

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Chukat

Challenging Your Ethical Default

In revisiting the sin at Mei Meriva (20:7-13), we wonder why Aharon suffered the same fate as Moshe when HaShem declared, "you will not bring this congregation to the Land I have given them." Was it not Moshe who was the central figure in not complying with HaShem's directive (however understood by Chazal)? In fact, the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 19:9) appears to exonerate Aharon of any wrongdoing. Quoting the verse, "And to [the Tribe of] Levi, he said: 'Your TUMIM and URIM be to your righteous one whom You tested at Masa and with whom You strove at the waters of Meriva'" (D'varim 33:8), the Midrash asks, "What was Aharon's sin?" Based upon this Midrash, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, offers this important explanation (Sichot - 38 Parshat Chukat): "The verse does not state that they sinned, but rather that they did not sanctify Gd's Name (Bamidbar 20:12, D'varim 32:51). The punishment, it seems, was not for a sin which was committed, but rather for something which they did not do. Although it was Moshe who [according to Rashi] struck rather than speaking, Aharon was also punished because he hesitated rather than speaking immediately to the rock, and did not object when Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it."

In this understanding of Aharon's sin, the lesson is clear. As Rav Aharon elaborates, there are consequences to missed opportunities. The Talmud (B'rachot 5a) states that if a person is overcome with suffering, he should examine his deeds, and if he finds no specific transgression, he must entertain the possibility that his punishment is a consequence of wasting time that could have been spent on Torah study or other worthy pursuits. In other words, one has to answer for a missed opportunity.

In addition to this valuable insight, we may suggest another approach. From the powerful Akeida episode, Chazal have understood the greatness of Avraham in terms of his extraordinary ability to surmount and deny his natural and virtuous trait of chesed and obey Gd's command to offer his only son on the Altar. Often, to demonstrate the strength and depth of our faith in HaShem, we are tested by a command that insists that we abandon our "comfort zone" and submit to the Divine decree, inexplicable though it may appear.

Aharon's personality was defined by his love and pursuit of peace (Avot 1:12). Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl, in a remarkable essay (Sichot, Sh'mot 23), opines that it was precisely this righteous attribute that led Aharon to mistakenly construct the Golden Calf. "Better that I be blamed and not Israel" (Vayikra Rabba 10:3). Rav

Nebenzahl suggests that Aharon should have overcome and suppressed his compassionate nature and refused the sinful demand of the people even if it might have been at the expense of his own life. Moshe's rebuke of his brother (Sh'mot 32:21) may very well have alluded to this failing of Aharon. Could it be then, that also by Mei Meriva, Aharon's reticence and inaction in not wanting to reprimand his brother was another example of his inability to go against his natural ethos?

In any case, this second message is no less significant than the first. To act boldly and with uncommon courage to do the right thing when it's not "your thing"; for an otherwise reserved, diffident person to suddenly stand up and defend the weak and defenseless; for a recluse, a loner, to barge out of his door to support a just cause - and all at personal expense, be it material or physical - for such a person to be MAAVIR AL MIDOTAV, to override the measure of who he is", there is the great reward of having redeemed his existence and earned HaShem's most cherished of blessings! 🙌