

Parashat Chukat: The Secret of Abra Cadabra

Dear Friends,

Parashat Chukat is one of the most profound parashot in the Torah! So many life lessons can be found in it, but it is not without its share of pain: Miriam and Aharon pass away in the arid wilderness, and Moshe, after striking the rock, is told that he, too, will die soon. So close, and yet so far from the Promised Land.

Between the previous parasha - Sh'lach Lecha - and this one, 38 years pass. For us it is a matter of a few pages in the story, but for them every day, every week, every month, and every year were undoubtedly endless.

Two great miracles occur in this parasha. More precisely, one miracle happens and the other one almost does, and they are both connected to the infamous complaints about the lack of water.

This shortage of water accompanies the entire journey of Bnei Yisrael, not just in the wilderness, but also the journeys of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Only in Egypt there is never a shortage of water! But the water of the Nile River was not the life-giving water that Bnei Yisrael required. The Nile actually represents death.

Because the Torah is not a historical drama but a book about the inner truth of creation, the thirst is not a physical one. The thirst repeats itself because it relates the deep yearning that exists within each of us, the longing for a connection to the source of life, the quest to return to the comforting oneness from which we all came (or from which we were all banished, according to the Torah) when we arrived in the world.

Therefore, anyone who is prepared to look deeply into the source of all human anguish will see that this thirst for water is a very accurate metaphor for our basic existential experience.

The Parsha relates two stories of thirst. The first is familiar, the second less so. If you have time, you are welcome to read them. If not, they can be skipped.

“The entire People of Israel arrived at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon [of the fortieth year], and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the LORD! Why have you brought the LORD’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you

make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the LORD appeared to them, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the staff and assemble the community, and before their very eyes you shall speak to the rock, and it shall yield its water. Thus you shall bring forth water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their flocks." Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Out came copious water, and the community and their flocks drank." (Bamidbar 20:1-13)

"They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." The LORD sent seraph serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a seraph figure and mount it on a high pole. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover." Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a pole; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the copper serpent and recover." (Bamidbar 21:4-9)

I wish to draw two drops of life-giving water from these stories this week, although there are many more to be had.

1. Life-giving water is a matter of awareness, not something physical. Hence we are called upon to look "up", or, if you like, into the deep, to the sustaining source of all life.
2. Although it is possible to attain what we wish for by the use of physical strength - striking the rock did, indeed, bring forth water - but such achievements are temporary and fleeting. How quickly are Bnei Yisrael thirsty again.

The great secret of the God of Israel, the God of Creation, is that everything came into being through speech. This is why the ancient Hebrew magical formula (written in Aramaic) which has become so famous, is Abra Cadabra, meaning "I will create through speech." Speech is the root of reality.

The one who represents this power of speech is Miriam the Prophetess, Moshe's sister. According to the Midrash, she spoke to her parents and convinced them to have another child at a time when male children were destined to be killed. She accompanied Moshe's ark when it was put in the water - that lethal water - and she convinced Pharaoh's daughter to take Moshe to his mother to nurse him until he was weaned, after which he would be

brought back to be raised as a prince. Miriam led the women of Israel in song and dance after the crossing of the sea. Miriam spoke about Moshe's Kushite woman (not necessarily negatively!), and she, who is an expert in the art of speaking, who knows how to create using the power of speech, is punished more harshly for using it in this way, by contracting (biblical) leprosy. Finally, our Sages tell us that Miriam is the well of life-giving water that accompanies Am Yisrael in the wilderness, and when she dies, there is an immediate shortage of water.

Miriam is a remnant of the ancient Hebrews that knew the secret of speech. This is a skill of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. All three of these men repeatedly change reality through speech.

Moshe is from the tribe of Levi, Yaakov's violent son. On his deathbed Yaakov makes an oath: **"Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of violence. Let not my soul be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen."** (Bereishit 29:5-6)

"Let not my soul be included in their council" - the secret of speech of the Divine soul is something they were unfamiliar with, because their weapons are tools of violence.

Moshe relies on the power of his staff throughout his life, albeit always in the name of justice. (The story of Levi and Shimon and their slaughter of all the men of Sh'chem was also in the name of justice!) Our first encounter with Moshe is when he kills a cruel Egyptian slave-master. Our second encounter is when he forcefully separates two Israelites who are quarrelling. The third time is in Midian, when Moshe uses impressive might to chase away the shepherds who are bothering the shepherdesses. He then single handedly removes the heavy stone covering the well using his own strength, a task that required several people. Later, he strikes his rod to bring the ten plagues on Egypt, he strikes the Red Sea until it splits, and on the same day, forty years before Parashat Chukat, he strikes a rock - this time commanded by God - and abundant water springs forth. A few months later he will cast the Tablets down in rage when he sees the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai.

It isn't Moshe's fault! Already at the Burning Bush he tells God with his typical Levite honesty that he is not a man of words! Speech is difficult for him.

And now, in the fortieth year of the journey in the wilderness, as they are about to enter the Promised Land, God initiates Moshe into the great secret: take your staff in your hands but don't use it - the staff is not the source of your true power - Moshe, it is time to speak. It is time to learn the secret of Divine creation: Abra Cadabra - creating through speech.

But Moshe strikes the rock in a fit of rage and frustration, not once, but twice! And indeed, violence worked - water gushes forth.

It is very important to refrain from passing judgment. We do not know the secret of speech! We don't even know the secret of Moshe's staff! If Moshe had difficulty speaking, we are

entirely mute by comparison. Most of what we say is insignificant - more like "blah, blah, blah."

Moshe, the man and the staff - the greatest of Israel's prophets - brought us to the threshold of the Promised Land.

Can we finally enter?

Can we entertain a whole new awareness - a shift from that of Moshe to that of Miriam? Are we ready to reclaim the ancient Israelite secret of creation, the secret of Abra Cadabra?

For three thousand years we have been interpreting the Torah of Moshe as well as Aaron's laws of Holiness. The time may have come to delve into the life-sustaining secrets of the Torah of Miriam, their beloved sister.

We can be the "People of the Book", a "Holy Nation", AND the "People of the Creative Speech".

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha