



ישיבת הר עציון

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Selected and Adapted by Rabbi Dov Karoll

Quote from the Rosh Yeshiva

The message of our parasha [para aduma, chapter 19] is twofold. On the one hand, we must not think that we know and understand all of the Torah. It is forever beyond us and we must accept it as a decree from God. On the other hand, we must not despair or give up on grappling with the questions and uncertainties that arise from observance of Torah and its commandments. We must accept God's decree and, at the same time, exert ourselves to the utmost in the tent of Torah in order to deepen our understanding of it to the extent possible.

-Harav Yehuda Amital zt"l

Parashat Chukat Study is Greater, for Study Leads to Action

By Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein



Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-chukat/chukat-study-greater-study-leads-action>

Our parasha records the song of the well (Bamidbar 21:17-20):

Then sang Israel this song: Spring up, O well, sing you to it. The well, which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people delved, with the scepter, & with their staves. And from the wilderness to Matana; & from Matana to Nachaliel; & from Nachaliel to Bamot; & from Bamot to the valley that is in the field of Moav by the top of Pisga, which looks down upon the desert.

Midrash Rabba (ad loc.) states that there were 3 things that Moshe "taught" to God and God accepted from him:

Another explanation: "Then sang Israel" – This is 1 of the 3 things that Moshe said before the Holy One, blessed be He, and God said [back] to him: You have taught Me.

He said before Him: Master of the universe, from where do Israel know what they did [was wrong]? Did they not grow up in Egypt, and all of Egypt were idolaters? And when You gave the Torah, You did not give it to them, and they were not even standing there... (see Shemot 20:17). And You gave it only to me... (see 20:1). And when You gave the statements [the Ten Commandments], You did not give [them] to them. You did not say: "I am the Lord Your (plural) God," but rather: "I am the Lord your (singular) God" (20:1). You said it to me. Did I sin? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: By your life, you have spoken well. You have taught Me. From now on, I will say: "I am the Lord your (plural) God."

The second is when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" (Sh. 20:4), Moshe said: Master of the universe, how many evildoers fathered righteous ones. Should they be removed for the iniquities of their fathers? Terach was an idolater, but his son Avraham was righteous.... Is it proper that the righteous should be struck for the iniquities of their fathers? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You have taught Me. By your life, I will nullify My words & preserve your words, as it is stated: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers" (Dev. 24:16). And by your life, I will write [this] in your name, as it is stated: "According to that which is written in the book of the law of Moshe, which God commanded, [The fathers shall not be put to death for the children]" (Il Mel. 14:6).

The third one is when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Wage war against Sichon; even if he does not want to fight you, wage war against him, as it is stated: "Rise you up, take your journey, & pass over the valley of Arnon" (Dev. 2:24). But Moshe did not do that. What is written above: "And I sent messengers" (2:26). The Holy One... said to him: By your life, nullify My words, & preserve your words, as it is stated: "When you draw near to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it" (20:10).

This is an exceedingly daring Midrash that is filled with difficulty. How could Moshe have taught God something, as He is all-knowing?

A Midrash on the verse, “Justice, justice you shall pursue” (Dev. 16:20), teaches that there is heavenly, Divine justice & earthly, human justice. This seems to be the key to solving our question. Moshe disagreed not about the correctness of God’s words per se as theoretical ideas, but about their application in the world of human action. We will briefly review the examples the Midrash cites.

First, the world of absolute truths dictates, “I am the Lord your God” in the singular, addressing the entire people as a single entity. Moshe recognizes this, but he claims that in practice, this creates an educational problem, so it is preferable to say, “I am the Lord your God” in the plural. Otherwise, the people are liable to understand that the command is directed at Moshe alone. God agrees with this position and accepts the human perspective.

Similarly, it is in fact just to visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the sons. However, such a situation can cause a psychological problem. People born to evil parents may despair, since they start out in an inferior position, which is why Moshe argues that punishing children for the sins of their parents should not be carried out in practice. God agrees to this as well and accepts the human point of view.

The same is true regarding the third example, relating to Sichon. Sichon was a cruel, tyrannical ruler who conquered territories indiscriminately. In terms of pure truth, it would have served him right for the people of Israel to wage war against him, but Moshe argued that this would lead to an educational-psychological problem. It would lead the people to think that this was the optimal course of action in all situations, which is not the case, for in general, a peaceful solution should be pursued first. Once again, God accepts the human perspective.

We can learn a general lesson from here. A commander, educator or rabbi should be attentive to the needs & problems of his trainees, students & followers. Based on this principle, God listens to Moshe’s arguments in these cases, & ultimately accepts them.

In this context, there is a gap between Halakha and reality. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his *Halakhic Man*, writes that halakhic man often occupies himself with the Halakha itself, without demonstrating interest in the real world, which he perceives as at best an application of the world of ideas.

When halakhic man comes across a spring bubbling quietly, he already possesses a fixed, a priori relationship with this real phenomenon: the complex of laws regarding the halakhic construct of a spring. The spring is fit for the immersion of a zav (a man with a discharge); it may serve as mei chatat (waters of expiation); it purifies with flowing water; it does not require a fixed quantity of 40 se’ahs, etc. When halakhic man approaches a real spring, he gazes at it and carefully examines its nature. He possesses, a priori, ideal principles and precepts which establish the character of the spring as a halakhic construct, and he uses the statutes for the purpose of determining normative law: does the real spring correspond to the requirements of the ideal Halakha or not? (HM, p. 20)

This tension, between the halakhic idea and worldly reality, finds expression in other cases as well. Thus, for example, the Ramban and the Tosafot disagree about the exemption from monetary liability granted for damages caused due to circumstances beyond a person’s control. The Ramban has a more principled position and expounds a theoretical distinction. He grants a very limited exemption from payment in cases of circumstances beyond one’s control. In contrast, the Tosafot propose a realistic distinction, which greatly expands the monetary exemption in cases of circumstances beyond a person’s control.

Once when we were learning tractate Bava Kama, I invited a friend, an expert on Jewish Law, to speak in the Yeshiva about the application of the laws that we had studied in contemporary rabbinical courts. He refused to come for fear that our students would be disappointed by the reality. He asserted that in the realm of torts, unlike in other areas, the gaps between the beit midrash and the beit din were exceedingly great. In the context of our discussion, he mentioned the view of the Tosafot, noting that the position of the Ramban does not exist. He explained that while such a position exists in the Yeshiva, it could never have been codified as the law, because society cannot exist if it follows it. Other examples of this tension are embodied in certain rules of halakhic decision-making, i.e., pressing circumstances, major loss, and the like. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that these considerations are not allowances to waive halakha in certain cases, but rather they are internal halakhic considerations.

Thus, there is a long-standing tradition of lenient rulings regarding agunot, women who are stuck in their marriages because they cannot obtain a bill of divorce. Responsa Noda bi-Yehuda (first series, EH 72) brings several possible justifications for allowing a certain woman to remarry, but when they are all rejected, the woman remains in her forbidden state. It is related that several years later, the Noda bi-Yehuda went to the woman’s grave to ask for forgiveness, although he was right from a halakhic perspective. Another case is brought in Responsa ha-Rama (125), regarding an orphan girl who was married on Shabbat. He explains there at

length why this is halakhically permitted. From all of this we see the application of the aforementioned perception of tension – the world of halakhic decision-making takes reality into account, but only through halakhic glasses.

In this context, it may be noted that the common understanding of the incident involving Akhnai's oven (Bava Metzia 59b) is that the conclusion of the story is that the sages of each generation are the final arbiters of the Halakha. Rav Amital, zt"l, had a wonderful explanation of the story. He explained that Akhnai's oven was actually an oven that was built piecemeal, composed of a pile of unrelated parts. Rabbi Eliezer, as an ideological purist, did not recognize it as a vessel. Only a well-constructed oven could be considered a vessel. In contrast, the Sages argued that we must consider the fact that people relate to it as a vessel and use it as one. The Halakha was decided in accordance with the view of the Sages.

To summarize, it may be argued that Halakha aggravates the friction between the world of ideas and reality. The halakhic idea cannot be fully realized in material reality. Reality is material, so it has a built-in flaw. Halakha brings pure ideas into this world and implements them in reality. It is in this context of the essential deficiency of matter that the idea of a red heifer should be understood.

As stated, matter is inherently defective in that it will end in death, which expresses the failure of matter in the most fundamental manner. However, there is a certain repair even of death – the red heifer. The red heifer is matter of the most perfect kind – “a red heifer, faultless, without blemish, and upon which never came a yoke” (Bam. 19:2). God commands that the repair of the fundamental weakness of matter – death & the impurity of a corpse – can be brought about by way of the most perfect matter. Even in the next world there will be repair of the world of matter, but the red heifer is a repair from within the world of matter. This is the idea of the red heifer. [This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Chukat, 5777. Summarized by Aviad Brestel, Translated by David Strauss.]

Parashat Chukat The Sin at Mei Meriva

Based on an article by Harav Yaakov Medan

Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-chukat/chukat-sin-mei-meriva>



When was the sin of Mei Meriva committed?

And the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Tzin in the first month; & the people abode in Kadesh; & Miryam died there, & was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation; & they assembled themselves together against Moshe & against Aharon. And the people strove with Moshe, & spoke, saying: “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! And why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle? And why have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in to this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.” And Moshe & Aharon went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tent of meeting, & fell upon their faces; & the glory of the Lord appeared to them. (Bam. 20:1-6) Because you rebelled against My commandment in the wilderness of Tzin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes. These are the waters of Merivat-Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin. (26:14)

In the Fortieth Year

The Torah tells us that Miryam's death and the sin at Mei Meriva took place in the first month (Nisan), but it does not tell us the year in which these events occurred. The commentators all agree that the sin was committed in the fortieth year, on the eve of Israel's entry into the land of Canaan:

“The whole congregation” – The congregation in its integrity, for those who were to die in the wilderness had already died, and these had been expressly mentioned for life. (Rashi)

In various formulations, Rashbam Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Rabbeinu Bechayei and Abravanel also express this view, and it is also similar to what is expressed in Seder Olam Rabba (9) and in other midrashim.

On the assumption that the sin took place in the fortieth year, we well understand the juxtaposition of this story to the sending of messengers to the king of Edom on the eve of Israel's entry into the land, as well as the camping at Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin, at the foot of the ascent of Akrabim, on the border of the land of Canaan (see Shoftim 1:36).

This follows also from the list of Israel's journeys in the wilderness, where Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin is mentioned near the death of Aharon on Hor Ha-Har in the fortieth year (Bamidbar 33:36-38):

And they journeyed from Etzyon-Gever and pitched in the wilderness of Tzin, the same is Kadesh. And they journeyed from Kadesh, and pitched in Hor Ha-Har, in the edge of the land of Edom. And Aharon the priest went up to Hor Ha-Har at the command of the Lord, and died there, in the fortieth year.

If we accept this interpretive assumption that the Torah has shifted to the 40th year, we must explain why the Torah skipped over 38 years. We assume that the episode of Korach took place close to the time of the sin of the spies, during the 2nd year, as I explained elsewhere. The section of the red heifer, which separates between the incident involving Korach & the death of Miryam & the sin of Mei Meriva, had been given earlier, at the time of the dedication of the Mishkan at the beginning of the 2nd year, as I explained elsewhere. Here, immediately afterwards, we move directly to the 40th year. What is the meaning of this empty vacuum of time?

Rashi (Devarim 2:16) attributes this to the sin of the spies, in the wake of which God did not speak with Moshe until the fortieth year, after all the people who sinned together with the spies had died. For this reason, no additional chapters of the Torah were given over the course of those 38 years.

An objection may be raised against Rashi that in the framework of the incident involving Korach, which (according to most commentators) took place after the sin of the spies, God spoke to Moshe and to the people several times, and even gave them commandments for future generations.

It is possible that it was the incident involving Korach that caused the departure of the Divine utterance for 38 years, primarily because it involved a challenge to the truth of the prophecy of Moshe upon which all of God's Torah depends. God may have continued to speak to Moshe during those 38 years in the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, as was the case following the sin of the golden calf (see Shemot 33:7-11), but is not written in the Torah, because the people did not merit to hear the words of God, due to the challenge that they had posed to Moshe's prophecy. The return of Aharon's rod to the Tent of the Testimony expressed the departure of God's words from between the 2 keruvim, as I explained elsewhere.

In the Third Year Following the Exodus

The interpretive possibility that we presented, that the sin at Mei Meriva was committed in the 40th year, has many advantages, most importantly the interpretive tradition inherent in it. But it leaves us with 2 difficulties, 1 interpretive & the other substantive (20:3):

And the people strove with Moshe, & spoke, saying: "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord." To what death are these complainers referring? Are they referring to the deaths of their fathers over the course of their 38-year journey through the wilderness? Why, then, did they say, "our brothers," and not "our fathers"? Furthermore, is it appropriate to refer to the slow deaths of the generation of the wilderness as "perishing before the Lord"?

They may be referring to what was stated following the deaths of the company of Korach (17:27-28):

And the children of Israel spoke to Moshe, saying: "Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Every one that comes near, that comes near to the Mishkan of the Lord, is to die; shall we wholly perish?"

That the complainers at Mei Meriva should refer to the deaths of the company of Korach 38 years earlier, when in the interim they experienced the deaths of the 600,00 members of the generation of the wilderness, is puzzling.

Let us then assume for a moment that the complaints at Mei Meriva were made shortly after the deaths of the company of Korach, and that the "first month" that is mentioned regarding the journey to Mei Meriva is the first month of the third year to the exodus from Egypt. The Torah does not mention that it is the third year, because it immediately followed the second year, during which all of the previous events mentioned in the book of Bamidbar took place. The incident at Mei Meriva, on this possibility, was part of the series of sins of Tav'era, Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, the spies, the ma'apilim, and the company of Korach.

Another objection may be raised against the conventional interpretation that the sin at Mei Meriva took place in the fortieth year, and that for the previous 38 years God did not speak to Moshe and the people: For 38 years, the people of Israel wandered from place to place in the sweltering wilderness. Did they not complain during those years even once? Were they not attacked by occasional enemies, bandits, wild beasts, heat, hunger, and thirst? And if such difficulties arose but the Torah ignored them, did Moshe succeed with his own leadership to silence the complaints of the desperate and slowly dying people, without God answering him and guiding him with His salvation?

Along with these 2 questions, let us add another exegetical remark: Rashi explains that "the whole congregation" refers to the 2nd generation, after the entire generation of the wilderness had died. The camp at Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin marked the border between the 2 generations. The Torah, however, emphasizes a different place served as this boundary line: the Zered brook, which

was far from the wilderness of Tzin, on the border of Moav after Israel circumvented the land of Edom from the west, the south, and the east. When the people of Israel crossed the Zered brook, they entered the land of Sichon the king of the Amorites, which they would later conquer, and the generation of the wilderness should have died out before they crossed this brook (Devarim 2:13-18):

“Now rise up, and get you over the Zered brook.” And we went over the Zered brook. And the days in which we came from Kadesh-Barnea until we were come over the Zered brook were 38 years; until all the generation, even the men of war, were consumed from the midst of the camp, as the Lord swore to them. Moreover the hand of the Lord was against them, to discomfit them from the midst of the camp, until they were consumed. So it came to pass, when all the men of war were consumed and dead from among the people, that the Lord spoke to me saying: “You are this day to pass over the border of Moav, even Ar.”

On my proposal, the people of Israel went from Ritma (where the sin involving the spies took place; see Rashi) to Kadesh in the Tzin desert, a trip of 18 journeys (see Bam. 33), in the 2nd year, & they encamped in Kadesh in the Tzin desert at the foot of the mountain of the Amorites and the Land of Israel for 37 years in a permanent, orderly camp near Einot Tzin (a location known to us today). God did not speak to Moshe and Aharon after He rebuked them in Mei Meriva for not having sanctified Him, but life in the camp went on in an orderly manner. There was water & manna until the 40th year, which started with Moshe’s request of the king of Edom to pass through his land. There Miryam died at the beginning of their encampment, & there, in Hor Ha-Har, Aharon died 37 years later.

According to this proposal, there is another verse whose meaning changes (Devarim 1:46-2:1):

So you abode in Kadesh many days, according to the days that you abode there. Then we turned, and took our journey into the wilderness by the way to the Sea of Suf, as the Lord spoke to me; and we compassed Mount Seir many days.

The Ibn Ezra and the Chizkuni understand that the reference is to Kadesh-Barnea in the Sinai wilderness west of the Negev, about the place from which the spies set off in the second year. The people of Israel remained there for a long time. According to the Seder Olam (8) and Rashi (Devarim, ad loc.), they remained in Kadesh-Barnea for 19 years, and another 19 years they moved about and encompassed Mount Seir (Rashi does not seem to distinguish between Kadesh-Barnea and Kadesh of Tzin). The reference seems to be to the “High Mountain Region,” a range of mountains in southern Sinai.

On our proposal, the Kadesh mentioned is Kadesh in the wilderness of Tzin in the eastern Negev, and therefore it is not called Kadesh-Barnea, but merely Kadesh. The aforementioned journey by the way to the Sea of Suf is the long route that they were forced to take to go around the land of Edom in the fortieth year, after the king of Edom refused their request to enter his land.

As stated above, there are also great advantages to the accepted understanding that the sin of Mei Meriva was committed in the 40th year, & I leave it to the reader to decide between the 2 interpretations. (Translated by David Strauss)

The Thought of Rav Kook

Lesson 9 – Rav Kook’s Approach to Death (Part 2)

By Rav Hillel Rachmani

Based on: <https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/rav-kook/rav-kooks-approach-death-part-2>



We ended last week’s article by mentioning three stages or levels (this world, the world of death and the resurrection of the dead) that Rav Kook discusses. Let me give an example to illustrate these 3 levels.

Imagine a politician whose life centers around politics. One day, he loses his position. At first, he feels as though he’s died. Gradually though, he discovers the world of spirit, of books and learning. After a while, he looks back in disgust at the world of politics, amazed that this superficial world ever attracted him. And then, one day he is called to return and lead the party. Let us imagine that he accepts. His return is different than before. What is central and what is peripheral has been completely transformed.

These 3 stages are similar to the 3 stages of life. The first is where the body is dominant and occupies central stage. The second stage, where there is separation, allows the soul to be discovered. The third stage represents the return, where the soul returns to the body and controls it.

In chapter 41, Rav Kook describes how the average man attempts to fight death. Rav Kook declares that all man’s efforts are aimed at defeating death. This is reminiscent of the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who begins his work, The Star of Redemption, with the statement that all philosophizing arises from the fear of death. Rosenzweig mocks the consolation which philosophy offers to man. Philosophy tries to encourage him by pointing to the eternity of spiritual values, implying that death is not the final word. Rosenzweig argues that the individual can take no comfort in that, for he asks about himself, as an individual – what will be with me?

What is Rav Kook's response?

One thing, Rav Kook says, is clear. The usual attempts to fight death are futile. Man attempts to fight death by maximizing his enjoyment of life, by involving himself ever deeper in the experiences of life. The result is that he deepens his commitment precisely in the material aspects of life, precisely in those aspects which death will attack and destroy. Man cannot elude the recognition that the beauty which he worships is destined to fade, the things he acquires are transitory, and therefore that the repression of death cannot succeed. Death cannot be fought in this manner. The solution is in maximizing the soul, "from its inner source."

Man's occupation with the spiritual awakens the spiritual within him. From without, the spiritual life appears dead, empty. But the spiritual man discovers the vitality, the reality, the power, and the fullness of spirituality. Man develops confidence in the spirituality with which he is occupied. The sacred awakens the inner qualities of the man who directs himself towards it, and he gradually becomes committed to the inner, spiritual aspect of existence. Man's sense of proportion changes. He discovers a sense of depth to his life, where external things derive value from the extent they are connected to the inner world, to the world of holiness.

The inner aspects of life are spiritual, & also universal. From the external perspective, every particular stands alone. Every individual man is separated from his fellow. From the spiritual perspective, however, a man begins to perceive the underlying unity of existence. In the same manner that the scientist discovers that the multiplicity of data is based on a few general principles, spiritual man uncovers the unity of which we each are the particular manifestations. Sometimes, when I know someone well, I understand his particular responses differently than other people do. A stranger perceives only the particular response. I, who know him, grasp how that response flows from the unity of his personality, & the specific response has a completely different significance for me.

Spiritual man penetrates the depths of existence and discovers eventually his own unity with the whole of reality. The deepest perception, to which such a man aspires, is to perceive God as the source of existence, who permeates and is revealed in every one of its particulars. A depth-perception of this sort has room for everything, including the external material world of particulars. Rav Kook declares that the depth-perception includes a complete world, one of soul-in-body. Therefore he states (42), "Why should not the soul cleave to the body in order to animate it eternally?"

Rav Kook aspires to an exalted world of unity, but he knows that first we must uncover the inner spiritual world. In other words, the goal is that man live a life of soul-in-body; however, not one of dependence on the body, but one of centrality of the soul.

Up to this point, we have taken the path of turning toward the inner life of man in order to awaken the spiritual side of his existence.

Rav Kook also points out that the opposition to the internal life is sin. Sin arises from a debased will. A debased will is comprised of man's cravings and lusts. Lust is an alienated will, alienated from the true depths of the ego, an external will, physical, impersonal. A man's lust is a powerful force, but not an inner force. To the extent that man's lusts are dominant, there exists an alienation between the deep aspect of his existence, between his soul, and the external aspect, his body. If we wish to re-create the unity of body and soul, we must bring his will to act in accord with the inner direction – and the inner direction of a holy individual is directed to the profoundest depths – to God. The conclusion is that the unified personality is one who binds within itself the internal and external, centered on the internal world – and in this way it overcomes death. This is the great "tikkun," the great rectification, to which Rav Kook aspires. He knows that no single individual can rectify the original sin, and that therefore a whole series of rectifications are necessary, but the path, the direction, is clear.

It is noteworthy that Rav Kook is aware of the danger for the average man in emphasizing the spiritual. He states that in our day, love of life stems from the imaginary fear of death. In other words, the feeling of fear of death as oblivion provides the energy and the power of the life in this world. Rav Kook is hinting at the fact that in Eastern cultures a preoccupation with the spiritual often results in a disregard for human life, for life in this world.

From this, it follows that there is a benefit in the distorted conception of death held by man. Hence, the lengthy educational process we have outlined requires a deep, profound struggle. To illustrate this, let me return to our example of the politician from earlier. Our politician returns finally to the life of politics. We continue to wonder, however – can he really, seriously return to his previous life? Is it not superficial and trivial in his eyes?

The educational process we are describing has as its goal that the external world shall be indeed secondary in importance, relative to the internal, but nonetheless be imbued with importance, with value and mission. Our politician will perform his job with seriousness and commitment – based, this time, on an enthusiasm for values and not personal honor and prestige.

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