

The Power of a Caring Word

Category: Balak, Bamidbar, Chukas

What's better charity, a smile or a contribution?

The Big Three

Good Shabbos!

In this week's Parshah, the Torah tells us about a different "Big Three"—the trio of leaders who led the Jewish Nation from Egypt into the desert. Those would be Moshe Rabbeinu, Aharon and Miriam. As the Prophet Micah says in the Haftarah of Balak: "For I brought you up from the Land of Egypt... and I sent before you Moshe, Aharon and Miriam" (Micah 6:4).

At the very start of the Parshah, we learn about the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu's big sister Miriam—the very same Miriam who rescued Baby Moshe when their mother left him in a basket on the water just by the shore of the Nile River. And the Torah, somewhat "curtly," tells us of her passing: "And the People dwelt in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there." Thus without any prior warning, Miriam suddenly passes away.

Right after that, the Torah tells us, "And there was no water for the congregation"—on which Rashi asks: What happened that there was suddenly no water? Rashi answers, "From here [we learn] that they had the well all 40 years [of desert travel] in the merit of Miriam" (Bamidbar 20:2).

At the end of that same chapter, we learn about the passing of Aharon HaKohein. There, the Torah goes into significant length on how G-d commanded Moshe to "Take Aharon and Elazar his son and bring them up on Mr. Hor [literally "Hor HaHor, which translates to "the Mountain of Mountains" or "Mt. Mountain"]. There, Moshe was to remove the High Priest uniform from Aharon and put it on Elazar his son, after which Aharon passed away and was buried on the mountain.

The Torah then tells goes back to specify that this is indeed what Moshe did, after which Moshe and Elazar descended back down the mountain, "and the entire congregation saw that Aharon has passed away, and the entire House of Israel

wept for Aharon for thirty days” (Bamidbar 20:29).

Right after that, the Torah tells us, “And the Canaanites heard... and fought with Israel.” On that, Rashi comments: What did the Canaanites (Amalekites) hear? “They heard that Aharon had died and that the Clouds of Glory had departed,” and so they thought that they now had permission to do battle against Israel.

Greater detail is brought in the Talmud (Tractate Taanis 9a): “Three precious champions stood for Israel, and these are they: Moshe, Aharon and Miriam; and three precious gifts were given by their hands, and these are they: the well, the cloud and the manna; the well was in the merit of Miriam, the cloud in the merit of Aharon, and the manna in the merit of Moshe. When Miriam died, the well departed... when Aharon died, the Clouds of Glory departed... and both returned in the merit of Moshe; when Moshe died, they all departed.”

It was in the merit of Miriam that the Jewish Nation had water for 40 years; it was in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu that the Jewish Nation had “bread from heaven” every morning; and it was in the merit of Aharon that they had the Clouds of Glory. And at the end of the 40 years, when those two shepherds departed the world, they both returned in the merit of Moshe.

Who Was Most Loved?

However, at the passing of each of these three shepherds, we find something strange. At the passing of Aharon, the Torah tells us, “And the whole House of Israel wept for Aharon,” “the menfolk and the womenfolk.” Not so the case with Moshe Rabbeinu, where we are told, “And the Sons of Israel wept for Moshe,” on which Rashi notes that from the fact that it does not say, “the whole House of Israel” but only “the Sons of Israel,” we deduce that only the menfolk wept for his passing. The Rebbe adds to that, saying that from the fact that it does not include the phrase ‘the whole,’ implies that not even all the menfolk wept for him.

This raises the question: How could such a thing happen? It was Moshe Rabbeinu who provided them with the manna all 40 years; you can’t survive without food. And yet, we are told that not everyone mourned for him! Certainly not the womenfolk, and not even all the menfolk.

Miriam, for her part, provided them with the most important need: water. Without

food, you can survive for at least a certain amount of time, but it's impossible to survive without water. As we read in our Torah portion, the Children of Israel argued with Moshe and Aharon, complaining why they had been brought into the desert to die—but still, we find no mention of even a single individual mourning over Miriam at all. We are told that she died, and that's it.

But with Aharon, in whose merit the Clouds of Glory were provided (and, as the Rebbe explains in a Sicha, that according to Rashi, not all the clouds departed but only the clouds “of Glory”) — the menfolk and womenfolk, the entire Nation of Israel, wept for his passing! (Likutei Sichos Vol. 18, pg. 253)

It should have been the opposite; everyone should have mourned Miriam and Moshe Rabbeinu, because they were the source of their two most vital needs, water and food. But Aharon, whose merit brought them the ‘Clouds of Glory,’ should have been mourned only by those concerned with the Jewish Nation's honor and glory!

Who Did You Smile To?

This past week was the Rebbe's yahrzeit. Naturally, there was a lot of talk about the Rebbe this past week—people talking about the “yechiduses” that they had with the Rebbe, and so on.

The JEM production house put together a special project in which they interviewed people who merited meeting the Rebbe (similar to Steven Spielberg's project in which Holocaust survivors recorded their stories), and they've interviewed over 1,500 people on their personal experiences with the Rebbe.

What's interesting is that when you listen to these testimonies, you notice that the interviewees don't remember everything that the Rebbe said to them at their meetings. And it's no wonder, because in many cases, it's been 50 or 60 years since the meeting. But what they do remember clearly is the smile that the Rebbe gave them—you see the interviewee trying to recall the Rebbe's words, but then he smiles and relates how the Rebbe gave him that smile.

But more than that, what people truly remember and repeat and recount to everyone is the good feeling the Rebbe gave them when they were in his presence. They felt that someone truly cared about them—that someone truly

loved them with all his heart. I recently read about a little girl who had lost her mother, and her father—who actually worked at the time in the Rebbe’s office as an aide (Rabbi Y. Quint)—brought his daughter into a yechidus with the Rebbe. That little girl, who today is a grown adult, recalls how at her yechidus, she felt that the Rebbe truly felt her pain. She adds that she doesn’t want to continue talking about it because she’d burst into tears.

Those are the things that people remember.

And that was the defining uniqueness of Aharon HaKohein. As Rashi says in our Parshah: Why did the entire House of Israel mourn his passing? “Because Aharon pursued peace and implemented love between disputing parties and between husbands and wives.”

Aharon’s Peace-Making Endeavors

The Midrash describes at length how Aharon would accomplish this:

“With two people who engaged in a dispute with one another, Aharon would go and sit with one of them and say to him, ‘My son, look at what your friend said! ‘I’m embarrassed that I wronged him!’” And Aharon would stay with him until he removed indignation from his heart. Aharon would then go and sit with the other and say, ‘Look, [your friend said] “How will I lift my eyes and see my friend? I’m embarrassed that I’m the one who wronged him!”’ And Aharon would stay with him until he removed indignation from his heart, and when they would meet one another, they would hug and kiss one another” (Avos D’Rabbi Noson 12:3).

Aharon HaKohein’s entire mission was to draw everyone close. As the Mishnah (Avos 1:12) says about Aharon, “Love peace and pursue peace, love the creations and bring them close to Torah.”

That explains another special thing that we find only in Aharon HaKohein. The one person whose day of passing is explicitly mentioned in the Torah is Aharon HaKohein: “And he died there in the fortieth year... in the fifth month, on the first day of the month” (Bamidbar 33:38).

The Rebbe notes that this is something “for which I have not found an equivalent anywhere in Scripture — in which the verse specifies a date of passing. We do not

find this with Avraham, Yitzchak or Yaakov, and before them, not with Noach or Adam HaRishon, and also not with Moshe Rabbeinu or Miriam... However, with regards to Moshe and Miriam, their dates of passing are also known... but we know that [only] through the Oral Torah.”

The Rebbe explains that since “the only individual with whom the quality of ‘loving peace and pursuing peace and implementing love between disputing parties’ is Aharon, it’s again no wonder that the Torah ascribes special importance to his passing.” (Hisvaduyos 5744 Vol. IV, pg. 2277).

This teaches us something very interesting about human nature. You could give a person food and water to save his very life—but it’s still no guarantee that the person will remember you for good reasons (unless you keep giving him). But a person to whom you give a smile or a good feeling will always remember you and your smile forever.

That is why, with regards to the mitzvah of tzedakah, we find the Talmud (Bava Basra 9a) telling us that “one who gives a prutah to a poor man is blessed with six blessings, while one who placates the poor man with words is blessed with 11 blessings.”

Why is this so? Because money is temporary—tomorrow, the poor man will need money again. But the kind words? He’ll remember those forever—because they give him the strength to stand strong against all the things that otherwise would break him. That’s something that everyone can give—and we learn to give that from Aharon HaKohein.