomer from - and by - which the world exists.

This is the decree of the Torah which Hashem has commanded. (19:2)

In his commentary, Targum Onkeles interprets the words, Zos chukas haTorah, to mean, Da gezeiras O'raisa, "This is the decree of the Torah." The word gezeirah, decree, seems a bit strong in describing a mitzvah - even if it refers to a mitzvah that has no clear rationale. The word gezeirah is usually associated with a painful decree. What pain did Moshe Rabbeinu experience in transmitting the mitzvah of Parah Adumah? What made teaching this mitzvah more difficult than any of the other mitzvos that Moshe taught to Klal Yisrael?

The Chasam Sofer cites the Midrash which relates the following. Hashem told Moshe, "To you, I reveal the hidden secret of Parah Adumah, but to everyone else it must remain an inscrutable decree." Hence, Moshe was the only human being ever to be privy to the real reason behind the Parah Adumah. He was not permitted, however, to share this knowledge with anyone. For Moshe, this was a difficult decree. As the quintessential rebbe, the consummate teacher of Torah, the pain he experienced at not being able to convey a Torah lesson to the people was so intense that he considered it a gezeirah, a decree, against himself. He cried out to Hashem in pain, "It would have been better for me not to know the reason for the Parah Adumah, than to know it and not be able to share this piece of Torah with others!"

This is why Moshe became the quintessential rebbe. His love for the subject matter compelled him with a powerful drive to convey and share every bit of knowledge with others. His love for his students coincided with his love for the Torah. This harmony between love for student and subject manifested itself in a rebbe who set the standard for every Torah teacher in the generations to follow.

The love between rebbe for subject and rebbe for the talmid, student, has been the bond that has maintained our undying relationship with the Torah. We love it and, therefore, we want to share it. In his book of inspirational stories, Touched By A Story, Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates a captivating episode from the annals of the Holocaust. A small piece of paper was discovered among the ruins of a bunker after the war. The message that the piece of paper conveyed revealed why it was saved against such overwhelming odds.

A group of people had been hiding in a bunker of the ghetto for a number of weeks. They knew their time was short. They lived on whatever scraps of food they could find. Fear was their constant companion. The idea of a future was very remote to them. Yet, they persevered with a deep abiding faith in Hashem. With this scenario in mind, we can understand the value of this simple piece of paper.

The paper contained a sentence from davening: Ashrei yoshvei veisecha od yehallelucha selah, "Praiseworthy are those who dwell in Your house, may they always praise You, Selah." Beneath the

phrase were the letters, aleph, shin, raish, and yud, together with nekudos, vowel sounds, that accompanied each letter. The small piece of paper was part of a lesson - a lesson in reading Hebrew. Hiding in fear, and in constant pain, a father was concerned with only one thing: transmitting Torah to his son. He wrote these words in order to teach his young son the Aleph Bais. Outside, the sounds of machine-gun fire prevailed. Inside, the sounds of Torah reigned. Amid death and deprivation, a father maintained hope as he passed the baton to the next generation. Moshe taught us that to love Torah means to seek to share it with others. This father was demonstrating his true love.

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)

The commentators go to great lengths seeking a reason to find Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon guilty of a sin. What was their infraction? What did they do wrong? Each in his inimitable manner suggests what might have been wrong with their actions. Horav Yechezkel Sarne, zl, derives from here a powerful lesson concerning the overriding importance of even the slightest sin. A sin such as the one committed by Moshe and Aharon, one that commentators are hard-pressed to explain and establish, was considered great enough to prevent these great leaders from entering Eretz Yisrael - despite all they had accomplished. Forty years of leading Klal Yisrael in the wilderness; praying five hundred and fifteen tefillos, prayers; supplicating Hashem to rescind the decree against him - all to no avail. All of this became insignificant due to one sin, a sin upon which no one seems to agree. This teaches us the overwhelming negative effect of a sin.

One sin: Adam Ha'Rishon transgressed one sin, and it changed the world. Avraham Avinu, despite of all his incredible efforts to spread monotheism throughout the world, asked one question: Ba'meh eida ki iras'shena? "How will I know that I will inherit the land?" and Hashem decreed a four-hundred year exile against his descendants. Moshe Rabbeinu gave his life for Klal Yisrael, but he committed a single sin. That was enough to prevent him from entering Eretz Yisrael. Imagine, if Moshe had taken us into Eretz Yisrael, we would never have lost it! All because of one sin.

There is a flip side, a positive perspective to the "one sin" effect; it also works the other way. When a person performs one mitzvah, he not only receives awesome reward, he also changes the world. He catalyzes a positive effect on the world. Avraham Avinu was referred to as Avraham HaIvri, because he was on eivar echad, one side against the entire world, which was on eivar sheini, the second/other side. If a person has the desire, he can change the world.

The Chafetz Chaim, zl, changed the world with one mitzvah. He taught the world about the evils and negativity of lashon hora, evil speech, and the world has been forever altered as a result of his lesson. Horav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl, changed Torah chinuch in America. Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, taught us the essence of Torah lishma, studying Torah for its sake, pure Torah, just because Hashem told us to study. The Satmar Rav, zl, demonstrated what it meant to adhere to the traditions of the past, not becoming overwhelmed and being swayed by the pressures and influences of contemporary society. Reb Yosef Rosenberger saved the mitzvah of shatnez from extinction in this country. And the list goes on. Virtually every Jewish community in this country that has a source of Torah instruction and dissemination is the product of the efforts of few lay leaders in conjunction with a rosh yeshivah, a rav, or a dedicated Torah scholar who initiated the project. Yes, one aveirah can destroy the world, but one mitzvah can give it continued existence.

You shall not pass through me - lest I come against you with the sword. (20:18)

In Moshe Rabbeinu's appeal to the king of Edom to allow Klal Yisrael to traverse his land, he gave an account of the Egyptian experience, implying that it was an aspect of the prophecy to Avraham Avinu. He continued with the notion that Hashem had listened to the voices/prayers of His people, as they entreated Him for salvation from their enemies. Since He wanted them to enter the land, He would listen to their prayers. Moshe was subtly intimating that "when the voice is the voice of Yaakov," when the Jews are praying with sincerity and feeling, the "hands of Eisav" will not prevail. Hence, it would serve Edom well to sheathe its sword and allow the people to go through. The king responded in an expected manner: "You aggrandize with Yaakov's voice; I am quite content to adhere to my grandfather Eisav's blessing of the sword." In other words, he was not impressed. The question that confronts us is, if Eisav's "hands" have no effect when Yaakov's "voice" is dominant, of what were they afraid?

The Ateres Tzvi of Ziditshoiv explains that the axiom is certainly true. When Yaakov's voice is heard, when the sounds of Torah prevail, then Eisav's sword will not harm them. This is only true, however, as long as the "voice" of Yaakov does not resonate in his own head. If Yaakov becomes haughty about his prayer, then it falls into the realm of the sitra achara, other/evil forces. Tefillah is tefillah only as long as it is a spiritual experience, expressed with humility and feeling. If it becomes a vehicle for gaavah, arrogance, or if it is used as a medium to disdain others, it is not tefillah; rather, it is gaavah. The king of Edom was implying that by aggrandizing their power of prayer, they were actually being self-defeating.

We may add that this idea does not apply only to tefillah, it applies to any area of mitzvah observance in which we use our observance as a means of one-upmanship: "We are better than you, because we learn more or better than you." While one should certainly be proud of his achievements, if he is secure in his accomplishments, he should be able to enjoy them privately.

Then Yisrael sang this song: "Come up, O well, announce it!" (21:17)

The Torah here records a hymn to the Well of Miriam. The Well which traveled with the nation throughout their sojourn in the wilderness miraculously provided water for them. Interestingly, the Well, which was with them for forty years, finally received its accolade - now. Why? Furthermore, with the exception of the Splitting of the Sea, the Well is the only miracle that achieved "song" status. Why was no similar expression of gratitude proclaimed about the Manna or even the Torah? The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh posits that the Well and its water are metaphorical references to the Torah, which is compared to water. Thus, the song is not really about the Well, but about the Torah itself.

In a thesis about the nature of song and its role in the expression of gratitude, the Shem MiShmuel suggests a deeper understanding of the function of Miriam's Well. A song expresses an outpouring of love for a specific gift. When an individual feels particular gratitude for a gift which he feels he does not deserve, his response is to burst forth in song as an expression of overwhelming appreciation. This is especially true when the recipient senses that the gift is more suitable for one greater than himself. Thus, he feels that this gift is a special chesed, kindness, from Hashem.

With this in mind, a song of praise would not be viewed as an appropriate response to the receipt of an essential item, such as food or drink. While these are truly gifts for which we are obliged to thank Hashem, they are, nonetheless, essentials - gifts that we must have in order to survive. Certainly, they are neither extraordinary nor suitable only for individuals of elevated spiritual status. Thus, clearly Hashem had to provide for Klal Yisrael in the wilderness, or else they would have died of hunger. While they, and indeed, we, should always be grateful for our sustenance, it is still a necessity for our continued existence. Therefore, while the Manna was certainly a miracle of great significance, it did not meet the criteria to merit a special song.

The Well of Miriam had dual significance. Its first function was that it provided water on a daily basis for the entire nation. There was, however, another aspect of the Well's significance. After being attacked by the Emorites, who hid in caves in a mountain pass with the intention to ambush the Jews, the Jews were miraculously spared from death when the mountains closed together, crushing the would be assailants. The blood of Klal Yisrael's enemies was brought by the Well for all to see. At this point, the water flowed upwards - surely not a natural event.

In other words, while the Well provided normally in its function as water supplier, its second function was of an extraordinary nature. It not only transported the remains of the Jews' enemies, it also flowed upwards in the process, demonstrating Hashem's might. Hence, a song of praise for the Well was appropriate.

What about the Torah? Does it not merit a special song of praise? After all, it is our lifeblood, without which we cannot live. This is exactly why there is no song. Clearly, the Torah is our greatest gift from Hashem. It is the ultimate experience of Divine chesed. Nonetheless, when we think about it, it is more than a chesed; it is an absolute necessity! Yetzias Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt, was the precursor of Kabbolas haTorah, receiving the Torah. Our raison d'etre is the Torah. In effect, without the Torah, there would be no Klal Yisrael, because we cannot live without it. The Torah is as basic to Jewish existence as food and drink. Hence, no song was necessary.

There are two lessons to be gleaned from the above thesis. First, we derive how Torah should be studied and how mitzvos are to be observed - as life itself. Second, while parnassah, livelihood, is necessary for survival, one must distinguish between basic survival and opulence. Those of us whose lifestyle extends beyond the essential should begin to sing.

This is the teaching regarding a man who would die in a tent. (19:14)

In the Talmud Berachos 63b, Chazal interpret this pasuk homiletically. "Reish Lakish says the words of Torah endure only for one who kills himself for it, as it says, 'This is the Torah/teaching (regarding) a man who would die in a tent.' The commentators, each in his own individual approach, suggest varied explanations for the meaning of Chazal's statement. The Chafetz Chaim, zl, explains that Chazal are intimating that one must be meticulous about his time and how he spends it. Every free moment should be dedicated to Torah study. He gives the following analogy. A wealthy businessman, who would spend the greater part of his waking hours immersed in business activity, finally came to the realization that he was literally wasting his time. His davening was no longer a spiritual experience. He ran into shul and ran out - during those days that he even made time to attend. Torah study was a thing of the past. The years had gone by, and he now realized that before long he would have to give a

reckoning to the Heavenly Tribunal about how he had spent his days in this world. He decided that from now on, he would change his seder hayom, daily schedule.

The next day, he did not rush through his davening. Afterwards, he sat and learned for two hours. When he arrived at the business three hours late, his wife questioned his tardiness. He made up an excuse, because he was not yet ready for an altercation. This continued for a number of weeks. He was running out of excuses, and his wife was tiring of being alone in the store. One day, her patience ran out, and she decided to search the city to find out what he was doing during his precious time. When she discovered her husband in the bais hamedrash, immersed in the sea of Talmud, she became upset.

"Why are you studying Torah at a time when the store is filled with customers? Where is your sense of achrayos, responsibility, to the community?" she asked, quite upset.

The husband calmly looked into his wife's eyes and replied, "My dear, what would you do if one day the angel of death paid me a visit and took me from this world? Would you tell him that the store is filled with customers? You know you cannot argue with death. You would 'give zich an eitzah,' you would find a way around the problem. Therefore, make believe that every day I die for a few hours and will be resurrected after I complete my daily seder, schedule, of learning."

The Chafetz Chaim explains that every individual should view himself as "dead" and, thus, whatever excuses he might have had not to study Torah will no longer be available to him. Horav Chaim Soloveitzhik, zl, supplements this thought. Imagine, says Rav Chaim, that one day Hashem would allow all those who have passed away from this world to leave their graves for one hour and during that hour they would be allowed to do whatever they want. Once word would get out in this world, everybody would rush to the cemetery to greet their long-lost relatives and friends to spend that special hour with them. We can imagine the surprise and shock on everyone's faces when, as soon as the graves opened up, the deceased all ran to the bais hamedrash to study Torah for an hour. They would not have time for anything else! This is the meaning of what Chazal are telling us. The Torah endures only by he who views the time allotted to him in this world as a special gift, as if he was rising from the dead for a short while, and he has to make effective use of every second.

The gedolei Yisrael, Torah leaders of each generation, viewed killing oneself for the study of Torah as an imperative to study Torah under hardship and without the usual comforts that so many of us seek. The enjoyment should be derived from the Torah study itself, not the embellishments that one creates, so that the learning will conform to his comfort zone. In the preface to the Biur Ha'Gra on Shulchan Aruch, the Gaon M'Vilna's sons relate the incredible level of perishus - abstinence from the pleasures of this world - and piety which their father achieved. From the moment he reached the age of Bar-Mitzvah, he never looked outside his four cubits. He ate a piece of stale bread soaked in water twice-a-day as his meals. Furthermore, he did not chew this bread, instead he swallowed it whole. He never slept more than two hours in the course of a 24-hour day. This was divided into four half-hour segments. During the half-hour "nap" his mouth would constantly be reviewing passages from the Talmud or Midrash. Three half-hours at night and one-half hour during the day was the extent of his daily sleep.

Horav Mendel Kaplan, zl, would say that Hashem counts the pain we suffer on His computer. The Midrash says that if someone toils in Torah until he needs his last bit of strength to drop onto his bed and fall asleep, then, when saliva begins to drip from his mouth, Hashem cherishes it like the incense offering in the Bais HaMikdash.

There is another form of killing oneself for Torah: overcoming difficulties in learning. There are students who have to struggle to understand the subject matter. For some, this causes humiliation and precludes success in learning. Rav Mendel would extol the qualities of one who was not discouraged by failure nor afraid to make mistakes. The humiliation should not be a deterrent in his quest for achievement in Torah knowledge. He would say that one who is injured in battle - or, in contemporary society, in a sporting event - will wear his bandage as a badge of honor. Similarly, when someone falls while trying to learn, it is to his credit. He would encourage his talmidim, students, "Do not be afraid to make mistakes. One does not succeed from getting honors - only from humiliation. You should act in shiur like you do on the basketball court. Do not be afraid to shoot the ball because you might miss. You have to accept embarrassment for Torah. By nature, honor feels good and it might even make you feel stronger, but it is a segulah, talisman, to humiliate yourself for Torah. When you prepare something to say over in a chaburah, group, you must struggle over Torah and may well end up embarrassing yourself; it is a big business proposition in which the rewards are very great."

This is the teaching/Torah regarding a man who would die in a tent. (19:14)

The Chida cites the Panim Meiros who gives the following interpretation for this pasuk. "This is the Torah" - this is one of the unique qualities of the Torah; a man who would die - even if a person were to die; in a tent - he still remains in the tent of Torah." Since his Torah thoughts are being related to others, it is considered as if his lips are speaking from the grave. The Chida adds that this applies to everyone whose name is mentioned; even if a number of citations are made from one who heard from another, who heard from the original source, they all receive the merit of having their lips speak from the grave. The Ben Ish Chai cites the Maharsha who posits that one can be mechayeh miesim, resurrect the dead, even in contemporary times. How? When one cites divrei Torah, words of Torah, from the deceased, he causes his lips to speak from the grave, thereby creating a vehicle through which the deceased momentarily lives on. Horav Chaim Palagi, zl, writes that if the Torah thoughts of a deceased are cited in his name, his neshamah, soul, is transported from its Heavenly abode to the place where his Torah thoughts are being cited.

A Heavenly angel once appeared to the Bais Yosef and said, "Last night you analyzed and correctly interpreted the words of the Rambam. The Rambam was so pleased that he said that when you pass from this world, he will come, greet and escort you to your place in Gan Eden."

The Maginei Shlomo was written for the purpose of resolving the difficult passages in Rashi which the Baalei Tosfos dispute and question. In the preface to the sefer, written by his grandson it is related that the author once commented to his students that Rashi had appeared to him in a dream and said, "Because you trouble yourself to save me from the powerful and brilliant lions of Torah, the Baalei Tosfos, I, together with my students, will come greet you in Olam Habah, the World To Come." On the day of the Maginei Shlomo's petirah, passing, approximately one half-hour before his soul left its earthly abode, he lay in bed surrounded by a group of Torah scholars. He looked up and said, "Make room for the light of Yisrael, Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzchaki, Rashi, who has arrived with his entourage to accompany me on my journey to the next world. I stood by his side throughout the years to rejoin and elucidate his commentary from the challenges posed by the Baalei Tosfos and now he is compensating me."

In his preface to the Mekor Baruch, Horav Nachum Ginzberg, zl, writes that he had once met Horav Meir Simchah, zl, m'Dvinsk, the Ohr Sameach, who appeared overjoyed, with his face lit up.

Rav Meir Simchah related that earlier that day he had the zchus, merit, to develop a brilliant novellae which he felt was l'amitah shel Torah, coincided with the truthful essence of the Torah. Shortly thereafter, he dozed off and dreamt that he was witness to an assembly in Heaven attended by the greatest Torah luminaries. They were lamenting the fact that in the material world there was no one who was writing Torah thoughts and novellae that correlated with the Divine Truth. Suddenly, the Rashba arose and declared that in the city of Dvinsk, there is a rav who is more successful than he had been in concurring his novellae with the Divine Truth. The Rashba was referring to a question he had on a passage in the Talmud which led him subsequently to posit that the text was in error and should be erased. The Ohr Sameach, however, was able to explicate the passage brilliantly.

Horav Chaim Palagi, zl, writes that one who contributes toward the publishing of a sefer will eventually sit next to the author in Gan Eden. It was his contribution that enabled the lips of the author to speak from the grave. He, therefore, shares in the reward.

The people quarreled with Moshe...If only we had perished as our brethren perished before Hashem... Take the staff and gather together the assembly...And speak to the rock before their eyes and it shall give its waters. (20:3,8)

The commentators have varied approaches for explaining Moshe Rabbeinu's "sin." They seem to ignore the genesis of this sin, what led up to it and what was the spiritual climate at the time. Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, focuses upon the background, so that we have a better perspective of what occurred and why. Actually, this was not the first time the people complained about a lack of water. They did so earlier in their sojourn. At that time, Hashem instructed Moshe to take the match, staff, and strike the stone, so that water would emerge. He did. It gave forth water, and everybody was happy. What happened this time? Why was Moshe told to speak to the stone rather than strike it? Furthermore, what did they mean when they said, "If only we had perished, as our brethren perished before Hashem?"

Rav Hirsch notes that after the victory over Amalek, we do not find the staff in Moshe's hands again. The staff of G-d in Moshe's hands signifies that he is being sent by Hashem to perform an act that is a direct intervening act of Hashem. Moshe is following orders and carrying out the will of the Almighty. The people felt that by bringing them to this waterless place, Moshe and Aharon were betraying their mission from Hashem. It was not in accordance with His will that they ended up in this place. Hashem would never have led them to a place where they would die of thirst.

Hearing this, Hashem instructed Moshe to "take the staff," - show the people that you represent Me and that they are here as a result of My will. "Gather together the assembly" refers to the assembly of the future, those who would be the future of Klal Yisrael: Let them see how you speak to the rock. A blow with the staff, as had occurred many years earlier, would give the impression that the water was the result of a fresh intervention by Hashem in response to the people's complaint. This was not to be. It was necessary for the people to realize that it was Hashem who led them to this place - not Moshe and Aharon. They also had to be taught that it was not their uproar that catalyzed Hashem's intervention. No! The water was already provided for them by Hashem before they came. It only required a few words from Moshe to make it flow freely to the people. It was not a fresh miracle, but rather a few well-placed words from Moshe that was all that was necessary to bring forth their undeniably present requirements.

This manner of obtaining water from the rock would have convinced the people of the profound

error they had committed in maligning Moshe and Aharon by accusing them of leading them to this waterless place against the will of G-d. Rather, the water gushing forth only as a result of the blow with the staff could still leave room for one to err and say that their having been led to this place was originally a willful, arbitrary act of Moshe and Aharon, and that only their subsequent revolt brought about a merciful miracle from Hashem.

The message was clear: Moshe was instructed to take the staff, the same staff that for forty years he had not used. He was to show the people that the staff still existed; he was still Hashem's messenger. As they stood at the threshold of Eretz Yisrael, however, with a new future awaiting them, they had to become aware of a new form of "staff," the word of Moshe - and the Moshes of every generation - was to be the symbol of Hashem's constant supervision over the nation. The period of nissim geluim, overt miracles, was coming to an end. Henceforth, they would be under the guidance of nissim nistarim, covert but no less miraculous miracles. The dvar Torah, word of Torah, would replace the staff, as it would bring forth sweet water from a stone. Regrettably, the lesson was not learned.

Therefore, you will not bring this congregation to the land. (20:12)

The opportunity to enter Eretz Yisrael together with the nation was taken away from Moshe Rabbeinu. What a tragic punishment for a man who had reached the zenith of spirituality, the quintessential leader of Klal Yisrael, whose great hope and desire was to enter the land. Why? What did Moshe do that sealed his fate? True, the Torah details his sin which is discussed and explained by the commentators. There must have been something else, however, something that he could have, and should have, done that might have catalyzed a last minute reprieve. What was it?

In the Midrash to Sefer Devarim, Chazal say that when Hashem saw Moshe "weighing" the decree for a moment and did not immediately respond with prayer, Hashem then made an oath that Moshe would never enter the land. Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, derives a compelling lesson from here. If Moshe Rabbeinu would have supplicated Hashem immediately upon hearing the decree against him, he would have succeeded in averting the decree. It is only because he relied on his ability to pray later that all of his five hundred and fifteen prayers were not accepted.

Those few moments changed the course of Jewish history. Had Moshe prayed immediately, he would have received permission to enter Eretz Yisrael. Chazal teach us that had Moshe entered Eretz Yisrael and succeeded in building the Bais Hamikdash, it never would have been destroyed. History would have been altered forever! No exile - no Inquisition - no Holocaust! All because of a few moments that demonstrated a lack of alacrity.

Zerizus, alacrity, indicates love. It displays that a person cares. He cannot wait to perform Hashem's will. Avraham Avinu was told to sacrifice his beloved Yitzchak. He did not tarry or dawdle. He went to it with alacrity, with enthusiasm, with love. Those few minutes made the difference.

This idea applies equally to all of us. We can go to davening by just making it in time to put on Tallis and Tefillin before Barchu, or, alternatively, we can come to shul early and prepare ourselves to greet Hashem through prayer. If we want our davening to reach its potential, we must demonstrate what it really means to us.

Regrettably, when we arrive late, that is exactly the thinking that we manifest.

Miriam died there, and she was buried there. There was no water for the assembly. (20:1,2)

The Kli Yakar explains that there is a distinct connection between Miriam's death and Klal Yisrael's lack of water. The Torah does not record that the assembly wept at Miriam's death, as they did for Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon. She was not eulogized properly, because they did not appreciate what they had received due to her merit. They knew that Moshe was the intermediary through which they received the Torah from Hashem. Aharon engendered harmony and unity among the people. Miriam had "long ago" helped save Jewish infants in Egypt. No one remembered that because it had occurred long ago. Therefore, Hashem dried up the well, so that the people would realize that the water that had previously sustained them was b'zchus, in the merit, of Miriam.

Things have not changed much. We still tend to forget what others have done for us. Let us go back and trace Torah's renaissance in America. Do we know - or care - who were the pioneers and architects of Torah, the Roshei Yeshivah and dedicated lay leadership who gave their very lives, so that we today could avail ourselves of their toil and devotion to the spiritual needs of Klal Yisrael? Sixty years ago there was very little in terms of Torah chinuch, education. A handful of individuals, Roshei Yeshivah, embers from the fires of the Holocaust came here with a fiery dedication to rebuild what the Nazis had destroyed. They teamed up with rabbanim and baalei batim, dedicated lay leaders, who understood the primacy of Torah and its significance to the Jewish people. Together they created a nucleus, a team that would succeed in establishing the greatest renaissance of Torah since the days of Ezra HaSofer.

We owe them everything. What we have today is only due to them. Do we even know who they are? They were determined people who refused to accept negativity, did not succumb to apathy, and overcame every challenge with resolution and fortitude. Perhaps they would not fit into "today's" Torah milieu for various reasons: the color of their hat, the type of yarmulke they wore. Perhaps their level of education does not coincide with what has become the standard - today. This was, however, a very different period of time with a different set of values. All too often, we judge people by our standards and our perspective, ignoring the fact that their challenges -viewed in historical context - were much different from ours. Indeed, we stand on their shoulders. They sacrificed, labored and persevered, so that we can enjoy and thrive in the spiritual oasis that America has become.

Let us derive a lesson from the Beeirah shel Miriam, the well of Miriam, the well that sustained Klal Yisrael for so long. Let us remember who it was that sacrificed for us. The past must be viewed through the prism of the past - not through the spectrum of the present. Above all, let us never forget the sense of hakoras hatov, gratitude and appreciation, that we owe them. In this way, the well that sustains us will never dry up.

And speak to the rock. (20:8)

Horav Leib Eigar, zl, related that when he was a young boy studying with his grandfather, Horav Akiva Eigar, zl, the Nesivos, Horav Yaakov, zl, m'Lisa, came to visit. It happened that the

Chasam Sofer, zl, Rav Akiva Eigar's son-in-law, was also visiting at the time. Rav Akiva Eigar was overjoyed with his distinguished guests. Thus, he asked his rebbetzin to prepare a suitable meal for them. He asked a student from the yeshivah to serve the guests.

During the meal, Rav Akiva Eigar asked the Nesivos to honor them with a discourse in halachah. Rav Yaakov lectured impressively as befitted a gathering of such distinguished Torah luminaries. When he finished, Rav Akiva Eigar asked the Chasam Sofer for his opinion on the dvar Torah. The Chasam Sofer responded that, in his opinion, Rav Yaakov's dvar Torah was refutable, and he proceeded to do so. Rav Akiva Eigar noticed that Rav Yaakov seemed to feel ill at ease as a result of the Chasam Sofer's critique of his dvar Torah. He immediately called over the young student who had been serving them and asked, "What is your opinion regarding the dispute between the two lions of Torah?"

"In my opinion, the novelae rendered by the Nesivos appears to be correct." He proceeded to lecture in support of the Nesivos, basically responding to each of the Chasam Sofer's questions.

As soon as the student finished speaking, the Chasam Sofer broke out in tears, saying, "Veritably, I am correct, but what can I do? If my father-in-law would decree upon a stone that it should speak, it would say anything that he would want it to say."

When Rav Leib completed the story he said, "Do not think that the Chasam Sofer did not mean what he was saying. He sincerely believed that Rav Akiva Eigar had the power to make a stone speak. The young man who served them, for the most part, was not able to hear their Torah dialogue. Furthermore, while he was certainly an excellent student, he was nowhere in the league of these Torah giants. Yes, it was in my grandfather's power to make a stone speak."

Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore, you will not bring the congregation to the land. (20:12)

The commentators struggle to understand Moshe Rabbeinu's sin. Some say that he was told to speak to the stone, and he hit the stone instead. Others say he spoke with anger to the people. In his Sefer Halkrim, Horav Yosef Albo, zl, gives a meaningful explanation. One of our principles of emunah is that Hashem bends teva, nature, to the needs of His faithful. Anyone who does not believe that Hashem fulfills the will of a tzaddik, righteous individual, denies the very basis of the Torah. It is especially true that when the opportunity to sanctify Hashem's Name exists, the tzaddik must publicize the fact that nature subordinates itself to the will of His faithful.

The Baal Halkrim continues, saying that a tzaddik or Navi who stands at the helm of the Jewish people at a time when they are in an eis tzarah, period of anguish, and does nothing - standing there with "folded hands" - increases the chance for a chillul Hashem, desecration of Hashem's Name. By doing nothing, he indicates that he himself doubts if nature will subordinate itself to him. When the tzaddik demonstrates a lack of security - it is a chillul Hashem.

"Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael." Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon should not have come "running" to Hashem in reaction to the people's demand for water. They should have been immediately proactive; when they were asked to produce water, they should have done so. That would have been a Kiddush Hashem. If they would have decreed water, Hashem would have listened to them, and the Name of Hashem would have been sanctified.

This is a very compelling explanation. Indeed, why did not Moshe and Aharon do just that, decree that water should flow freely from the stone? Why did they not show that nature is subordinate to their will? This question actually applies to many more instances throughout the forty-year sojourn of the Jewish People in the desert. Why did they not do something? The Meshech Chochmah explains that with the spiritual zenith that Moshe achieved, there was an overwhelming fear that the people might deify him. They might forget that he is only a tzinor, medium, through which Hashem grants His blessing. He is a shaliach, agent of Hashem.

While this would have been a valid excuse until the episode of Korach and his assembly, when they disputed Moshe's leadership, when they likened him to just any other Navi, they crossed the line. Moshe had to put his foot down - and he did. He was different, having been selected by Hashem to be the Adon Ha'Neviim, master of the prophets, the leader of Klal Yisrael. Now that Moshe had already asserted his position during the Korach rebellion, he should do likewise when Klal Yisrael are in need of water. Does he only believe in affirmative action where his leadership is impugned, reverting to his "study" when it affects the general public? This constituted the chillul Hashem. When people do not understand the actions of a gadol, Torah leader, it can lead to severe repercussions.

The princes dug the well, the nobles of the people excavated, with a scepter, with their poles. And from the wilderness they went to Matanah; and from Matanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamos; and from Bamos to Hagai. (21:18,19,20) Matanah and Nachaliel have other meanings: Matanah is a gift, and Nachaliel is defined as an inheritance from Hashem. How are these meanings related to the pasuk? In the Talmud Nedarim 55a, Chazal say that Matanah and Nachaliel refer to the manner in which we receive the Torah from Hashem. If a person asserts himself in a selfless and dedicated manner, the Torah is given to him as a gift. Once the Torah is his, it is a nachal-Keil, an inheritance from Hashem. At that point, the individual is elevated to a distinguished position, described by the word Bamos, greatness. If, however, at any time the person becomes arrogant, he is immediately lowered, which is represented by the word Hagai, a term used for a valley. Chazal describe the Torah as belonging to a person both as a gift and as an inheritance. In fact, these are two distinct levels of relationship to the Torah. The more significant level is that of an inheritance. When one assumes a piece of property that has been previously owned and passed down to him by his forebears, he views it as part of a legacy. He sees himself as carrying on a family tradition. Hence, he acts in a manner which he perceives will expedite his families best interests.

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, explains that this concept motivated Bnos Tzlafchad to express their concern regarding inheriting their father's portion in Eretz Yisrael. They claimed "Lamah yigra shem Avinu?" "Why should the name of our father be lost from the family because he had no sons? Let us have an inheritance among the land of our father's brothers." They were not merely asking for rights to a piece of property. They sought their heritage. They fought to assure their father's spiritual destiny. The ownership of a parcel of land in Eretz Yisrael guaranteed the survival of the heritage transmitted by their ancestors.

Moshe Rabbeinu responded to their request. He understood the sincerity with which they spoke. Thus, the Torah writes, "Moshe advanced Mishpatam, their just claim, before Hashem." Their argument was legitimate and sincere, its goals lofty and noble.

Rav Rogov posits that this should be our attitude concerning the study of Torah. It should be a matter of heritage to us. It should elicit a sense of belonging, a feeling of pride in being connected with the Torah. Studying a Mishnah should not be an abstract experience. One should picture the Revelation: Hashem giving the Torah to Moshe, who in turn transmits it to Yehoshua and the Zekeinim, Elders - all

the way down to him! He should feel a sense of pride at his association with scores of generations of men and women who dedicated themselves to living the Torah way of life. It will also cause him to measure his words and avoid repeating any interpretations of Torah or halachah which might not be authentic or might lack spiritual integrity. We might add that those who have denied the Divine source of Torah also sever their relationship with their heritage. Our People is a nation only by its connection to Torah. In other words, they have torn asunder their bond with the Jewish People, because the "twine" that holds us together is our nachalah, heritage of Torah.

When one studies Torah with a sense of heritage, he transports himself to Har Sinai and becomes a part of that awesome experience. For one who studies Torah in this manner, every moment is precious, every word is invaluable. Striving to understand the Mesorah, tradition, of Torah - as it was transmitted to us at Har Sinai to Moshe and from Moshe to Yehoshua - elevates one's study to a spiritual plateau unattainable in any other way.

This is the statute of the Torah...and they shall take to you a perfectly red cow. (19:20)

The parsha that addresses the concept of chukim employs the halachos, laws, of the Parah Adumah, Red Cow, as its standard. Jewish religious thought divides Divine commandments into two categories: "rational" laws, known as mishpatim; and "edicts" or chukim. Making a related distinction, Rabbeinu Saadya Gaon speaks of mitzvos sichliyos, those commandments required by reason, and mitzvos shimiyos, commandments mandated by Revelation. In truth, as the Sefas Emes explains, the overriding approach to mitzvah observance should be in the perspective of chukim, whereby one observes all commandments simply because they constitute an expression of Hashem's will.

The Piaseczner Rebbe, zl, follows in the path of the Sefas Emes in his tendency to minimize the distinction between mishpatim and chukim. He contends that the notion of mishpatim is based upon the existence of an autonomous human intellect, which is capable of moral reasoning. The Rebbe writes at a time when the Nazi atrocities against the Jews in particular, and humanity in general, were raising the question the legitimacy of relying on intellectual cognition. One's intellect is bound by his essential character. In other words, an individual's understanding is a function of his essential personality. This is true especially with respect to such prohibitions as robbery and murder, which have always been considered to be rational mitzvos. In the category of mishpatim, we see that certain nations have rendered rationales permitting -- and even advocating -- murder and plunder of those whom they consider to be lesser beings.

One's approach to mitzvos should be based upon pure faith. The Jew's faith comes from the spirit of holiness within him. His faith grants him access to reach higher than what he could grasp through his mind. When one experiences the pressure of pain and anguish, the multitude of sufferings can cause his faith to waver - if he is not strong. The function of a Jew is to abrogate his autonomous critical rationality with a total surrender of his being, thereby enabling him to withstand the questions to his faith which emanate from his suffering.

The Piaseczner Rebbe emphasized this idea in a homily delivered on Shabbos Parashas Parah 1942, when the chapter of the Parah Adumah was read. Rashi explains the word chukah to be the result of our response to the Satan and the nations of the world who taunt us, asking, "What is this command? What is the reason?" Hashem responds, "It is My decree; emanating from Me; you have no right to

question it!" The Rebbe posits that the purification effected by the Red Cow, and the prohibition against questioning the reason for the commandment, are not two independent matters. Rather, the prohibition of questioning is in itself a component of the purification.

At the end of the Talmud Yoma 85b, Rabbi Akiva posits "Just as a mikveh, ritualarium, purifies the unclean, so does Hashem purify Klal Yisrael." A mikveh effects purification only as long as one's entire body is immersed in it. If even one tiny limb remains outside, the purification is not valid. Likewise, we must subject ourselves totally to Hashem, entering into His domain with our entire beings. Whoever views himself as a distinct being, with his own mind and thought processes, remains outside of Hashem. We must abrogate ourselves, acknowledging that we are naught and our minds are naught. Hashem and His holiness are everything. However He conducts the affairs of the world and whatever He commands is good and we have no right to question.

This is why the term *chukah* is applied to the Parah Adumah, implying that here, too, one may not question. Rather, we are to believe that since Hashem made things happen in this manner, then this is the way it is supposed to be. In this way, the Red Cow purifies, since we enter with our whole being, without question, surrendering ourselves to Him. The paradoxical nature of the *chukim*, commandments, and the abstruse nature of Hashem's actions in the world are profoundly related: both require a surrender of autonomous reason and an absolute and total submission to the Divine will. Accepting *chukim* is tantamount to submerging one's mind in the purifying waters of the Divine being.

Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Bnei Yisrael. (20:12)

Rashi explains that Hashem's complaint against them stemmed from the fact that had they spoken to the rock it would have brought forth water, Hashem's Name would have been sanctified. Klal Yisrael would have said, "Now, if this rock, which neither speaks nor hears and does not need subsistence, fulfills the word of Hashem, how much more so should we fulfill His word." While this may be true, the words expressed in the Torah in criticizing them, "because you did not believe in Me," are, at best, enigmatic. Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest believer. Aharon accepted Hashem's Divine decree against his sons with utmost faith. To say that they did not believe is a rather strong condemnation. Furthermore, how does speaking to the rock instead of hitting it, constitute a greater source of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of Hashem's Name? In any event, they both defy the laws of nature. What more is there to consider?

Horav Zaidel Epstein, Shlita, offers a profound exegesis, distinguishing between the two. Speaking to the rock, thus causing water to emerge from the rock, is considered a *ratzon*, a willing act, while causing water to run as a result of hitting the rock is an act of *hechrech*, compulsion, force. Both acts teach the importance of listening to the *dvar Hashem*, word of G-d. If we derive only that one must listen to Hashem when he is compelled, under duress, the lesson is not as compelling as learning the importance of listening to Hashem willingly. Failure to teach the complete lesson is reason enough to prevent Moshe from entering Eretz Yisrael.

We see from here the depth of *din*, justice, which Hashem is demanding of the righteous. For any other person, hitting the rock in order to cause water to run constitutes a sanctification of Hashem's Name. For Moshe, it could have been a greater, more penetrating lesson - and it was not. It is a *chillul Hashem* for which he must answer.

Moreover, we learn from this incident that a person is judged commensurate with his abilities.

Even if a person has done much, if he could have done more - or better - then what he has done is not enough. Imagine, says Horav Epstein, two great Roshei Yeshiva, Torah disseminators of the highest degree, who have each successfully prepared a generation of students in Torah scholarship. If one has been granted greater talent and superior abilities to the other, however, it is quite possible that he will be taken to task for not doing more. Success is measured by what one has accomplished relative to what he could have achieved.

And the Egyptians did evil to us and to our Forefathers. (20:15)

Rashi says that from here we see that the Avos, Patriarchs, feel pain in the grave when Klal Yisrael is punished. Rashi adds the word "b'kever," in the grave, which is enigmatic. The neshamah, soul, of the departed is not really in the grave. Its place is in the Heavens. Why does Rashi seem to emphasize the pain sustained by the souls in the grave? In his commentary, Eish Kodesh, the Piaseczner Rebbe, zl, posits that Rashi focuses on the souls in the grave by design. He is teaching us that the Avos, whose bodies lie in the ground, are pained by the anguish that their progeny are experiencing. These neshamos understand that the exalted spiritual plateau which they achieved was only a result of their physical dimension, their corporeal bodies which existed in this world. The Rebbe adds that while these neshamos study Torah in the Mesivta d'Rekia, Heavenly Academy, their lips in the ground are simultaneously uttering words of Torah. It is the fulfillment of mitzvos in this world that catalyzes the soul's holiness in Olam Habah, Eternal world. Consequently, their bodies in the ground feel pain when the living feel pain.

This is the reason that it is beneficial for the soul of the departed that - in addition to the recitation of Kaddish and the study of Mishnayos - one should remember the neshamos during the times that he is actually engaged in mitzvah performance and Torah study. Furthermore, the Rebbe explains that this means not just remembering them, but binding ourselves to them, soul to soul, in order to study Torah or perform a mitzvah together. When we connect with them, they become invested with a body in this olam hoassiyah, world of action. That Torah study or mitzvah performance grants them the opportunity for increased and intensified sanctity.

The souls of the departed yearn to be with the living, yearn to do mitzvos with the living, yearn to participate in the physical act of mitzvah performance. Not only can the living commune with the departed, they can actually give them the most precious gift of all: the opportunity to once again be invested in the concrete act of mitzvah performance. With these words the Rebbe, who was the spiritual leader and inspiration of the Warsaw Ghetto, attempted to console his bereaved chassidim. He wanted to share the idea that they could commune with the spirits of their departed loved ones, bestowing upon them the gift of physical-being in mitzvah performance.

In a drashah, lecture, on Rosh Chodesh Nissan in 1942 the Rebbe said, "Our departed ancestors are pained by our physical pain. Do not think that since they are tzaddikim, pious and righteous - especially now that they have departed this physical realm - do not think that they are above any contact with the physical. While, indeed, they are in Heaven above, they are acutely aware that it was by means of their physical bodies that they were able to achieve their level of sublime attainment. While it is true that their souls are studying Torah in Gan Eden in the Yeshiva Shel Maalah, Heavenly Academy, it is also true that their lips whisper words of Torah in the grave, catalyzed by the Torah study of Jews who are alive and well in this corporeal world."

It is not enough to say that our souls will be saved, our spirits will live on in Heaven. Our bodies also have an element of holiness, and therefore, our corporeal existence demands salvation. This enlightening idea lends an entirely new perspective to our relationship with those who have passed on. It also places upon us an awesome responsibility with respect to the way we act in our mitzvah performance.

About this the poets would say: "come to cheshbon" (21:27)

Chazal define this pasuk homiletically, saying, "Come let the rulers who are in control of their evil-inclination make a cheshbon, reckoning, of their spiritual activity. Let us keep in mind the benefit of a mitzvah as compared to the loss incurred by a sin." Horav Yehoshua Heshel, zl, m'Aftah said in reference to himself, "When I was young, I thought I could rule over my province, my city - but I was not successful. I attempted then to govern over my immediate family - also, to no avail. Afterwards, I made up my mind to control myself, to rule over my life. As I started to succeed in this endeavor, I came to realize that it is only he who rules over himself that can succeed in governing and directing the lives of others."

One must make a cheshbon ha'nefesh, to have spiritual accountability towards himself. While many attempt to do this, they often fail because, in their weakness, they lie to themselves, as illustrated by the following story. When he was a young man, the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, went by foot to visit his rebbe, Horav Simcha Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa. Along the way, he came upon an old friend of his youth who, regrettably, had left the fold and become an apostate. His friend invited the Kotzker to join him in his impressive carriage. The Rebbe accepted, and they continued together along the way. Suddenly, the Kotzker turned to his friend and asked, "Where is your olam hazeh, the benefits of this world?" His friend smiled and said, "Reb Mendel, olam hazeh! I have so much: fields, horses, homes; my material wealth is extensive. Indeed, I live like the czar." The Kotzker looked at his friend with penetrating eyes and said, "You are mistaken. This is your olam habah! I am asking you about your olam hazeh."

The Rebbe's words pierced through the years of indifference and ambiguity. The message was driven home. For some of us, life may present itself as a wonderful material experience. We have to realize that when we enjoy what we perceive as olam hazeh, which many of us feel we are entitled to enjoy, in reality, we are trading our place in Olam Habah, the eternal world of truth, for a box seat in this ephemeral world. All of this is the result of a lack of self-accounting.

Yet, we must be aware that this world is here for a purpose: in order to gain access to Olam Habah. To gain entry to the spiritual paradise that awaits us all, one must prepare himself in this world, as noted from the following exchange. It was a dark and cold wintry night, the only light was from the snow that was falling with intensity. A Jewish businessman, regrettably an unsuccessful one, was trudging along from one town to the other in his attempt to make the few kopeks that would sustain his family. He entered the town of Koznitz, seeking a place to rest his weary body. The town was fast asleep. No lights were on except in one home, where a candle was always burning late into the night so that its inhabitant, the Koznitzer Maggid, zl, could learn into the wee hours of the morning.

The weary traveler, a Koznitzer chassid, quietly knocked on his Rebbe's door. When the Rebbe came to answer the door he hardly recognized his chassid, as he was covered with snow from head to toe. After he came into the house and the snow covering him had melted, the Rebbe recognized his chassid, who now began to bemoan his fate. "Rebbe, I have no olam hazeh; I have no life. I move from

place to place in search of a livelihood. I am preoccupied with nothing, pursued and hounded by creditors, with no way of paying what I owe. I borrow from one to pay another. This is no life. At least, if I knew that I would merit Olam Habah."

The Maggid looked at his broken-hearted chassid and said, "If the olam hazeh, for which you say you work so hard eludes you, how can you expect to gain a foothold in Olam Habah, if you exert no effort to gain access to it?"

Some individuals do reckon the mitzvah performed in their lives. They calculate the value of mitzvah performance and conjure up entire cheshbonos, accountings, of their future accomplishments and their spiritual worth, but neglect to go beyond the calculations. The Tzanzer Rav, zl, was wont to tell the following story to illustrate this common failing. A certain woman had a vivid imagination. Once, she had an egg in her hand and reckoned its incredible long-term value to her. From this one egg, she would have a chick which would become a hen that would lay another twenty eggs. Each egg would produce another hen. The twenty hens would lay four hundred eggs which would result in four hundred hens. These hens would produce eight thousand eggs/hens. Indeed, with this single egg she had the potential, over time, to become very wealthy.

As she continued with her high level calculations, suddenly something occurred that shattered her dreams of wealth: the egg fell from her hand and broke. Nothing was left for her but her calculations, which were now worthless.

This is the story of life: we make grandiose plans; we make cheshbonos; we talk about the many spiritual endeavors we will undertake to perform, the people we want to help and it all ends up as talk. Regrettably, by the time we decide to act, life has passed by, and the egg has broken.

This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whatever is in the tent will be contaminated for seven days. (19:14)

In a lecture on the topic of hasmadah, diligence in Torah study, Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, once cited the Talmud in Berachos 63b in which Chazal say that Torah is sustained only in he who kills himself over it. This is derived from the words, "This is the Torah: A man who dies in a tent", referring to the ohalah shel Torah, the tent of Torah. In order for the Torah one studies to become integrated into his essence, he must literally be willing to give up his life for it. The material benefits of this world -- with its worldly pleasures -- are of no value to this person. He is like a corpse who does not sense these pleasures.

Rav Chaim related a story of a wealthy man who was so engrossed in his business activities that he had little time for spiritual pursuits. Indeed, he had no time for tefillah b'tzibur, communal prayer with a minyan, quorum, and limited time and energy left at the end of the day to study Torah. As the years went by and he became older and wiser, he came to realize that he would soon be summoned to meet his Maker. He would have to give an account for neglecting to pray and study in accordance with Hashem's wishes. He decided to alter his daily schedule to provide for minyan attendance and Torah study. Every day he would leave his home early in the morning, daven, and then study Torah. A few hours would elapse before he left for work.

Undoubtedly, arriving at the office three hours late did little to endear him to his customers, and especially to his wife who would slave in the store alone. When his wife questioned him as to his

whereabouts, his response was simple but abrupt. He was busy with other very important things. After she pestered him for a number of days, she decided that she would follow him and see for herself how he was spending the time away from the store. She followed him discreetly and -- lo and behold -- she discovered that he was "wasting" their hard-earned money to study in the yeshivah. This was simply not right. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" she asked. "Do you realize how much money we are losing every day? Moreover, you owe it to your regular customers who have supported you to be there for them. How can you do this?" she asked incredulously.

"Listen to me, my dear wife," he responded, "and tell me what you would do if one day the Malach ha'Maves, Angel of Death, shows up at our door, bids me good day and says, 'Your time is up.' Would you tell him, 'No, he cannot go. There are customers waiting in the store; it will ruin our business!' Veritably, you could never give such a foolish response to the Angel of Death. Therefore, from today on, during those hours of the day that I am not in the business, you are to view it as if I were dead! When I arrive from the bais ha'medrash, it will be my techias ha'meisim, resurrection of the dead!"

Rav Chaim explains that in this story lies the underlying meaning of our pasuk: A person should view himself as gone from this world, dead to society and its pressures and demands. Thus, every excuse to "shtet," deter, his Torah study will be for naught. Indeed, only then will he realize how much time he really has to study Torah.

Furthermore, continued Rav Chaim, we can delve even deeper into this idea. Imagine if one day it was decided in Heaven to avail all those who have died, every holy neshamah, one hour - one single hour - to arise from the dead and do whatever he wants. Indeed, when family and friends who are alive would hear of this wonderful news, they would all rush to the cemeteries to meet with their loved ones. The long-awaited moment would arrive and everybody who flocked to the cemeteries would be awaiting that single hour meeting, and -- lo and behold -- the neshamos, souls, would arise and immediately run to the nearest bais ha'medrash to study Torah with unbelievable intensity. They would refuse to waste a second of their one hour to speak to anyone. Why? Because now they know and appreciate the remarkable value of Torah study. Now they understand the futility of this temporary world.

This is the meaning of Chazal's dictum: Torah is sustained only by he who views his short stay on this world as one who was released from the grave for a short period and makes the most of it by applying his time and energy to Torah study.

Therefore do the rulers say: Come to Cheshbon. (Let us make a reckoning.) (21:27) Chazal teach us that these "rulers" are those who are able to rule over their inclinations, who are in control of their yetzer hora, evil inclination. What type of reckoning do these rulers make? They determine the advantage derived from a mitzvah as opposed to a loss, and the gain of a sin as opposed to the "loss". One who makes this reckoning will be "built in Olam Hazeh, this world, and established in Olam Habah, the Eternal World." While it goes without saying that one gains eternal benefit from mitzvah performance, the novelty of this dictum is that one also gains immeasurably in this world.

Horav Shalom Schwadron, zl, related an intriguing story he heard from one of the listeners at his Friday night shmuessen, ethical discourses, in which he spoke about weighing the loss incurred in performing a mitzvah against its reward. The story took place in Russia during the beginning of Socialist rule. This man worked at the Bourse, dealing in pearls. He would leave for work promptly every day at 8:00 a.m. One day as he went to work, he passed a house from which a man called out to him to come inside and be the tenth man for a minyan. Apparently, he had yahrzeit that day, and he

needed a minyan for kaddish. Looking at his watch, the man decided he could spend fifteen minutes to help another Jew. This feeling changed drastically when he entered the house and discovered that there were only five others there. After a few more minutes, they had seven people. The man, who now realized that he would be late for work, became angry and complained to his "host," "You told me that you needed a tenth man, but even now, you still need more men!"

The owner of the house said, "You are right, but what would you do if it were you who needed to say Kaddish?" "It is easy for you to say, since you are not losing money," the man responded. "I am sorry, I must leave." The owner went to the door and blocked the entrance, saying, "I am not letting you go."

When he saw that he had no choice but to stay, the jeweler relented and took out a Sefer Tehillim and began to recite the Psalms. Finally, there was a minyan, but the host did not merely choose to say Kaddish, he proceeded to daven the entire davening. How does one say no to another Jew who wants to say Kaddish for a parent? Indeed, too many of us wait until it is too late, focusing their Kibud Av v'Eim solely on the Kaddish and rarely on anything else. The jeweler was resigned to sit it out until the end of davening, thus performing the mitzvah in the fullest sense of the word, by enabling another Jew to daven with a minyan. After davening, the jeweler resumed his journey to the Bourse.

As he neared his office, a man came running over to him and shouted, "Get out of here now! The Bolsheviks are attacking! They have killed just about everyone. Run for your life!" The jeweler did an about-face and escaped into the woods. After a few days of running and hiding, he made it to the border and eventually to safety. He now realized that had he not stayed to help his host with his Kaddish, he would right now be the subject of Kaddish. The mitzvah that he performed protected him even in this world.

Make for yourself a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole; and it shall be that everyone that is bitten when he sees it, shall live. (21:8)

The narrative stimulates a number of questions: Why did Moshe Rabbeinu fashion the serpent of copper? Why not of another substance, such as clay or wood? Is there a relationship between the word nachash, serpent, and the word nechoshes, copper? Why was this serpent placed upon a pole? How is one who is bitten by a serpent cured simply by gazing at the serpent? Horav Avigdor Miller, Shlita, addresses these questions in his commentary on this parsha. The serpent is a symbol of the yetzer hora, evil inclination. The yetzer hora's strength lies in its ability to be elusive, to conceal itself from its victims. Thus, the first serpent, the nachash that played a leading role in the sin of Adam Ha'rishon, presented itself as a friendly advisor. Hashem chose the nachash as the symbol for all forms of persuasion, using its guile to manipulate man into succumbing to temptation. Every serpent should serve as a reminder of this concealed force. The ability to ensnare defines the essentially character of the nachash.

The serpent travels on its stomach, hiding in the grass, so that it can strike without warning, when it is least expected. Because of its unique nature, the serpent is copper-colored, a color that easily blends in with most environments. This allows the snake a greater opportunity to remain concealed, especially upon the earth or in the grass.

Moshe understood the hidden peril of the serpent. He, therefore, chose to fashion a serpent of copper. Even the name nachash alluded to the serpent's resemblance to nechoshes, copper, pointing to

the difficulty man has in recognizing the danger of the nachash. Thus, Hashem commanded Moshe to place this copper serpent upon a pole, so that everyone would see it and be reminded of its existence. This way, people would be warned to avoid the fatal temptation of its misleading advice.

The complainers were punished in order to provide a lesson to be cognizant of the effects of the subtle persuasion of the serpent. When the people looked at the copper serpent, they were reminded of the existence of the evil inclination. They would avoid the tragic consequences that its bite could catalyze. The way to be healed of the snake bite/yetzer hora, is to be aware of its existence at all times. The serpent seeks to remain incognito, to hide from its victims. It enters the minds and hearts of men, poisoning their concepts and philosophies. They think they are thinking straight, but, alas, they are only succumbing to the effects of the serpent's guile. The healing is through awareness. Whoever notices the serpent survives. It is as true today as it was then. When we open our eyes to the efforts of the serpents, we will realize that it subtly leads us astray: to follow the trends of the times; to defer to every challenge to the Torah way of life; to view modernity as a savior and reject the past. When we recognize the tempting nature of the snake, we are able to avoid the entrapping, deception of the yetzer hora.

And Moshe sent (spies) to spy out Yaazer and they conquered its towns. (21:32)

One city remained in the land of the Emorites that had not yet been conquered - Yaazer. Moshe Rabbeinu sent spies, Pinchas and Calev, to scout the land. Targum Yonasan relates that while their mission was simply to spy, they decided to upgrade their assignment to wage war with Yaazer. They succeeded, and conquered the city. They were compelled to act differently from their ill-fated predecessors, the original spies sent by Moshe to scout Eretz Yisrael. They conjectured that their faith and trust in the Almighty would protect them and led them to success. They were not willing to risk that Klal Yisrael's fear of failure would engender yet another tragedy. Their belief in Hashem reinforced the self-confidence they needed to take that crucial step forward. Their reasoning was accurate. Thus, they emerged triumphant in their objective.

Horav A. Henach Leibowitz, Shlita, makes a note of the commitment, devotion and conviction these spies must have manifested in order to undertake battling an entire city without having been commanded by Hashem. To have so much confidence in the presence of such grave danger must have truly taken a remarkable amount of emunah, faith, and bitachon, trust, in Hashem. They felt they must complete their mission in its totality, to conquer the city, lest there be another unfortunate reaction -- as their predecessors had experienced. The previous mission had been tainted. The spies had possessed a minute blemish, a character flaw that would normally have gone unnoticed. This time it did not. It infected a nation and brought Klal Yisrael down.

These spies were prepared. They were armed with the strength of their conviction: ready to go to war - voluntarily. Why? If they possessed such a degree of emunah and bitachon, could they not imbue the people with the courage necessary to vanquish Yaazer? How could they have felt sufficiently confident in themselves to risk their lives in battle, yet be so anxious that they might not impress the people enough. How did they feel self-confident of success on the one hand, and fearful of failure on the other? Horav Leibowitz feels that this incident presents us with an insight into the flexibility and breadth of perspective of which our minds and souls are capable of and expected to achieve.

At times, opposite emotions necessarily exist within us. Even when we are confident and have

complete trust in Heavenly assistance, we must still feel unsure of the outcome. We undertake an endeavor, feeling secure and inspired that we are doing the right thing, yet we must reinforce ourselves with added measures, with supplication and good deeds, just in case our motivation is not one-hundred percent pure -- or simply to ensure that we do not deviate from our prescribed goals. At other times, we perceive a lack of confidence in ourselves. A hesitancy and uncertainty permeates our hearts and minds. Yet, we must forge ahead in our plans with resolution and conviction. We maintain a balance when we have both extremes working in harmony with one another. This may be compared to a concert pianist who simultaneously strikes notes at opposite sides of the scales. These notes, although at opposing sides of the scales, blend together harmoniously, complementing each other, producing a sound more beautiful than had they each been struck individually. The human spirit and intellect can, and must, likewise, play simultaneous "notes" at both ends of the scale: using confidence and caution, courage and anxiety to produce a ben Torah, strong and resolute in his commitment. The symphony of sound that emanates from this person is the sound of Torah.

And the people settled in Kadosh, and Miriam died there...there was no water for the congregation...the people quarreled with Moshe. (20:1,2,3.)

The people followed a pattern that has regrettably become typical: When events did not proceed in their favor, they either complained or protested. The Alshich Hakadosh notes that the Torah does not mention that they expressed grief over Miriam's loss, as it does regarding the deaths of Moshe and Aharon. Thus, he infers that they did not shed tears when Miriam died. Because they did not acknowledge her merit as the source of their water supply, they lost it. Being surrounded by kedushah, holiness, has little effect if one does not recognize and appreciate it.

We must address Klal Yisrael's reaction -- or lack thereof -- to the loss of Miriam. Chazal teach us that the battle with the yetzer hora, evil inclination, is a formidable one. They suggest a number of tactics an individual can employ to enable him to succeed in this battle. After attempting to struggle with the yetzer hora to no avail, one should study Torah diligently. If this strategy does not work, he should recite Krias Shema and accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven. If this course of action does not engender success, he is told to reflect upon his mortality, specifically the day of death which everyone must eventually confront. The fear of this forbidding moment should inspire the individual to overwhelm the evil-inclination and repent. The Talmud is apparently implying that the last approach, remembering yom ha'missah, the day of death, will secure one's ability to triumph over the yetzer hora. If so, we ask, how could Bnei Yisrael debate Moshe? How could they start a conflict immediately after Miriam's death? Did not the death of such a sainted leader serve as a "subtle" reminder of their own mortality?

In his Al Hatorah, Horav Mordechai Hakohen remarks that yom ha'missah certainly serves as a reminder - as a last resort. When it catalyzes machlokes, controversy, conflict, dispute, however, nothing, helps. They witnessed the tzaddeikas, Miriam Ha'neviyah, die. Did it leave an impression on them? No, because machlokes overrides everything - even one's own mortality. How often do we see elderly people - scholars who have devoted so much of their lives to Klal Yisrael - involved in controversy? Why? These adversarial relationships symbolize the overwhelming power of the yetzer hora of machlokes.

*Regarding this the poets would come to Cheshbon, let it be built and established as the city of Sichon.
(21:27)*

In the Talmud Bava Basra 78b, Rabbi Yochanan understands this pasuk differently. He contends that the word "moshlim," "rulers," refers to those who rule over themselves/their yetzer hora, evil inclination, while "cheshbon" means "reckoning." Those who govern their passion -- who are not controlled by their yetzer hora -- say, "Let us make a reckoning of the world: the loss that a mitzvah entails against its reward; the profit from a transgression against the loss it brings." In order to progress spiritually, one must triumph over the formidable challenge presented by the yetzer hora. The key to success is making a cheshbon, assessing what one gains and what one loses by everything that they do, whether good or bad. When one performs a mitzvah, the loss, if there is one, is temporary and miniscule in comparison to the everlasting reward he receives. For a transgression, the pleasure is fleeting and quickly forgotten; the loss, the harm that results, in contrast, is devastating and permanent.

Why does everyone not make this very simple reckoning? Some individuals do - at the end of their lives. After they have raised their families, they look back at their mistakes and how these errors affected the spiritual development of their families. For the most part, however, we tend to ignore the obvious. Indeed, most of us scrutinize a simple monetary investment much more than we weigh our actions prior to evading a mitzvah or even worse - performing an aveirah. We do not stop to think, because the yetzer hora does not give us the opportunity to do so. We are so involved in ourselves that we refuse to see what is happening to our lives. Because we do not stop to think, we do not balance the immense and everlasting benefits of a mitzvah against the epic and eternal loss incurred by sinning.

Horav Shalom Schwadron, zl, recounted the following story in conjunction with this Mishnah. One Shabbos night, after a shiur about the importance of weighing the value of a mitzvah, an elderly Jew came to him to tell the following story: After the first World War, prior to the Bolshevik rebellion, the Jews were finally permitted some form of freedom. Peaceful coexistence was in the air. Those Jews who were fortunate enough to have had invested in diamonds benefitted immensely from this reprieve in Jew-non-Jew hostility. "I was one of those who had a successful diamond business," said the Jew to Horav Schwadron. "Every morning I would be at my office in the diamond center at eight o'clock to get an early start on the trading. One day, I left somewhat earlier than usual, since I was carrying with me a large and expensive shipment of uncut diamonds, hoping to get an early start on the cutting and polishing. As I was walking, I heard someone shouting, 'A tzenter, a tzenter!' 'A tenth man for a minyan!' The man came over and begged me to join his minyan so that he could say Kaddish. Assuming that I was the tenth man and it would not take very long, I followed him to the shul. When I entered the shul, however, I was surprised to see that there were only three other people waiting for the minyan.

"I attempted to leave, saying it would take all day to gather a minyan -- to no avail. The man begged me to stay so that he could say Kaddish on his father's yahrtzeit. I sat down in the corner of the shul and recited Tehillim with the hope that there would soon be a minyan. I was mistaken. Finally, at ten o'clock the minyan was assembled and Shacharis commenced. I told the man who so badly need the minyan that we were all present for him. Could he just speed it up? He responded angrily, 'It is my father's yahrtzeit, how can I speed up the davening? How would you like it if it was your father's yahrtzeit?' I saw that I was obviously not going to be at work until the afternoon, so I resigned myself to participating patiently with the minyan. Finally, davening ended, and I was able to leave. As I

walked toward the diamond center carrying my bag of diamonds, I noticed a friend of mine running towards me, disheveled and shook up. 'Run from here,' he cried out to me. 'Escape. The Bolsheviks have rebelled against the government. As usual the Jews are their first victims. They have destroyed the diamond center and killed many Jews. They are now gathering their ill-gotten booty. Escape while you can!'

"I ran into the forest with my bag of diamonds. After a few days in hiding, I was able to return. I left Russia and eventually came to Eretz Yisrael. I was saved only because I had participated in a mitzvah. Had I ignored the man who needed the minyan, I would have gone to work and probably met the same fate as so many of my friends."

The merit of performing a mitzvah does not always immediately manifest itself. It is sometimes covert. We have only to open our eyes and look so that we might see it.

Hashem said to Moshe and Aharon...by the border of Edom saying...Aharon shall be gathered to his people...(20:23,24)

Rashi explains that the Torah juxtaposes Aharon's death upon Klal Yisrael's unfruitful dialogue with Edom because of a distinct relationship between the two. When Klal Yisrael attempted to join Eisav's descendants, they created a breach in their activities which resulted in the loss of Aharon. Why? How is Aharon's death associated with their attempt to establish diplomatic relations with Eisav? Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, cites the pasuk in Devarim 32:4, "The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice." Hashem's rectitude in justice is manifest in that He will not punish a person if it will cause undue and unwarranted pain to another person. His justice is meticulous; only those whose behavior, for whatever reason, warrants punitive discipline will receive said punishment. Thus, if Aharon's time on this world had come to an end, he would not have died if his death would cause unjustified pain and anguish to others. Aharon would not have died at that moment because his death would have caused unjustified pain and grief. When the people submitted themselves to Edom, when they attempted to breach the separation between them by establishing a relationship with them, they created a rift between themselves and a tzaddik of Aharon's caliber. By becoming closer to Eisav, Bnei Yisrael distanced themselves from Aharon to the point that his death would not be as difficult for them to endure as it previously would have been. Hashem, therefore, decided to recall Aharon's soul to its source.

In a second approach, Horav Alpert reconsiders Aharon's involvement in the sin of the Golden Calf. Aharon allowed himself to participate in the Golden Calf, because he felt that if he protested Bnei Yisrael's iniquity, they would kill him. Hashem does not punish a person unless the spiritual damage he has inflicted is obvious. Only when Bnei Yisrael attempted to get close to Edom, an action which undermined their spiritual superiority, was the lesson clear: a relationship with evil or wicked people, regardless of their religious persuasion, is wrong and hazardous. It ultimately cannot produce positive results, even if the immediate results seem promising. Only misery and destruction will be the final product. The incident involving Bnei Yisrael and their attempted relationship with Edom was an indication that Aharon's reaction, although noble, was erroneous. Hashem called upon him to answer for his spontaneous participation in Chet HaAgel.

Take Aharon and Elazar his son...strip Aharon of his vestments and dress Elazar his son in them;

Aharon shall be gathered in and die there. (20:25,26)

Aharon merited a unique and exalted departure from this world. The ritual of stripping him of his clothes, so that his son Elazar could don them seems a bit enigmatic. What really is the significance of removing Aharon's clothes prior to his death? If the underlying purpose had been that Aharon could see his son attired in the priestly vestments of the Kohen Gadol, it could have been accomplished without Aharon being dressed and then having his clothes removed. Apparently, the actual removing of Aharon's vestments plays an important role.

Horav Zaidel Epstein, Shlita, cites the Talmud Shabbos, 153A, wherein Rabbi Eliezer says one should repent one day prior to his death. Since no one really knows when his yom ha'missah, day of death, will occur, Rabbi Eliezer is really telling us to repent every day of our lives. If the purpose of this statement is to emphasize the importance of repenting every day, why not simply say, "Repent every day!"

The answer, claims Horav Epstein, lies in the apparent distinction between a person's emotions and his cognitive perception. Some people recite Vidui as often as twice a day. They daily say Tachanun, which is a prayer that focuses upon man's acknowledgement of sin and its devastating powers. This does not have much of an effect on them. Their submission to physical and material temptations preclude them from perceiving the truth. On the day of his death man confronts his own mortality. He is at the end of the rope, time when excuses are no longer valid. At that point, he becomes regretful and remorseful, so that he can truly repent.

This is the meaning of the statement, "Repent one day before you die!" One should always sense that his time is limited. He does not know when his sojourn on this earth will come to an end, so that his teshuvah will be more meaningful. When an individual confronts his mortality, he must respond with sobering seriousness.

The effect of yom ha'missah has a more profound impact upon someone of Aharon Hakohen's caliber than on the average person. He understands the meaning of life and what one can accomplish with the time allotted to him. His life is an acknowledgement of this fact. He lives every moment l'shem Shomayim, with a purpose, for the sake of Heaven. Thus, his teshuvah is effected by this reality.

For a tzaddik, the end creates an almost paradoxical feeling. On the one hand, he experiences the usual fear and anxiety that accompanies a person at this moment. On the other hand, he experiences another type of fear - one of awe and excitement, almost a feeling of joy, as the tzaddik, who has lived a life true to Torah, of purity, sanctity and virtue, realizes that he has achieved a form of perfection. He has attained the tiara of success for a life well-lived.

Aharon earned the kesser Kehunah, crown of Priesthood. He secured this crown of distinction by living a life of distinction. He totally devoted his life to Hashem and His mitzvos, never deviating, never cross-examining Hashem's Providence, never disputing His mitzvos. He reached the summit of avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. Hashem notified him that today was the most auspicious day of his life. Today he had achieved perfection. It was the culmination of a life of perfection. Today, the kesser Kehunah that was his would be transferred to Elazar, his son. Today, he would don the sacred vestments that he exemplified and observe as they were given over to Elazar. Aharon saw how not only his position in life was consigned to his son, but even his achievements, symbolized by his crown of Kehunah, were transmitted to him.

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