Parshat Chukat: Another Brick in the wall

By Noam Levenson

Parshat Chukat picks up forty years after the incident with Korach in the previous *parsha*. All those of the previous generation have died in the desert and we arrive ready to make our entrance into Hashem's promised land. The time is tumultuous. We must overcome the spiritual gap left as our leaders begin to die. First Miriam passes away. Miriam, our matriarch who led us in song towards freedom between the walls of the Red Sea, the woman who inspired hope throughout our wanderings in the desert. The water that was provided in her merit dries up and the Jews cry out for water. Hashem instructs Moshe and Aaron to gather the nation and speak to a rock to bring forth water. Moshe strikes the rock twice and water pours forth. There are multiple opinions as to why neither Aaron nor Moshe merited to enter the land. According to the *Midrash* brought by Rashi, they do not get to see the land for they did not "believe in Hashem" enough to speak to the rock and thus, failed to sanctify His name before the congregation. They were commanded to speak to the rock so that Israel might have said, "now this rock, which neither speaks nor hears and does not need subsistence, fulfills the will of Hashem, how much more so should we."[1] Instead, they struck it, *twice*.

Aaron dies next. Aaron, our first Kohen Gadol, earned his position by responding with happiness instead of jealously over Moshe's prophecy. His commitment to truth and peace brought shalom to homes and partnerships throughout *Am Yisrael*. He is taken up on Mount Hor and dies the death of a *tzaddik*. *Am Yisrael* is so distraught over his death that they refused to believe it. Moshe requests that Hashem show *Am Yisrael* a vision of Aaron lying on his deathbed. Only then do they believe.[2] The pillars of clouds that for so long protected and guided Israel in Aaron's merit disappear.

The nation stumbles. Tensions grow. "And the spirit of the people grew short with the road. 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 our soul is at its limit with this insubstantial food."[3] The complaining is a result of their spirits growing short. What does this mean? Rashi explains that these difficulties are the result of our "shortened spirit." "The expression of 'shortening of spirit' applies to anything that is difficult to a person, like a person upon whom something disturbing falls, and his state of mind is not broad enough to accept that thing, and he does not have room in his heart where the pain might abide."[4] Hats off Rashi. I have not read a better analysis of the human condition.

In short, here is how our consciousness works. Our consciousness is limitless. It is a piece of *ain sof.* But we limit our own minds, primarily with fear. We fear pain. Fear tells us where we are allowed to go, what we are allowed to do, who we are allowed to be, in order to avoid pain. We

are afraid of pain because we subconsciously don't think we can handle it. This *parsha* provides us the key to breaking free.

We live in fear because outside events hurt us. They make us feel anxious, stressed, angry, hurt, embarrassed, ashamed, or trapped. This is real pain and its all-consuming nature makes it often much more severe than any physical pain. What triggers the pain is different for us all. For some, it is judgment, for others failure. Each of us has these triggers – deep, unhealed wounds from the past. Like a dog that is constantly hit, we shy away from our source of pain. This is why we have fear. It protects us or at least tries to. Fear won't even let us even get close to a situation that *might* hurt us. It sparks feelings of fear and anxiety well before and we leap backward. These become our walls. *You can go here, but you can't go here*. Who you are and what you do are largely defined by your fears. As Michael Singer puts it, it is like an invisible electric fence. The dog quickly comes to understand the boundaries of the yard.[5] The consistent trigger for us in the desert is fear over sustenance. This makes sense. For many of us, anything that threatens our livelihood is a major trigger. In response to *Am Yisrael's* rebellion, Hashem sends snakes against the people. "They bit the people and many of the Israelites died."[6] Our fears infect us like venom. Its death is not immediate, but rather painful and long.

We should not be content to live a life defined by our fears. We should rather yearn to live a life defined by our capabilities, by our dreams and hopes and vision. We should leap out of bed each day, every day, and never wait for the world to give us a reason to do so.

How do we achieve this? How do we free ourselves from our fears? Hashem tells us. "Make for yourself a serpent and place it on a pole, and it will be that anyone who has been bitten will look at it and live."[7] How do we free ourselves, we look directly at that which hurts us. We must look our fears in the eyes. We do this simply by feeling what is there. Lean into whatever you are feeling instead of fighting against it. We fight against it by thinking about it, we fight against it by trying to solve it. Our analytical mind has long believed that it can control all of reality. But it can't. The longer it fights the more we suffer. We just need to feel the pain. Close your eyes and let it wash over you and feel your heart expand. You will see that you can actually feel all that you are afraid of.

When we confront our fears, we realize that we are capable of holding our pain. Instead of jumping backward, we simply feel it, hold it. As Rashi shows us, we are disturbed because we don't have room in our hearts where the pain might abide. We grow the room in our hearts by simply *feeling* exactly that which we are afraid of feeling. Slowly, we realize that the pain is actually manageable. Then, the embarrassment or failure or judgment that has ruled us suddenly has much less power. It can't kill us. In fact, the only power it has is that which we give it. As we let go of our fear, we remove a wall that for so long has defined our lives. Incredibly, when we let go of the fear, the pain disappears as well. One by one, we face our fears, and one by one we tear down our walls. We expand our spirits to encompass all that the world can throw at us.

People think that life is an act of control. We plan and worry, thinking that if we could only ever control *every* variable, we would be safe, happy, connected, and enough. It stops mattering what we have, we want the other thing. If we have fish we want meat. If we have manna we want watermelon. It's not about the food. It's about the control. We are like picky toddlers who simply want some *control* over our world. We mold and fold, twist and cushion each sharp turn of life to avoid those places that cause us pain. We are left with a life that is not our own, that will not behave, that bites us like a snake. If we live with this mentality, we simply waste our energy constantly trying to control the uncontrollable. We have defined the boundaries of our spirits and most of the world falls outside of it.

Rather, life can be an act of surrender. It is an act of finding safety and happiness and connectivity now and carrying it with us no matter what happens. That is what it means to have an expanded spirit. It means that we remain centered and balanced no matter what happens. Each time we notice disbalance and consciously rebalance, we expand our spirits. This does not mean passivity. Rather, it means living with wisdom. It takes great strength to live a life of balance. The man building walls laughs at those who leave themselves vulnerable. What he does not realize is that the enemy he is trying to keep out is within. His walls trap only him.

We must look at our snakes and realize that they too came from Hashem. We must understand that each person that annoys us, each car that cuts us off in traffic, each financial difficulty we endure, is simply a reminder to let go. Let go of that *old* self that needed life to be a certain way. Let go of those *old* fears that say that you can't handle anything that comes. The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that our challenges are only here to teach us. When we learn our lesson, the challenge can then disappear.

We must understand that Hashem created us for a specific purpose. Our greatest happiness is in fulfilling that purpose. But we only value that which we earn. So we must have fears to overcome so that we might have the satisfaction of *actually* having achieved something. Want a good marker that you are on a path towards your purpose? You'll feel fear. Are you afraid? Good. Move towards it. Does your heart ache? Good. Let it ache. Let it burn. It is a holy fire that is expanding your heart to hold all the pain you have for so long feared. Never ever ever give up. The pain is not forever. Ours is a holy purpose. We are to be a light onto the world, we are here to demonstrate to others what it means to be free, what it means to be alive. Have faith for the fall is never so far as we think. Hashem catches us far before.

An Optional Practice:
Walls are those places that inspire discomfort in us. They inspire fear and thus, we avoid them, mold our life to fit within their limits. Notice your walls throughout the day. You won't have to look hard. Ask Hashem to help make them clear to you. Then, notice why they are there. What are they protecting you from? Can you imagine going past them? What does it feel like in that place? Sit with that feeling – the feeling of being judged, or being embarrassed, etc. – for as long as you can. Watch how your mind fights very hard to protect you from that feeling. Look at each triggering moment throughout the day, not as an annoyance, but as a gift from Hashem for

you to chip a little bit more at the wall holding you back. Simply relax into the discomfort. It will hurt. But don't try to chase it away. Look at it with compassion.

A poem:

If I let down these
battle-marked walls
of myself,
where will I go?

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1. BaMidbar: Rashi: 20:12
2. BaMidbar: Rashi: 20:29
3. BaMidbar: 21:5
4. BaMidbar: Rashi: 21:4
5. Michael Singer: The Untethered Soul
6. BaMidbar: 21:6
7. BaMidbar: 21:8