

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

4 - 5 July, 2008

2 Tammuz 5768

Parashat Chukat
(Numbers 19:1–22:1)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Torah Talk by Rabbi Joel Oseran

Did The Punishment Fit The Crime?

Among the interesting themes contained in our weekly Torah portion, Chukat (Numbers 19:1 – 22:1), is one which has deeply troubled Torah commentators and sages throughout the ages. In chapter 20 we read how the Israelites, in the wilderness of Zin, yet again complain bitterly to Moses and to Aaron that there is no food or water, that they should never have left Egypt (“Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!).

Moses and Aaron beseech God to intervene and they are instructed to take the rod and assemble the community and before the eyes of the people and order the rock to yield its water. As we all remember, Moses did take the rod but from that moment on, things went from bad to worse. Moses and Aaron told the Israelites (verses. 10, 11) “Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.”

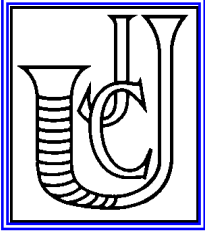
Then comes the punishment directly from God. In verse 12 we read: “But Adonai said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.’”

This is the fateful punishment which has confused, troubled and ultimately forced the rabbis to provide some reasonable explanation for its severity. How can it be that after all Moses and Aaron have done for their people, from the confrontation with Pharaoh, through the heroic leadership of guiding the Israelites out of Egypt, to the epiphany at Sinai and the receiving of the Torah, and now the years of suffering the Israelites rebellions against having left Egypt in the first place – how can it be that after all these acts of devotion and passionate obedience to God, this one indiscretion has denied both brothers their entrance into the promised Land?

At our Torah study session on Shabbat morning in the rabbi’s apartment, we shall carefully look at several rabbinic interpretations which try to resolve this dilemma (I warmly welcome you to come, share some bagels and coffee, and take part in this study). Yet, in order to provide some closure to this article, I will share with you one of the rabbinic midrashim (homiletical interpretations) which I have always found meaningful.

If you take a close look at our Torah portion, you will see that immediately after Moses and Aaron are punished by Adonai the text continues in verse 14 as if nothing whatsoever just happened. Neither Moses nor Aaron react in any way to the punishment; neither protests its severity or petitions God for leniency or compassion. It is as if nothing just happened – an entire lifetime of leadership towards an ultimate goal (entrance into the land) wiped away and not a single word in response.

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Here is where the creativity of our sages comes into play. The rabbis sense that this reaction by Moses and Aaron is equally strange and perplexing. Therefore, the rabbis use this situation to teach us a valuable lesson in the fundamental nature of repentance. The rabbis suggest that Moses does not repent immediately because he assumes that he has proven his loyalty to God quite sufficiently up until this point in his life that he simply did not need to ask forgiveness. Moses assumed that he would be forgiven for his indiscretion, that his past record would “save” him. And according to the sages, this was his fatal error. Had Moses petitioned God for forgiveness, he would have been pardoned and would have entered into the promised Land. He was denied entrance into the land, not because he sinned, but because he did not repent.

Application of this human failure to our everyday lives is not difficult to make. How many of us commit indiscretions, some more some less severe, and fail to seek forgiveness or rectification, using the reasoning that the indiscretions are clearly not our customary behavior and that we are really good people inside and that, sometime down the line, we will make it all right? How many of us take for granted that people in our status and with our clear record of accomplishment, are entitled, now and then, to take certain liberties with our moral code and then continue on as if nothing happened because acknowledging our misdeeds really isn't what people like us do.

We certainly are not close to being a Moses in terms of our accomplishments or our commitment to the divine course – but maybe we do share something in common with our great leader and teacher after all. And if so, let us learn from our weekly Torah reading that it is never alright to postpone seeking forgiveness. It is never alright to assume that our past victories will carry us through our present indiscretions. Let us learn from Moses – and let us, unlike him, find entrance into our own promised land.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Joel D. Oseran

3rd July, 2008