

Parashat Chukat 5775, 2015

Of Water, Torah and Humility

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

From there to the well; that is the well of which the L-rd said to Moses, “Gather the people, and I will give them water.” Then Israel sang this song: “Ascend, O well, sing to it! A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, through the lawgiver with their staffs, and from the desert, a gift.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 21:16-18, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

It appears from the formulation of these verses, that the well referred to in our *parasha* is a physical one. Therefore, Rashi (1040-1105) states: “‘Then Israel sang this song,’ was said at the end of forty [years], but the well was given to them at the beginning of the forty [years].” In contrast, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (1696-1743), known as the “Ohr HaChaim” after the name of his famous work of Torah exegesis, offers a strikingly different interpretation. He addresses the identity of the well by asking, “What is the nature of this *shira* (song)?” In answering his question, he suggests that the well of our verse is not a well at all. Instead, it is a symbolic term that refers to the Torah:

It is possible that this *shira* [is not to be taken as literally having been sung over a well. Instead, it] was said in regards to the Torah. Nevertheless, one ought not view that generation’s song [to the Torah] as an indictment as to why they did not sing such a new song when the Torah was given as a permanent possession [to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai] – when it would have been fitting and proper to sing just such a song of praise. For without a doubt, this song of the Torah wherein it is called “a well of water,” received [this poetic description] because ... the Torah is compared to water ... (Translation and brackets my own)

The Ohr HaChaim's association of water with Torah is firmly based upon the Talmudic expression, "*ain mayim elah Torah*" ("there is no use of the term 'water' that does not symbolize Torah"):

For it was taught: 'And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water, upon which those who expound verses metaphorically said: "water means nothing but Torah," as it says: "Ho! All who thirst, go to water [Rashi, water = Torah], and whoever has no money, go, buy and eat, and go, buy without money and without a price, wine and milk." (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 55:1) It thus means as they went three days without Torah they immediately became exhausted... (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Kama* 52a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud*)

At this juncture we may well ask, "What conceptual connection obtains between water and Torah?" Here, too, we are fortunate in that we have another Talmudic source that addresses precisely this question: "R. Hanina b. Ida said: Why are the words of the Torah likened unto water - as it is written, 'Ho! All who thirst, go to water?' This is to teach you, just as water flows from a higher level to a lower, so too, the words of the Torah endure only with him who is humble." (*Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit* 7a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations) In sum, humility is a necessary component of an authentic Torah personality.

How does one acquire the crucial and fundamental *midah* (moral quality) of humility?

The Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmanides, 1194-1270) addressed this question in his *Iggeret HaRamban (The Letter of the Ramban)*:

Therefore, I will now explain to you how to always behave humbly. Speak gently at all times, with your head bowed, your eyes looking down to the ground and your heart focusing on Hashem. Don't look at the face of the person to whom you are speaking. Consider everyone as greater than yourself. If he is wise or rich, you should give him respect. If he is poor and you are richer -- or wiser -- than he, consider yourself to be more guilty than he, and that he is more worthy than you, since when he sins it is through error, while yours is deliberate and you should know better!

In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His *Schechinah* [Divine Presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a slave standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master.

Torah should always be learned diligently, so you will be able to fulfill its commands. When you arise from your learning reflect carefully on what you have studied, in order to see what in it that you can be put into practice. Examine your actions every morning and evening, and in this way every one of your days will be spent in *teshuvah* (repentance). (Translation, <http://www.pirchei.com/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>, brackets and italics my own)

While the above section of the *Iggeret* demands an entire *shiur* (Torah class) to be properly explicated, a few salient points emerge that can guide us toward the acquisition of this moral virtue. Our manner of speaking and physical demeanor speaks volumes about us. They should reflect humility and respect for the significance of others. In addition, our minds and hearts should be focused upon Hashem, with the conscious recognition that we are always standing before His Divine Presence. Moreover, Torah should be learned in a diligent fashion and in a manner that leads to meaningful practice of its precepts. The Ramban urges us to reflect upon this goal when we complete a Torah learning session, so that the Torah we have studied becomes a part of us, instead of remaining apart from us. Finally, we must undertake a twice-daily *cheshbon hanefesh* (a spiritual accounting) of our actions and the words that we have spoken. By doing this, we can raise our self-awareness and recognize those areas that require further growth.

By implementing the Ramban's call to action, we can ensure that the waters of our holy Torah will become the foremost part of our essence and being. As Isaiah the prophet declared so long ago:

Here is the G-d of my salvation, I shall trust and not fear; for the strength and praise of the Eternal the L-rd was my salvation. And you shall draw water with joy from the fountains of the salvation. And you shall say on that day, “Thank the L-rd, call in His Name, publicize His deeds among the peoples; keep it in remembrance, for His Name is exalted.” (12:2-4)

May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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