

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

HUKAT

Haftarah: Shoftim 11:1-33
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DEDICATION: In memory of Alfred J Sutton- Abraham Ben Zarife

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EDITORS NOTES

Atonement of the Righteous

We've had too many funerals this month. We've mourned older people who lived full and fulfilling lives and younger people who lived tragic lives and we're taken far too soon. I heard again and again, and you've probably heard it as well as it seems to be a common theme in eulogies, that the deaths of righteous people atone for those left behind. I wondered how this korban Sibur (congregational sacrifice) works and who gets the atonement?

I believe the source for this statement is in this week's portion. Rashi asks, "Why was Miriam's death juxtaposed to the Red Heifer?" He answers that this teaches us that just as sacrifices atone (or perhaps the Parah Adumah atones for the sin of the Golden Calf), so too does the demise of the righteous atone. The Siftei Hahamim suggests Miriam's demise was juxtaposed to the Red Heifer, and not to a regular sacrifice, to highlight that neither are real sacrifices, yet they both atone.

One has to ask, where do we see Miriam (and Aaron's) death atoning for others?

With regard to Miriam's death, the Baal Haturim points out that the word Sham - there, is mentioned twice. Miriam died there and was buried there. The gematria of Sin and Mem is $300+40 = 340$, the gematria of the word "atones" - mechaper is $40+20+80+200 = 340$. He suggests that this is the hint that there is a connection between 'atonement' reflected in the Red Heifer and 'there' repeated superfluously in connection with Miriam's death, the death of a righteous person.

Miriam dies on the 10th of Nissan. Aaron dies four months later on the first of Av. And Aaron's date of death is the only one we are told of in the Torah. Why not simply tell us he died in Av, why do we need to know it was the 1st of Av?

The Midrash tells us the following story regarding the origins of Tu Be'Av, the minor holiday that we celebrate on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Av. The people of the Dor Midbar – the desert generation - were all under the edict of having to die in the desert. This generation consisted of all those who were between the ages of 20 and 60 at the Exodus. We are told that no one died before the age of 60 unless he was involved in one of the special incidents involving the sins described in elsewhere in the Torah. Those include the sin of the golden calf, the man who cursed, the man who collected wood and those involved in the revolt of Korach. Every year on the eve of the 9th of Av, the anniversary of the issuance of the edict, Moses issued a call, "go out and dig." The 60-year-olds would say goodbye to their families, pick up their shovels, go outside the camp, dig themselves a grave, and lie down to go to sleep. The 15,000 who were destined to die that year [600,000 people between the ages of 20 and 60 dying over a period of forty years equals 15,000 deaths each year] simply didn't wake up.

They followed this custom in the 40th year as well, but much to their surprise no one died. Their immediate reaction was that they had somehow mistaken the day, so they went back to sleep again the next night in the graves they had dug. After six days, when they saw the full moon rise on the evening of the 15th day of the month, they were certain that there was no mistake and realized that the edict had lapsed. They established that day as a holiday.

But in whose merit were those 15,000 given a reprieve and pardon? Putting the stories together, it appears that the death of Miriam and Aaron served as atonement for those 15,000. And to be sure that we know Aaron didn't die because of the same sin although he died during Av, we are specifically told that he dies on the first and not the ninth.

Furthermore we know that the generation of the midbar, the 600,000 were punished specifically because they cried on that night of the 9th of Av for nothing when the spies brought their report. We see at Aaron's death that all of Israel cried for 30 days beginning on the 1st of Av and continuing the entire month. We see that those who remained were now crying for the right reason and perhaps this is why

they were forgiven at the very end for crying for the wrong reason.

Maybe the key is in the tears. The Talmud tells us that, "From the day that the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed ... but even though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of tears are not closed."

Perhaps when we mourn the death of a person and shed tears, those tears not only open the gates for the departed soul to pass through, they open gates for us and in opening those gates we become potentially new people and in that there is atonement.

Miriam died in her time and Aaron died in his time. She was 124 years old and he was 122 years old. Yet the people still cried and mourned their loss. They took time to stop and look at their lives; at what was important and where they needed to refocus. Gates were opened and tears traveled up while blessing and light traveled down and lives were changed. What a lesson to all of us?

Shabbat Shalom,

David Bibi

PS: After completing this, I saw that Rav Kook writes: The principal benefit that comes from the death of tzaddikim is the spiritual and moral awakening that takes place after they pass away. When a tzaddik is alive, his acts of kindness and generosity are not always public knowledge. True tzaddikim do not promote themselves. On the contrary, they often take great pains to conceal their virtues and charitable deeds. It is not uncommon that we become aware of their true greatness and nobility of spirit only after they are no longer with us. Only then do we hear reports of their selfless deeds and extraordinary sensitivity, and we are inspired to emulate their ways. In this way, the positive impact of the righteous as inspiring role models increases after their death.

While stories of their fine traits and good deeds stir us to follow in their path, certain aspects of great tzaddikim — extraordinary erudition and scholarship, for example — are beyond the capabilities of most people to emulate. In such matters, the best we can do is to take upon ourselves to promote these qualities in our spiritual leadership, such as supporting the Torah study of young, promising scholars.

Two Forms of Emulation: In short, the death of tzaddikim inspires us to imitate their personal conduct — if possible, in our own actions, and if not, by

ensuring that there will be others who will fill this spiritual void.

These two methods of emulation parallel the different forms of atonement through the Parah Adumah and the priestly clothes. Ritual purification using Parah Adumah ashes was only effective when they were sprinkled on the body of the impure person; no one else could be purified in his place. This is comparable to those aspects of the tzaddik that are accessible to, and incumbent upon, all to emulate.

The priestly garments, on the other hand, were only worn by the kohanim. It was through the service of these holy emissaries that the entire nation was forgiven. This is like those extraordinary traits of the tzaddik that are beyond the capabilities of most people. These qualities can be carried on only by a select few, with the support of the entire nation.

Summary of the Perasha Nathan Dweck

Hukat - Para Aduma, Moshe hits the rock, Amalek, Sihon and Og (year 40 in the midbar)

1- Para Aduma - slaughtering, burning, saving the ashes, how one becomes tameh

2- Para Aduma- the sprinkling, laws of the tameh. Miriam dies and the water stops coming.

3- Moshe hits the rock

4- Benei Israel asks to pass through the land of Edom on the way to Israel and Edom refuses

5- Aharon dies, Amalek attacks, Benei Israel complains. Hashem sends a plague of snakes

6- Benei Israel's journeys in the 40th yr, the miracle of the rivers of Arnon, Benei Israel gets water

7- Benei Israel battles and defeats Sihon and Og on the way to Israel

FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

"And he struck the rock." (Bemidbar 20:11)

The parashah describes the incident of the rock. At the "Waters of Strife," in the wilderness, Moshe was told by Hashem to speak to the rock, which would then bring forth water for the entire nation. According to Rashi, the fact that Moshe hit the rock rather than just speaking to it was the sin that prevented him from entering Eress Yisrael.

Rabbi Shemuel of Slonim asks: How could Moshe, the ultimate servant of Hashem, possibly commit a sin? Wasn't he aware that he was violating a direct command of Hashem? He answers that miracles occur in various levels. To hit the rock involved a physical effort, but to produce water from the rock merely by speaking to it was a miracle in a

higher level. One reason that Moshe hit the rock was that he did not think the Jewish people were worthy of a miracle on a higher level. We learn from this explanation that one should not underestimate the strengths and merits of the Jewish nation.

The guiding principle of our shul was to always encourage the members that they can do great things and never to say they can't do it. It has paid off greatly over the years. Rabbi Reuven Semah

In this week's parashah, we read about the tragic incident when Moshe lost the opportunity to enter the land of Israel. The Torah does not explicitly state what Moshe's mistake was, but almost every commentary suggests a different interpretation. For example, Rashi says that his sin was that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, while Ramban explains that the problem was that he called the nation rebellious. Regardless of what the actual sin was, we see two very important points. Firstly, the fact that there are so many interpretations of what he actually did, shows that it must have been a very small sin, so small that it's difficult to discern what it was. Secondly, we see that if we are trying to find a fault in another person, we are sure to find some imperfection, even when we look at a person as great as Moshe Rabenu. A person with a negative attitude will always pick up on these faults, and disregard the good in others.

I was once in a store on a Monday morning, and I overheard two women talking. One said, "What a gorgeous day it is today!" And the friend responded, "Yeah, but they're saying it might rain on Friday." I walked away shaking my head and thinking that this person probably sees her glass half empty rather than half full. She was so focused on a possible rainy day four days from now that she couldn't even enjoy the next three days of beautiful weather.

In contrast, Rabbi Avigdor Miller was famous for his ability to speak for hours about the beauty and wisdom that went into creating an apple, or the wonders of our body, or any other miracle of nature that we have been so accustomed to that we don't even pay any attention to them. Anyone with a positive outlook like this will only see the good in everything, and he will live a life of happiness and tranquility.

The choice is ours. We can choose to highlight the faults and shortcomings of others, or we can notice their good qualities. As the Gemara teaches, one who judges others favorably will merit to have Hashem view him in a positive light as well. Let's commit ourselves to focus on the good in others, and through that we will enjoy the sunny

days, and promote peace among our fellow man. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Be Fruitful and Multiply

"Fish are the harvest of the sea, a harvest almost as great as the harvest of the fields. Despite all of their natural enemies, fish are able to reproduce and survive and they provide mankind with food on a massive scale."

Despite being surrounded by enemies, through the kindness of Hashem, our nation remains fruitful and can introduce technological and medical advancements to benefit mankind. (Norman D. Levy, Based on Rabbi Miller's, Duties of the mind)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

The Well of Miriam

This week's parasha, Parashat Hukat, begins with the laws of the para aduma (the red heifer), and then relates the unfortunate death of Miriam.

The Jewish people arrived at the wilderness of Zin... Miriam dies there and was buried there (Bamidbar 20:20).

The Talmud (Moed Katan 28a) asks why the section which relates the death of Miriam is placed immediately after the section of the red heifer. The gemara suggests that it teaches the following comparison: "What is the purpose of the sacrifices? They effect atonement! So, too, does the death of the righteous effect atonement!"

Immediately following Miriam's death, the Torah (ibid. 21) relates that "the nation was without water." The Talmud (Taanit 9a) teaches that the well of Miriam dried up after her death, because "during the entire forty years they had the 'well' through Miriam's merit." Upon her death, the water disappeared.

The Torah then relates that after the Well of Miriam dried up, the people complained, saying "If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the Lord." They asked why God even brought the Jewish people, and their animals, to the desert if they are to die of thirst. In response, Moshe Rabbeinu and Aaron fell upon their faces at the entrance to the Ohel Moed.

God subsequently tells Moshe and Aharon that they should "take the rod and gather the community and speak to the rock in front of all of the people, and it will yield water." Moshe and Aharon gathered the people by the rock, and said, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of the rock?" Moshe Rabbeinu then raises his hand and strikes the rock, twice, and out came the water.

This is a very, very troubling story. We might ask why Moshe and Aharon need to gather the people? And why did God tell Moshe Rabbeinu to bring a stick? And finally, why was Moshe commanded to speak to the rock? What is a person meant to say to a rock?

Interestingly, the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel explains that when God commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to speak to the rock and to bring a stick, the intention was that only if the rock did not yield water should Moshe take the stick and hit the rock. In other words, the stick was intended only as a "back-up" plan. Our questions, however, remain.

The Yalkut Shimoni asks a very important question. Why, in Parashat Beshalah (Shemot 17:1-7), is Moshe told to hit the rock, and here he is told to speak to the rock? He explains that the Jewish people, upon leaving Egypt, were 'young' and they only understand the demonstrative act of hitting. However, forty years later, they are older and more mature, and therefore Moshe Rabbeinu is commanded to speak to the rock, to pray, to study, and in the merit of Torah blessing will come to the world. In other words, God tells Moshe Rabbeinu that in a time of drought, we should pray, and study Torah, and only then will we merit receiving rain.

If so, God intended to teach the Jewish people a lesson. Just as in a time of drought Moshe Rabbeinu was commanded to learn Torah next to the rock, and the fire of the Torah was meant to destroy and bring forth water from the rock, so too we are supposed to use our words, and turn to Torah study and prayer in times of crisis. Unfortunately, Moshe Rabbeinu was unable to united the people behind this solution, and therefore, he needed to use the second option, i.e. to hit the rock. The incident concludes when God tells Moshe Rabbeinu that since he was unable to perform this miracle, and to teach the Jewish people this very important lesson, in 'front of the Jewish people', he would not be the leader who would bring the Jewish people into the land of Israel.

What do we learn from the episode? Those who study Torah have a special merit. It isn't the horses and chariots which bring victory, but rather the study of Torah. If we only believe that, and internalize this message, then we will merit great blessing.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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Rabbi Wein WHAT HAPPENED?

I have an acquaintance in the United States with whom I occasionally converse and share ideas. He is a retired Rabbi who for many years was a leading figure in the Conservative rabbinic movement in the United States. Even though we have long agreed to disagree on theological matters, nevertheless all relations are cordial and sometimes even interesting and stimulating. Neither of us are youngsters any longer and in our dotage are given to nostalgia and reminiscing.

I mentioned to him that one of my fondest memories from my pre-adolescent childhood was listening to the radio on Sunday mornings when a major radio network in the United States provided a half-hour of time to the Conservative movement, which produced an excellent radio program on Jewish topics. The program was called The Eternal Light. It was produced in a most talented and professional manner with excellent acting and inspirational musical background.

The topics then centered around Jewish tradition, the horrors of World War II and the nascent State of Israel. I remember that the program was always introduced by a cantorial rendition of a verse taken from the morning prayers of the traditional prayer book. That radio program, I believe, spoke to all Jews then living in the United States at that time. It advanced no theological agenda, it had no political or even social goal, its sole purpose was to give the listener a sense of Jewish pride and traditional self identity.

To the best of my knowledge, no such program exists any longer in the general media in the United States. There is much Jewish content on specific Jewish radio programs and naturally on the Internet but almost all of it is narrowly constructed and usually speaks to a specific base and not to the Jewish people as a whole.

I remarked about all of this to my acquaintance in our last conversation. He agreed with me that he thought that the radio program The Eternal Light was one of the finest contributions that the Conservative movement ever made to the cause of American Jewry. He then proceeded, without much encouragement from me, to detail the decline of that movement in numbers and influence. I asked him what he attributed to be the causes of this decline of a movement that once was seen by many to be the future force of American Jewish society.

He answered, somewhat ruefully, that... "we thought that societal, liberal Judaism would suffice and that any concentration on Jewish studies and traditional observances was really no longer necessary. Well, we were very wrong in that assessment." It is obvious that Jewish concerns are not at the head of the list of much of American Jewry.

Jewish students, brainwashed by very liberal professors and the atmospheres on American college campuses, no longer feel it necessary to identify themselves as Jews. It is sufficient that they just consider themselves to be human beings and that that somehow will make everything right and bring about the fantasy world that is always promised to the naïve utopians. The Conservatives long ago abandoned Sabbath observance as being necessary to Jewish survival. The dietary laws were no longer maintained and as Jewish history has shown time and again, Conservatism is about to become an obsolete and disappearing movement.

Official Orthodoxy, both in the United States and Israel has many defects and failings. However, it has managed to retain and save the Sabbath, the strength of the observance of dietary laws, and family purity, to build an educational infrastructure that provides tens of thousands of Jews with basic Jewish knowledge, values and vision.

Because of this, it not only survives despite its imperfections and human failings, but is constantly expanding and is the vital machine that drives all Jewish life. It sees itself as the heir to a great historical past and an even greater future. And despite all criticism to the contrary, it reflects a spirit of care and concern for all Jews wherever they may be found.

I certainly do not revel or rejoice in the decline and near demise of both the Reform and Conservative movements in the United States. Their failure has created a spiritual disaster for millions of Jews who have lost everything and do not even realize what it is they have lost. But the inexorable rule of history is that tampering with the Torah to make it fit perceived current and future society will always lead to disaster. I feel it to be tragic that a program such as The Eternal Light has proven to be only temporary on the Jewish scene

Rabbi Yosef Farhi
CALM, CONFIDENT AND CONTENT

Why did the Jews say Shira in the desert only on the Well of Water, and not on the Mannah? Because about the Mannah, they made tasteless remarks,

"And now our souls are dry, there is nothing..."(Bamidbar 11) G-d said, " I want neither your complaints nor your praise". That is why G-d did not give them permission to say Shira. But on the Well, G-d allowed them to say Shira, because it was dear to them... (Shemot Rabba 7)

How sad. G-d brought them 40 years of Mannah, and no matter how much they would want to say Shira for Manna, G-d was not interested. To say Shira is a privilege. You need permission. If you complain, G-d is not interested in your Shira. You blew it by looking at the negative and complaining.

Saying Shira is not something we should take lightly. Shira is what keeps every element of the world in existence. It is the powerhouse of every creature. When Yehoshua stopped the sun from setting , he said, *יְשׁוּעַ בְּגִבְעוֹן דָּוָם*, Sun in Givon, silence! (Yehoshua 10) Why 'silence'? Why not 'stop'? Yehoshua commanded the sun to stop saying Shira. Without saying Shira, the sun is powerless, so it froze in its tracks (Chomat Anach (Chida) Tehillim 19).When you feel powerless, when you are not being you, it is because you are not singing Shirah. Shirah is your battery. *אוה רורב שודקה ינפל לארשי יביבח*. העש לכב - תרשה יכאלממ רתוי (Hullin 91b)

A person's prayer is not heard unless it is in the Shul, as it says *אֶל-הַתְּפִלָּה לְשִׁמְעַ אֶל-הַרְנָהּ* !, to hear the praise, and the prayer. Our Rabbis learn from this passuk, *הַלִּיפַת אֹהֶת מִשׁ הַנֵּר מוֹקֵמָב*, in the place of praise, that is where there should be prayer. Rashi explains that the Shul is special, for that is where the minyan says songs and praises, in a singing, sweet and calm voice (Berachot 6a). The power of prayer is strongest when it is associated with singing G-d's praises.

Why don't we say Shira, why don't we feel like we are singing to G-d His praises when we are in shul? What is stopping our hearts from singing?

Everything that you need to know in life, you were taught in kindergarten. To be a part of a group. To make sure you share your fun with others. To ask yourself, always, what you want to be when you grow up, no matter how old you are. To sing the song when relationships have gone sour, Let's be friends. Make amends. Now's the time to say I'm sorry. And most importantly, to learn how to say thank you, even if things did not work out the way you expected. The simplest truisms in life are the most important ones, and, unfortunately, the most forgettable ones. The truths we were taught then keep coming back to us,

to remind us what we keep forgetting. Like the lesson of Rick Hanson.

There is a recent study by UC Berkeley-based clinical psychologist Rick Hanson that will help you to "Reprogram your brain to be calm, content, and confident in 10 seconds". It explains why so many people are miserable and how to experience more joy. Here it is, in a Torah-based version.

People have a tendency to pay attention to the negative rather than the positive. This is a response of the Nefesh, the animal-survival part of your soul that is hard wired to a "fight or flight" survival response. Survival depends upon immediately identifying and quickly reacting to life threats. According to Hanson, "there is a negativity bias that makes like Velcro for bad experiences, but like Teflon for good ones." Therefore, bad experiences tend to stick with us (because they seem IMPORTANT), while good experiences tend to be quickly forgotten. Over time, we tend to accumulate a long laundry list of easily-recalled bad experiences, which seem vivid and significant, while we tend to forget good experiences.

Hanson cites studies that good relationships require at least a 5-to-1 ratio of positive interactions to negative ones. In other words, you'll probably dislike your boss if he doesn't praise you at least five times more than he criticizes you. Unfortunately, it's the bad experience that sticks. The Nefesh is busy accumulating negative thoughts, experiences, and worries and sticking big, red, "THIS IS IMPORTANT!!!" flags on them.

Fortunately, you can tap into your Neshama and reprogram yourself to be happy, simply by taking 10 to 30 seconds to focus on how happy you feel when you're experiencing a small pleasure. You instruct your brain to stick a "THIS IS IMPORTANT!!!" flag on the little things that make you happy. Over time, your brain becomes acclimatized to being happy. The happiest people are those who seem to be able to enjoy whatever is going on at the time, not those who have encountered the fewest difficulties in life. Without really knowing what they were doing, those people who seem "naturally happy" have actually been programming their brains to be that way.

If a person does not see the good in the bad, or if he does not trust G-d that there is a good reason for the bad in the good, then G-d does not want his Shira. Because Shira is recognizing how it was, is and will be all good. That G-d is always there in your life, opposite you. Anyone who says Shira in This World, will merit to say Shira in the Next World, as it says,

לucky are those who sit in Your House; they will continue to praise You, for eternity (Sanhedrin 91b). This is the connection of the next passuk we say אֲשֶׁר־הָעָם שִׁבְּחָה לְךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ: Fortunate is the nation for whom this is so, lucky is the nation that YHVH is His G-d(Elokim). The only way you can say Shira is if you can see that G-d's mercy (YHVH) stands behind all the difficulties in life (Elokim).

In life, we have pain, and we have pleasure. There is no such thing as pain without pleasure. And there is no such thing as pleasure without pain. G-d gives pain and suffering only so that we can see through it to its purpose, and actually love it. ירוסי יביב. (Berachot 5b). Shirah is not about thanking G-d for giving you a good life, as much as it is about being thankful to G-d that He used you as a vessel to bring awareness of His G-dliness into the world, that He is running the world at every moment, and He can change reality at any moment (Beit Halevi Beshalach; R Tzadok Sichot Malachei Hasharet 2).

We are here for a purpose, ה' לע גועתה. To enjoy and appreciate the goodness that G-d gives us and to recognize that it is He who is giving us what we have. ה' ינפ חכנ רבל סימכ יכפש. Pour out your heart like water, opposite the Face of G-d. You can pour your heart like water, out of thankfulness and gratitude, only if G-d is opposite you. That is the only way there is meaning in pain and suffering. דימת ידגנל ה' יתיוש. I place G-d opposite me, always. Only if you are conscious of the fact that G-d is right there in front of you, always, can you praise G-d, because only then is it possible for pain to have a rhyme and reason.

This is the main goal in this world, to become a חכנ Jew, a דימת ידגנל ה' Jew. (End of Alei Shur 2) To be aware that G-d is right here in front of us, at all times, waiting for us to sing

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks The Consolations of Mortality

Chukat is about mortality. In it we read of the death of two of Israel's three great leaders in the wilderness, Miriam and Aaron, and the sentence of death decreed against Moses, the greatest of them all. These were devastating losses.

To counter that sense of loss and bereavement, the Torah employs one of Judaism's great principles: The Holy One, blessed be He, creates the remedy before the disease.[1] Before any of the deaths are mentioned we read about the strange ritual of the red heifer, which purified people who had been in contact with death – the archetypal source of impurity. That

ritual, often deemed incomprehensible, is in fact deeply symbolic.

It involves taking the most striking emblem of life – a heifer that is pure red, the colour of blood which is the source of life, and that has never been made to endure the burden of a yoke – and reducing it to ash. That is mortality, the fate of all that lives. We are, said Abraham, “mere dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27). “Dust you are,” said God to Adam, “and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). But the dust is dissolved into “living water,” and from water comes new life. Water is constantly changing. We never step into the same river twice, said Heraclitus. Yet the river maintains its course between the banks. The water changes but the river remains. So we as physical beings may one day be reduced to dust. But there are two consolations.

The first is that we are not just physical beings. God made the first human “from the dust of the earth”[2] but He breathed into him the breath of life. We may be mortal but there is within us something that is immortal. “The dust returns to the earth as it was but the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The second is that, even down here on earth, something of us lives on, as it did for Aaron in the form of his sons who carry the name of the priesthood to this day, as it did for Moses in the form of his disciples who studied and lived by his words as they do to this day, and as it did for Miriam in the lives of all those women who, by their courage, taught men the true meaning of faith.[3] For good or bad, our lives have an impact on other lives, and the ripples of our deeds spread ever outward across space and time. We are part of the undying river of life.

So we may be mortal, but that does not reduce our life to insignificance, as Tolstoy once thought it did,[4] for we are part of something larger than ourselves, characters in a story that began early in the history of civilisation and that will last as long as humankind.

It is in this context that we should understand one of the most troubling episodes in the Torah, Moses’ angry outburst when the people called for water, for which he and Aaron were condemned to die in the wilderness without ever crossing into the Promised Land.[5] I have written about this passage many times elsewhere, and I do not want to focus on the details here. I want simply to note why the story of Moses hitting the rock appears here, in parshat Chukat, whose overarching theme is our existence as physical beings in a physical world, with its two potentially tragic consequences.

First, we are an unstable mix of reason and passion, reflection and emotion, so that sometimes grief and exhaustion can lead even the greatest to make mistakes, as it did in the case of Moses and Aaron after the death of their sister. Second, we are physical, therefore mortal. Therefore, for all of us, there are rivers we will not cross, promised lands we will not enter, futures we helped shape but will not live to see.

The Torah is sketching out the contours of a truly remarkable idea. Despite these two facets of our humanity – that we make mistakes and that we die – human existence is not tragic. Moses and Aaron made mistakes, but that did not stop them being among the greatest leaders who ever lived, whose impact is still palpable today in the prophetic and priestly dimensions of Jewish life. And the fact that Moses did not live to see his people cross the Jordan did not diminish his eternal legacy as the man who turned a nation of slaves into a free people, bringing them to the very brink of the Promised Land.

I wonder if any other culture, creed or civilisation has done greater justice to the human condition than Judaism, with its insistence that we are human, not gods, and that we are, nonetheless, God’s partners in the work of creation and the fulfilment of the covenant.

Almost every other culture has blurred the line between God and human beings. In the ancient world, rulers were usually thought of as gods, demigods, or chief intermediaries with the gods. Christianity and Islam know of infallible human beings, the son of God or the prophet of God. Modern atheists, by contrast, have tended to echo Nietzsche’s question that, to justify our dethronement of God, “Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”[6]

In 1967, when I was just beginning my university studies, I listened to the BBC Reith Lectures, given that year by Edmond Leach, professor of anthropology at Cambridge, with their opening sentences, “Men have become like gods. Isn’t it about time that we understood our divinity?”[7] I recall that as soon as I heard those words, I sensed that something was going wrong in Western civilisation. We are not gods, and bad things happened when people thought they were.

Meanwhile, paradoxically, the greater our powers, the lower our estimate of the human person. In his novel *Zadig*, Voltaire described humans as “insects devouring one another on a little atom of mud.” The late Stephen Hawking stated that “the human race is

just a chemical scum on a moderate size planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies.” The philosopher John Gray declared that “human life has no more meaning than that of slime mould.”[8] In his *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari reaches the conclusion that, “Looking back, humanity will turn out to be just a ripple within the cosmic data flow.”[9]

These are the two options the Torah rejects: too high or too low an estimate of humankind. On the one hand, no man is a god. No one is infallible. There is no life without error and shortcoming. That is why it was so important to note, in the parsha that deals with mortality, Moses’ sin. Likewise it was important to say at the outset of his mission that he had no special charismatic endowments. He was not a natural speaker who could sway crowds (Ex. 4:10). Equally the Torah emphasises at the end of his life that “No one knows his burial place,” (Deut. 34:6) so that it could not become a place of pilgrimage. Moses was human, all-too-human, yet he was the greatest prophet who ever lived (Deut. 34:10).

On the other hand the idea that we are mere dust and nothing more – insects, scum, slime mould, a ripple in the cosmic data flow – must rank among the most foolish ever formulated by intelligent minds. No insect ever became a Voltaire. No chemical scum became a chemist. No ripple in the data flow wrote international bestsellers. Both errors – that we are gods or we are insects – are dangerous. Taken seriously they can justify almost any crime against humanity. Without a delicate balance between Divine eternity and human mortality, Divine forgiveness and human error, we can wreak much destruction – and our power to do so grows by the year.

Hence the life-changing idea of Chukat: we are dust of the earth but there is within us the breath of God. We fail, but we can still achieve greatness. We die, but the best part of us lives on.

The Hasidic master R. Simcha Bunim of Peshisckhe said we should each have two pockets. In one should be a note saying: “I am but dust and ashes.”[10] In the other should be a note saying: “For my sake was the world created.”[11] Life lives in the tension between our physical smallness and our spiritual greatness, the brevity of life and the eternity of the faith by which we live. Defeat, despair and a sense of tragedy are always premature. Life is short, but when we lift our eyes to heaven, we walk tall.

[1] Megillah 13b; Midrash Sechel Tov, Shemot 3:1.

[2] Or as we might put it today: from the same source of life, written in the same genetic code, as everything else that lives.

[3] See the essay on ‘Women and the Exodus,’ in *The Rabbi Sacks Haggadah*, 117-121.

[4] See Tolstoy’s parable of the traveller hiding in a well, in his *Confessions*; and his short story, ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich.’ See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, 1973.

[5] Num. 20:1-13.

[6] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125.

[7] Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World?*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

[8] I owe these quotes to Raymond Tallis, ‘You chemical scum, you,’ in his *Reflections of a Metaphysical Flaneur*, Acumen, 2013.

[9] Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus*, Harvill Secker, 2016, 395.

[10] Gen. 18:27.

[11] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL “They shall take for you a red heifer, perfect” (19:2)

Included in “perfect” is also the requirement that also the color should be perfect without any hairs of a different color. Here we see the possibility of understanding this mystifying procedure of the purification by the Parah Adumah. This heifer, with a beautiful coat of red hair without a blemish even in the perfection of its color, was therefore a rarity, and it was so expensive that its owner became wealthy when he sold it to the public use (Kiddushin 31A).

Yet despite its striking beauty, this enormously costly creature could accomplish nothing of the purification procedure while it was still in a state of its beauty. Only after slaughtering it and then burning it into ashes could it achieve the purpose of purifying the unclean person or object.

This symbolizes a vastly important parallel: The Israelite is to Hashem the most precious object in the world. Even one Israelite is more valuable to Hashem than the entire Universe (“For my sake the world was created” – Sanhedrin 37A). Yet throughout his life he is susceptible to sin or even to entire self-ruination, no matter how perfect he is. The most beautifully righteous man becomes truly purified only when he dies and is interred and his body turns to ashes, exactly like the Parah Adumah.

“Greater are the righteous after their death, more than in their lifetime” (Hullin 7B) and the procedure of the Parah Adumah comes to emphasize the importance of the Afterlife as the culmination of all men’s efforts to gain true excellence in the eyes of Hashem. The righteous, that bask in the splendor of Hashem’s favor, perceive that their death and destruction of their bodies constituted the final purification.

The Israelite individual is the most precious object in the entire Universe while he is alive. Yet his ultimate and most sublime excellence is achieved when he becomes ashes in the earth. Quoted from “Journey Into Greatness” by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZTL