

TORAHSCOPE: Chukat (Regulation)

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Numbers 19:1-22:1
Judges 11:1-33

“Speak to the Rock”

Chukat includes some very important scenes, as well as some curious instructions. It begins with the mystery of the red heifer purification rites,¹ and concludes with a series of military conflicts that precede Israel's entrance into the Promised Land.² Also recorded are the deaths of Moses' two siblings, Miriam³ and Aaron.⁴ Once again, we find that students of the Torah have a number of important object lessons to consider, when examining this *parashah*.

For millennia, the enigma of the red heifer has baffled Torah scholars, the Jewish Sages, and even a few modern-day theologians and scientists. This mysterious rite seems to be beyond much human ability to comprehend, and subsequently, the Israelites were probably to just to obey its prescriptions by faith. This they did in the ancient era, and they received the commensurate blessings of obedience.

In recent years, many have heard of the publicized birth of a red heifer named Melody. Some took this as a sign that the Temple could now be rebuilt, because the prerequisite sacrifice used for cleansing the Temple was now available. Of course, as many followed the frequent reports about the calf in anticipation of some dramatic end-time event, a few white hairs appeared on the young heifer. This disqualified her for the ritual, but did alert a considerable number of people worldwide, from a spectrum of backgrounds (even non-religious people), about this relatively obscure procedure. It also brought a number of evangelical Christians together, who believe it is only a matter of time before a qualified red heifer is born, and ultra Orthodox Jews, who believe it is only a matter of time before the Temple will be rebuilt. Both groups look to the coming of the Messiah.⁵

This small, inexplicable procedure lured thousands of Christians into the pages of the Torah and Tanakh, as many were prompted to seek answers to questions beyond their cognitive capability. *Some of them even got interested in their Hebraic Roots.*

Rather than dwell on the mysteries of the ashes of a sacrificed animal—as intriguing as they may be—*Chukat* reminds us of other things that relate more easily to the human condition, and some of the challenges we face as Believers. In the narrative of the Torah, thirty-eight years have passed since the failed attempt for Ancient Israel to enter the Promised Land without the protection of God (Numbers 13:26). The “Exodus generation” of the Israelites, who lacked the faith to take the land because they believed the bad report from the ten spies, had now died off:

“So the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD was destroyed” (Numbers 32:13).

Much of what we encounter in *Chukat*, sadly, after the succeeding generation of Israelites has buried their predecessors in the wilderness, is nearly identical to what caused the delay. The general patterns of murmuring and complaining have been passed down by the Exodus generation to their children and grandchildren. In spite of very serious consequences of their disbelief in God, the descendants of the Exodus generation face their own discontentment, bitterness, and rebellion.

¹ Numbers 19:1-22.

² Numbers 21:1-35.

³ Numbers 20:1-6.

⁴ Numbers 20:24-29.

⁵ Cf. “Cattlemen of the Apocalypse,” in Gershom Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp 7-29.

The iniquity of the fathers seems to have been passed down to the group that should be preparing to enter into the Promised Land (cf. Exodus 34:7).

A Water Problem, and Moses' Bad Works

As the narrative proceeds, the infamous incident at the waters of Meribah is detailed. Israel has arrived at the wilderness of Zin around Kadesh. Miriam dies and the lack of water becomes a crisis:

“There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, ‘If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why then have you brought the LORD’s assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink’” (Numbers 20:2-5).

When you read these complaints and sarcastic comments, you can almost hear the voices of the preceding generation who clamored very similar contentions (i.e., Exodus 14:11). It is difficult to believe that the hearts of this “Joshua generation” could be so similar to the preceding “Exodus generation.” And yet, as you read their statements, the attitudes are almost identical. Derision and disgust pepper their remarks: “Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD!” (NRSV), is a reference to having died with Korah and his followers.

Questions about dying in the wilderness should remind us of the early days of Israel’s travels, right after the people departed Egypt, when a similar water challenge was considered at the rock at Horeb:

“Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water that we may drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?’ But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.’ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.’ And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel” (Exodus 17:2-6).

In this incident which had occurred nearly forty years earlier, the Lord instructed Moses to take the staff that he had been given to execute the judgments on Egypt, and to strike the rock. Miraculously, water flows forth from the rock, and the place is named *Massah u’Merivah* (מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה (177 סֵדֶה מַסָּה), actually rendered in the Septuagint with the adjectival designations *peirasmos kai loidorēsis* (πειρασμός καὶ λοιδότης) or “Temptation, and Reviling” (LXE).

In *Chukat*, the Ancient Israelites are almost forty years into their wilderness journey, and another water shortage is eliciting an almost identical response. This incident, to distinguish it from the earlier trial at Rephidim, is known as Meribah-Kadesh (Numbers 20:13-14). Moses is approaching 120 years of age, and he and Aaron are confronted by a mob of malcontents who are reverting to the patterns of their deceased parents and grandparents. As accusations come forth, Moses and Aaron resort to the persistent pattern of falling on their faces before the Lord for understanding and mercy:

“Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them” (Numbers 20:6).

God was faithful to answer their pleadings. Rather than repeating the message of some forty years earlier at Horeb, telling Moses to strike the rock for water to gush forth—God tells him instead to speak to the rock:

“[A]nd the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You

shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink” (Numbers 20:7-8).

Moses and Aaron do as the Lord has directed them, assembling Israel before the rock. But rather than speak to the rock as instructed, Moses takes the staff and strikes the rock twice:

“So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, ‘Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?’ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank” (Numbers 20:9-11).

Why did Moses disobey the instruction of the Lord? Moses was told to speak to the rock so that water would come out—not strike it. A definite answer has alluded many readers of *Chukat* for centuries, but one of the reasons can probably be seen. In speaking to the crowds of Israelites, Moses begins his words with the command *shimu-na* (שִׁמְעוּ-נָא) or “Hear now” (RSV). In some ways, he appears to chide them: “Now listen, you rebels! Are we able to extract water from this rock?” (Keter Crown Bible). One is tempted to almost add “...or not?” to the end of Moses’ sentence. The leader of Israel is certainly a bit frustrated with the people he has to lead.

Can you imagine what must have been going through Moses’ mind as he looked down at the seething crowd, which could have been growing to a riot scene? How could these people be so ungrateful? Had they not seen the provision of the Lord as they grew up? Did they not know the consequences for questioning the authority of Israel’s God-appointed leaders? Did they just forget what happened to their parents and grandparents because of their disbelief?

Moses was justifiably livid, but being angry—even righteously angry—does not justify deliberately disobeying the instructions of God, as seen here. Did Moses have a bit of a temper that was not totally under control? We can remember back some eighty years to the time Moses lost his temper and killed the Egyptian guard:

“Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one *around*, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Exodus 2:11-12).

Now, in what would seem to be an uncharacteristic way, Moses does not simply speak to the rock, but instead he strikes the rock twice. This action was contrary to the explicit word of the Lord. Something must have overcome Moses, because by this point in his life and experiences, he knew how precise the Lord was in His instructions. He heard God’s command to “speak to the rock,” and yet for some unstated reason, he struck the rock. And he does not strike the rock only once, like he did at Horeb almost forty years earlier, *but twice*. The Lord was obviously watching, because shortly thereafter penalties upon Moses and Aaron are meted out:

“But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’ Those *were* the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them” (Numbers 20:12-13).

This is such a difficult action to fathom. How can Moses and Aaron be guilty of not sanctifying the Lord in the eyes of the people of Israel? One simple slip of temper, or possibly even a senile moment—and Moses and Aaron are denied the opportunity to enter into the Promised Land. Apparently, the instructions of God were so specific here, that it was absolutely impossible for Moses not to understand that he was supposed to “speak to the rock” rather than strike the rock. The fact that he took his own initiative to strike the rock was obviously considered an act of his own will, which brought with it some serious judgment from God.

When reading this, I always wonder why Moses had reacted so violently to the rebels who were complaining about a lack of water. I try to remember that the rebellious Israelites were simply repeating a pattern that their forbearers had done a generation earlier. *Was Moses any different?* Had he not shown a disposition to lose his temper and strike out on his own? Perhaps Moses is simply a reflection of his Levite ancestors (cf. 1 Chronicles 23:6, 12-14). We can

remember the last words spoken over Levi by Jacob on his deathbed, and how the Levites would be dispersed and scattered throughout Israel because of the bloodshed at Shechem (cf. Genesis 34:25-31):

“Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are implements of violence. Let my soul not enter into their council; let not my glory be united with their assembly; because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel” (Genesis 49:5-7).

Is it possible that some of the effects of Levi’s sin were passed down through the generations to Moses? Simeon and Levi had taken matters into their own hands hundreds of years earlier, when the prince of Shechem had compromised the honor of their sister Dinah. As a young prince of Egypt, Moses had taken matters into his own hands as he saw the mistreatment of his Hebrew kinfolk by the Egyptian slave masters.

Now some eighty years later, the pattern seems to have repeated itself. Moses is angry, frustrated, irritated, and probably sick and tired of watching the Israelites continue to make poor choices when it comes to not trusting in the Lord. Rather than simply speaking to the rock, he strikes it twice. Water rushes forth, but the price he will have to pay is very high: Moses will be unable to lead Israel into the Promised Land. What can we learn from this example of a great person, who pays a significant price for a single human failure?

A Faith that Works

What has brought the Israelites to the point where they, yet again, have another altercation with Moses? A **lack of faith in God’s provision**. Moses, with past examples in his life of acting rashly—has seemingly been able to keep his temper under control during his entire tenure as Israel’s leader. Perhaps with some negative thoughts about the Israelites here or there, his actions in serving the people have been exemplary. But at Meribah-Kadesh, having to wait for the previous generation to be gone, the new generation of people are repeating old habits. *Moses reaches his proverbial wits end*. Moses is not vengeful or evil in his attitude toward either the Israelites or God, but he has had his fill of the wining and complaining.

I think that in *Chukat*, we can see a bit of a comparison and contrast between demonstrating faith and the *proper* works that are becoming of people who believe in God. Consider the mysteries of the red heifer, and the inexplicable procedure for purifying the Tabernacle and its accoutrements. No definite explanation, even today, has been offered for these things. The Israelites simply had to believe and follow the instructions—and yet, by faith and obedience to the instructions, the Tabernacle would be purified and the Lord would dwell in it.

Another example of faith and works is seen a little later in our *parashah*, as the Israelites begin again to complain—this time about a lack of water and a lack of variety of food. The Lord is again provoked to send judgment, this time in the form of poisonous serpents upon Israel:

“The people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.’ The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.’ And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.’ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived” (Numbers 21:5-9).

Witnessed here is a very vivid example of a people judged by God. Yet because of Moses’ intercession for them—and God’s mercy toward them—they had just one simple thing to do to if they wanted to avoid death: they had to look upon the brazen serpent. Those who looked upon the lifted standard, though bitten, would not die. In many respects, after being told the solution to the venomous bites, **the people had to have the faith to receive healing**. The standard did not heal

them; it was the necessity for them to look upon it which would. Think about how relatively easy that it would be.

In a like manner, followers of Yeshua the Messiah have been instructed to look upon Him, who was lifted up to die for our sins. In His conversation with the learned Nicodemus, Yeshua made it clear that He would be lifted up, similar to the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” John 3:14-15).

Today, some have the same challenge that was presented to Nicodemus. We **have to believe in Him** and His accomplished work *in being lifted up* in order to receive eternal life. Then as we speak to the Rock, we can make our confession of faith from our hearts. The Apostle Paul writes, “[I]f you confess with your mouth Yeshua as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, ‘WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED’ [Isaiah 28:16] ” (Romans 10:9-11).

Additionally, it is important to understand that Moses, in spite of his mistake out of anger and being barred from entering the Promised Land, **did not lose his being counted among the redeemed**. Moses, like all human beings, simply had some flaws that cost him some temporary rewards. David and Paul and other characters throughout the Bible likewise suffered consequences because of previous sins. Most of us can relate as we have seen the consequences of sin in our lives, which have often caused us some aches and pain in Earthly living. But that does not mean that we lose our salvation or status as God’s children. Moses never denied the supernatural acts of God in delivering Israel, or his own special calling into God’s service; Moses was simply fed up with the bickering and immaturity of the Israelites. *Being in Messianic ministry today, I can identify with much of Moses’ frustration.*

Moses himself will be among the myriads of saints who spend eternity with us. Moses was, after all, present on the Mount of Transfiguration before Peter, John, and James—when Yeshua shone before them in all His glory (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9). Moses’ presence at such an event assures us of His being numbered among the redeemed. Moses’ legacy is a positive one that later generations looked to, most especially those within First Century Judaism such as Yeshua and the Apostles. Moses’ choices and works indicate that he had great faith in the God of Israel, worthy of emulation by us. Consider what the author of Hebrews tells us:

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Messiah greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

As *Chukat* has indicated, some of the greatest of God’s servants can be flawed. And yet, due to the mercy of a loving and compassionate Heavenly Father, we can have peace in the assurance that He has given us a way to approach Him and receive redemptive by faith in His Son’s sacrificial work at Golgotha. We have the choice—just like the Ancient Israelites had a choice to obey the laws of purification, or to look upon a brazen serpent in order to be healed—to cry out to the One who was lifted up on the bloody cross, slain to atone for our sins. One may not totally understand the reasoning behind any of these actions, but the result of being saved from sins should be in living a life of positive difference in the world (James 2:14-26).

Have you looked to the Risen Savior, speaking to Him as the Rock of your salvation? Do you have a faith that generates positive works—indicating that you truly have been redeemed? Do you continually operate in God’s love and grace toward others, and perform good deeds? **May we all have faith that works, knowing that He hears our prayers and responds according to His mercy and grace!**

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