

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Chukat)

The sport of 'rappelling' or 'sneppling' as it is known in Israel, is the art of descending from a cliff by sliding down a rope which is sunken into the mountain above with stakes.

Last week our daughter celebrated her twentieth birthday and her brothers decided to plan a surprise birthday for her. So they told her she should keep Saturday night (Motzaei Shabbat) free, and having gathered a bunch of their and her friends, proceeded to blindfold her and take her to a cliff at the Northern edge of Efrat where they had arranged: 'Ta'da!' the chance to rappel down the side of the cliff into a dark abyss with all of her friends watching (only one other girl was brave enough to participate...).

It is one thing to be doing this in the army, or even to tackle such an adventure out of necessity. But lowering yourself over a cliff while risking a hundred-foot drop, is not exactly my idea of 'fun'. We were obviously not invited, but to be honest my wife and I did not think this was a particularly great idea. And yet, there is something to be said for allowing our children to push the envelope and perhaps even conquer their fears, and certainly for the tremendous sense of self-esteem that comes with such an experience.

And make no mistake about it: we are speaking of pure, raw fear. Not so much in the actual descent as in the initial instant of lowering oneself over the side of a cliff. There is a moment, when you are still at the top, and it is all ahead of you, that you have to trust in the ropes, and the equipment, and the instructor directing you, and you have to lean way back over the abyss relying on a single rope to save you from falling over the cliff to the rocks far below. I remember, years ago, watching our children rappel at a young age whilst we were on a family vacation.

It was nothing short of inspiring to watch the look of sheer terror on the kids' faces as they leaned back and battled their fears, determined to overcome them and take this leap of faith on a rope into emptiness.... And it was one of the more challenging moments we experienced as parents, to simply 'let go' knowing they were now on their own....

Chukat, the portion read overseas this week, is essentially the portion in which we transition from the period of time immediately following the grand Exodus from Egypt, to the generation about to enter the land of Israel.

Miriam, the elder sister of Moshe passes away, as does Moshe's brother Aaron.

Alongside all this, Moshe (along with Aaron) seems to make the greatest mistake of his life, resulting in G-d's tragic decision not to allow them into the land of Israel.

They will die in the desert never having realized their dream of leading the Jewish people into their land as free men.

But what remains unclear is exactly what this terrible transgression, was? What caused G-d to deny his most beloved servant Moshe, the opportunity to enter the land of Israel?

The Torah shares with us (Bamidbar (Numbers) 20; 1-13) that the people came to the desert of *Tzin* and there was no water. So they cried out against Moshe and Aaron demanding water and wondered why they had ever left Egypt, even suggesting that slavery in Egypt might have been preferable to dying of thirst in the desert.

Moshe and Aaron adjourn to the entrance of the tent of meeting (the *Ohel Moed*) whereupon G-d tells Moshe to take his staff (or perhaps Aaron's staff?), gather the people, and speak to a (the?) rock at which point water will be forthcoming.

Inexplicably, Moshe, after gathering the people along with Aaron, seems to castigate the people, calling them 'rebels' after which he strikes the rock not once, but twice, whereupon water flows forth from the rock and the people are saved.

But G-d does not seem to think this is such a happy ending, and tells Moshe and Aaron (ibid. v. 12) by virtue of the fact that they (Moshe and Aaron!) did not believe in G-d and did not sanctify Him in the Jewish people's eyes, they will not bring this people into the land....

So... what just happened?

There are a number of different opinions as to what went wrong but none seem to measure up to the resulting consequence.

Rashi suggests that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it which would have been a much greater sanctification of G-d's name. But what does that have to do with Moshe's punishment of not being allowed to enter the land?

The **Ramban** (Nachmanides) suggests Moshe erred by implying that he and Aaron were bringing forth the water allowing people to miss the fact that the water was coming from G-d.... But one wonders whether Moshe could have really thought that and why the people's possible misperception would result in such a severe consequence?

And the **Rambam** (Maimonides; Intro to *Pirkei Avot* chap. 4) suggest Moshe's mistake was his anger; a leader cannot lose it with his charges.... But then, 'losing it' once after forty years of immeasurable patience would seem to actually be ... normal?

None of these seems to do justice to the result which seems so out of proportion.

Furthermore, if Rashi is correct and G-d somehow deems it so important that the people see Moshe talking to the rock, why does he tell him to take his staff? And why, upon seeing Moshe hitting the rock, could G-d not just TELL Moshe 'U need to speak to the rock'?!

If it was so important for the people to see Moshe speaking to, rather than hitting the rock, Hashem (G-d) could most certainly have orchestrated such an event.

Perhaps we might suggest a different way of looking at this story.

Moshe hits the rock exactly as he was meant to, and that was exactly the point of the entire exercise. In fact, one might consider that it was not that the people who were meant to see Moshe speaking to the rock, but rather Moshe and Aaron who were meant to see that he wouldn't.

It would be difficult to view this story (and for that matter any story in the Torah) as one which unfolded contrary to Hashem (G-d)'s will. Hashem tells Moshe to take the staff knowing full well that he would

end up hitting the rock, because that is what happens. And if Hashem really did not want Moshe to hit the rock then He would not have sent him (and Aaron) with the staff. Moshe was always meant to hit the rock. And how do we know that? Because that is exactly what happened!

Of course, that would mean that Moshe and Aaron were never meant to enter the land of Israel with the Jewish people. Moshe and Aaron were the leadership the Jewish people needed when it was time for them to leave Israel, and they did indeed measure up to the incredible challenge such a task represented. But now it seems, the people need something else; why?

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 8a and *Baba Basra* 75a) in explaining why Moshe cannot bring the Jewish people into the land of Israel and that role will instead be given to Yehoshua (Joshua) explains that 'Moshe is like the sun, and Yehoshua is like the moon'.

The Jewish people were in absolute awe of Moshe. After all, Moshe was their direct conduit to G-d Himself! Indeed, when Moshe came back down from Mt. Sinai, they could not look at him because his face shone (Shemot (Exodus) 34:29-20) and he had to cover his face with a veil (ibid. 34:33). And this reflected the period of the Jews in the desert.

In the desert Hashem was everywhere, and miracles abounded. Manna fell from heaven every day, water flowed from a miraculous well, the people were protected by clouds of glory such that even their clothing did not wear out in forty years (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 8:4) and pillars of fire and cloud accompanied them on their journeys; indeed, Hashem was everywhere they looked. And this was critical to the Jews' Exodus from Egypt; in Egypt, as slaves it was the Master, the Egyptian taskmaster, who was everywhere and upon whom everything depended. In the desert, the Jewish people learned that the true source of reality and substance and goodness was not Egypt but G-d.

But of course, this created another problem, because if Hashem (G-d) is everywhere, then where am I? What does it matter what we do if G-d runs the world? You see this often with the children of very successful people; the parents are so 'everywhere' there is no room for the child, so eventually the child rebels essentially saying 'here I am'; make room for me!

Successful parents (as opposed to successful people who happen to be parents) understand that gradually they need to step back and allow the child to grow and 'become' on his or her own. Indeed, the Jews in the desert cannot seem to stop complaining and rebelling, as if to say 'here we are;' but once the Jewish people enter Israel under the leadership of Yehoshua the rebellions stop. In all of the book of Yehoshua which begins thirty days after Moshe's death and the end of the Torah, the people do not complain once!

Moshe comes as close as a human being can to representing G-d Himself, and he is the faithful conduit to pass on Torah from G-d directly to the Jewish people without effecting the Torah he was transmitting, so he is like the sun. Moshe (and with him, of the same generation, Miriam and Aaron) is like the sun, and you can't look at the sun; its light is too powerful.

Yehoshua on the other hand, who receives the tradition from Moshe, is reflected light, like the Moon. You can look at the moon which represents the idea that there is room for us, to make a difference. When the moon is out and the sun is hidden, you can see the stars....

So here we are, in the transitional moment of the Jewish people, and as the commentaries make clear (e.g. see **Rashi** ibid. 20:1) the first generation who left Egypt have all passed on; Moshe and Aaron are now speaking to the second generation, born in the desert.

So Hashem orchestrates this moment to help Moshe and Aaron understand why they will not be entering Israel with the Jewish people; because the Jewish people need to 'become'.

Judaism believes that we have an impact to make in this world, and despite the fact that Hashem is the source of reality, Hashem wants us to be his partners in making a better world; we make a difference.

Indeed, after this story, Moshe will send spies to *Yaazer* and the Jewish people will conquer the kingdoms of Sichon and Og, as they gradually transition to taking ownership of their destiny and preparing for the challenging transition that lies ahead: entering and conquering the land of Israel and creating a model society which will truly be a 'light unto the nations'.

And on a personal level, this week's portion is an opportune time to ask ourselves where and how we need to take more control of our destiny and responsibility for how we can be a part, of making a better world....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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