

Parashat Chukat, 5771, 2011:

True Forgiveness

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* contains a disturbing incident in the history of the *dor hamidbar* (generation of the desert). It is particularly upsetting since it comes in the wake of the egregious errors of the Golden Calf, the debacle of the Spies, and Korach's Rebellion. One would have thought that our ancestors would have learned their lesson by now. They had already witnessed the explicit results of rebelling against Moshe and Hashem. Nonetheless, we find our forebears once again testing and challenging Moshe and Hashem, with disastrous results. Indeed, it is difficult to take the term "*dor deah*" ("the generation of knowledge of Hashem") at face value, when they seemed to do everything in their power to reject this title:

21:4 [The Israelites] moved on from Hor Mountain, going by way of the South Sea so as to skirt the territory of Edom. The people began to become discouraged along the way.

21:5 The people spoke out against G-d and Moses, 'Why did you take us out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread and no water! We are getting disgusted with this insubstantial food.'

21:6 G-d sent poisonous snakes against the people, and when they began biting the people, a number of Israelites died.

21:7 The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against G-d and you. Pray to G-d, and have Him take the snakes away from us. **And Moses prayed for the people.** (Translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*, emphasis my own).

"And Moses prayed for the people" teaches us an invaluable lesson about *midot* (ethical behaviors). Moshe could easily have maintained feelings of resentment against the Jewish people for their interminable complaints against him. After all, each time the people rebelled against Hashem in any fashion, they also rebelled against Moshe. He

understandably could have answered them in their hour of dire need: “Enough already, I am exhausted by your ceaseless complaints. You acted foolishly and rejected the *mann* (manna). You questioned G-d’s wisdom in taking you out of Egypt. You repudiated all of the good that Hashem has bestowed upon you (*kafui tovah*). Leave me alone and suffer the punishment that you deserve.” Instead, in an inspired gesture of true leadership, empathy, and love, Moshe immediately responded with prayer on behalf of his wayward nation. Without hesitation, and with a full and loving heart, Moshe forgave their defiant and insubordinate behavior and sought their salvation – which he was able to successfully obtain.

Rashi (1040-1105) explains that Moshe’s response teaches us a major rule of *midot*: “*shelo yehay achzari melimchol*” (“one should never be stubborn and refuse to grant forgiveness”). His explanation is based upon Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi’s comment, as found in *Midrash Tanchumah*: “Rebbi said: ‘The one who is asked to forgive should never be obstinate and withhold forgiveness.’” The Midrash, in turn, is itself based upon Mishnah *Baba Kama* 8:7:

Even though one makes all manner and types of compensatory payments, he is not forgiven for his transgression until he asks for forgiveness from the injured party. As the Torah states: “And now [Avimelech] return his [Avraham’s] wife for he is a prophet and he will pray on your behalf. (*Sefer Bereishit* 20:7) And from where do we derive [the principle] that it is forbidden for the one who is asked to forgive to be stubborn [and withhold forgiveness]? As the Torah states: “And Avraham prayed to G-d [on behalf of Avimelech and his family] and G-d healed Avimelech.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 20:17, translation my own)

Moshe’s laudatory willingness to immediately pray on our behalf, regardless of the personal wrong and calumny he suffered, emerges as a classic instance of *maaseh Avot siman l’banim* (the actions of our Patriarchs foreshadow the future behaviors of their

children). In short, Moshe emulated a behavior pattern begun and modeled for all time by *Avraham Avinu* (Our Father Avraham). Rapidly forgiving someone for the wrongs they have committed against you is an act of *chesed* demonstrated over and over again by *Avraham Avinu*..

At first glance, it might appear that while “*shelo yehay achzari melimchol*” is a noble ideal to emulate, it is not an obligatory behavior. This, however, is not the case since the Rambam (1135-1204) codified this notion as a binding halachic principle in *Hilchos Teshuvah* 2:10:

It is forbidden for one to be harsh and unwilling to be appeased. One should rather be forgiving and slow to anger, and whenever a sinner asks one for forgiveness one should grant it wholeheartedly. Even if the sinner had distressed one considerably and sinned against one a lot, one should/may not take revenge or bear a grudge, in the manner of a true Jew, and not like that of idolaters, who always bear grudges. Concerning the Gibeonites, who did not forgive or appease, it has been said, "The Gibeonites were not of the Children of Israel."

(Translation by O'Levy, <http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/MadaT.html>, with my corrections)

In addition to the above quoted sources, the Rambam based his decision upon the well-known Mishnaic passage found in *Pirkei Avot* 5:11:

There are four types of temperaments. One who is easily angered and easily appeased--his virtue cancels his flaw. One whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease--his flaw cancels his virtue. One whom it is difficult to anger and is easily appeased, is a *chassid* [a righteous individual]. One who is easily angered and is difficult to appease, is wicked. (<http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=2099>)

The world-renowned *posek* (halachic decisor), Rabbi Moshe ben Yisrael Isserles (1530-1572), popularly known as the Rema, concurs with the Rambam and views “*shelo yehay achzari melimchol*” as a statement of practical halacha. We find this in his additions to Rabbi Yosef Karo’s (1488-1575) *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 326:1, wherein he states: “In addition, the one who is asked to grant forgiveness ought not to be obstinate

and refuse to [readily] forgive...” (Translation my own) The *Mishnah Berurah* (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohane, 1838-1933) comments upon the Rema’s decision and provides us with an almost utilitarian explanation as to why we should carefully follow this *pesak* (decision): “Anyone who is willing to readily forgive will find that his own sins will be readily forgiven [by G-d]. And if he is unwilling to forgive, neither will he be forgiven. [subsection 8]”

Given the above, “*shelo yehay achzari melimchol*” is clearly a statement of practical halacha, rather than merely “a nice idea.” When we grant someone *mechila* (forgiveness), we are duty-bound to forgive wholeheartedly and as immediately as possible. In this way, we emulate both Avraham and Moshe. Moreover, we authentically reinstate our relationships with our fellow Jews and thereby help bring true and lasting peace to our lonely and alienating world. As we strive to accomplish this goal, may the *Ribbono shel Olam* (the Master of the Universe) look down upon us in great mercy and send *Mashiach*, soon, and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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