

PARSHA

## CHUKAT

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## THE INFLUENCE OF THE STREET

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

*It is written, “Moshe sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom. ... ‘Let us pass through your land’” (Bamidbar 20:14-17).*

Why did Moshe want the Children of Israel to pass through the territory of Esav? This decision obligated him to ask for a favor from its inhabitants by declaring: “So said your brother Israel: You know all the hardship that has befallen us” so they would allow Israel to pass through their land. Yet were there no other routes they could take? Furthermore, why was Moshe not afraid of the inevitable and destructive consequences of making an agreement with Esav? In fact by passing through his territory and dwelling there, the Children of Israel might imitate the bad behavior and corrupt lifestyle of their neighbors! Is it possible that Moshe overlooked this? Nevertheless, and despite incessant and repetitive requests, the king of Edom refused to let the Children of Israel pass through his territory. He even threatened them with war by stating, “You shall not pass through me – lest I come against you with the sword” (v.18). Here Rashi comments, “[Edom said:] You pride yourselves with the ‘voice’ that your father bequeathed you, and you declare: ‘We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice’ [v.16]. But we will go out against you with what my father bequeathed me: ‘You shall live by the sword’ [Bereshith 27:40].” Yet Moshe repeated his request: “We shall go up on the highway, and if we drink your water – I or my flock – I shall pay their price” (v.19). Rashi adds (v.17): “Moshe said, ‘Though we have manna to eat and a well from which to drink, we will not drink from it, but will buy food and drink from you, for your benefit.’” However the king of Edom was not swayed, and he reiterated his position: “He said, ‘You shall not pass through!’ Then Edom went out against him with a massive horde and a strong hand” (v.20). Here Rashi states: “With our grandfather’s promise: ‘the hands are the hands of Esav.’” Having no other choice, “Israel turned away from near him” (v.21) – as if the people were overcome by fear and therefore chose another route.

To better understand this, let us examine a verse near the beginning of this week’s parsha: “This is the decree of the Torah” (Bamidbar 19:2). This verse is discussing the mitzvah of the red heifer, concerning which G-d said to Moshe: “I have decreed it. You have no right to challenge it” (Yoma 67b). It is therefore a mitzvah whose reasons were not revealed, and concerning which even King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, declared: “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (Kohelet 7:23). From here we learn that all the wisdom in the world cannot compare to that of the holy Torah, which has no equal. Other wisdom is certainly useful, but it may also do more harm than

good. For example, the advent of the nuclear age has been very beneficial, for it has enabled us to harness nuclear energy that powers all kinds of devices used by man. However it also has the power to destroy the world in seconds. The same goes for all kinds of technological progress. Today the development of the Internet and cellular telephones is of great interest to many, but it can also be detrimental and make us descend into a spiritual abyss. There is no doubt that King Solomon, the wisest of all men, could have created and developed everything we have mentioned. Nevertheless he refrained, for he was aware of the serious consequences that would result from it. The wisdom of the holy Torah, on the other hand, is only beneficial, both for us and the entire world. It has no negative or destructive consequences. That is why King Solomon declared, “I thought I could become wise.” From every angle, the Torah possesses extraordinary wisdom. It spreads blessings upon all Creation, allowing us to attach ourselves to the Creator and cleave to Him. I think that Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to show the Children of Israel the abysmal difference between themselves and Edom, the incredible gap that separated their refined and positive culture from the depraved society of the wicked Esav, from whom the civilization of Edom emerged. In order to clearly demonstrate the differences between them, Moshe considered it preferable for the Children of Israel to approach Edom for a short time, for them to cross the border of this territory and live alongside them. At that point they would discover the immense gulf between them, and they would realize that the lifestyle of Jews is destined to elevate and refine a human being. In fact the power of the Jewish people resides in its words, according to the verse: “The voice is the voice of Jacob” (Bereshith 27:22). In other words, the path of Torah and mitzvot teaches us decency and helps us acquire good character traits. On the other hand, by observing the descendants of Esav, the Children of Israel would understand what Esav lost by repudiating the path of Torah and mitzvot, descending to an incredibly low level as a result. In fact the power of Esav’s descendants lies entirely in the sword, for their civilization is completely based on strength of arms. This is the teaching that Moshe wanted to transmit to the Children of Israel by making them pass through the territory of Edom. He wanted them to understand the serious loss that a person can experience by neglecting the path of Torah in order to quench his own thirst in broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

However the king of Edom continued to refuse the Children of Israel passage through his land, for it is a halachah that “Esav hates Jacob.” Why? Because deep down, Esav knows the truth and recognizes that the Children of Israel have adopted the correct and genuine path, one that leads to a good and happy life.

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Esav knows that it is their attachment to Torah and mitzvot that gives them the merit to be the people chosen by G-d, and he has tremendous difficulty accepting this reality. That is why he hates Israel. Still today, the nations of the world know the truth and realize that Jews are the chosen and eternal people, and that their culture – completely based on the Torah

and divine commandments – is the correct and true path. However it is difficult for them to adopt this lifestyle, and they cannot make an effort to follow such a path, for the Torah demands that we restrain our passions and control our desires. Not feeling capable of this, they experience tremendous hatred for the Jewish people.

## Real Life Stories

### *The Army Couldn't Help*

It is written, “On the open field, anyone who touches one slain by the sword” (Bamidbar 19:16).

Self-sacrifice and bravery have always characterized the Jewish people, who determinedly fight for the dignity of their fallen soldiers, and who always make every effort to give them a proper burial among their own, not letting them remain on the ground as refuse.

This is the story of Reserve Major Moshe Kenan, as told in the book *Am Yisrael Chai*:

Near the end of the second Lebanon war, in a particularly fierce battle three kilometers into Lebanon, four Israeli soldiers were killed and over 30 wounded. Major Moshe Kenan was the leader of the paratrooper rescue squad that brought the dead and injured and some materiel back into Israel. When the operation was over, they realized that they had left one dead soldier behind.

It was Sunday. They had been notified that a ceasefire with Hezbollah would go into effect at 8:00 am Monday. They had scarcely 18 hours left to go back into the war zone and retrieve their fallen comrade, as well as the considerable arms and munitions left behind. In the platoon, opinions were divided. Some of the officers felt that there was no reason to go back in. Hezbollah was just waiting for the rescue force to return and would fire on it. It was not worth jeopardizing the lives of other soldiers to rescue the body of a fallen comrade and retrieve materiel. But the majority favored the opinion that they had to go back in, no matter what the cost, so the body wouldn't be captured and materiel wouldn't fall into the hands of Hezbollah. In the evening, the decision was made: They were going back in.

Shlomi, the assistant platoon commander, was skeptical about the operation, but Moshe forged ahead with the preparations. He requisitioned and received special night vision equipment, sappers trained to defuse landmines, and a hunting dog to sniff out the body easily and quickly, since they would be under Hezbollah fire throughout the mission.

Late that night, just before setting out, Moshe gathered his soldiers for a briefing. He explained the goal of the operation – to bring back the dead soldier for a proper Jewish burial. “About the importance of the operation, there was no need to speak,” Moshe recalls. “I could see a spark of faith in the eyes of the pure-hearted soldiers.”

He concluded the briefing: “We're going to bring our friend back for a Jewish burial. His pure and eternal soul sees and knows your self-sacrifice. We, the nation of Israel, are not afraid of Hezbollah. They are exactly like Amalek, who fought with the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt.”

Moshe went on to explain how Moshe Rabbeinu had led the Israelite army to victory. He sat on a hill overlooking the battlefield, and when he lifted his hands toward Heaven, Israel prevailed. When he dropped his hands, the enemy prevailed.

A skeptic in the platoon asked how Moshe's hands could determine the outcome of the battle. Moshe answered that Moshe had pointed out to the soldiers, “Look up to G-d! The physical battle is important, but in order to win the battle one needs to subjugate the heart to our Father in

Heaven. When Israel looked up and subjugated their hearts to G-d, they won. With G-d's help, we will go and we will win.”

As they started to move out, they were notified that Hezbollah had been identified in the precise area they were going, and therefore they could not take the dog. A single bark would reveal their whereabouts.

At the border fence, Moshe blessed his soldiers with the priestly blessing from the Torah: “I am not a kohen, but I felt such a strong love for these soldiers. I really felt as though I were blessing my sons on Shabbat night. I did not think about my family. It's forbidden in war to think about one's family. To me, the soldiers were my children. Then I took a minute to raise my eyes to Heaven and prayed from the depths of my heart, ‘Sovereign of the universe, please prove to all the soldiers of the platoon that You love us. Thank you.’”

As soon as he took his first steps into Lebanese territory, Moshe saw from the corner of his eye something running across his path. It was a small, gray cat. The cat hovered close to his boots, despite Moshe's attempts to shoo it away. As the platoon marched deeper into Lebanon, the cat accompanied them.

After an hour of movement, their scout noticed two shadowy figures to the east. The platoon hit the ground and pointed their weapons toward the terrorists. Moshe was about to open fire when the cat jumped next to him and brushed him with its tail. Startled, Moshe lost his concentration. By the time he regained it moments later and again prepared to fire, the two shadowy figures were identified as Israeli soldiers.

The cat accompanied them the entire three kilometers to their destination – the hill where the soldier's body lay somewhere in the darkness. Hezbollah fire rained down on the whole area. “We recognized the smell of war on the hill, and from afar we saw the missiles we had left in the area, shining from the dew and the light of the moon.”

Shlomi, the assistant platoon commander, sent forces to retrieve the materiel. Then he called to Moshe's rescue force to quickly ascend the hill and find the body. Just then, a Hezbollah missile landed next to the hill. Stalwartly, Moshe's men formed a horizontal line and, treading carefully, started to comb the area.

At one point the soldier at the right of the line said, “Look at this!” They stopped and saw that the cat stood next to an Israeli helmet. Moshe whispered, “Apparently, this is exactly where he fell.” They began to search the ground with their hands, but all they found were grenades and shrapnel from the battle. Then Moshe noticed the cat.

“Suddenly, from a distance of three meters, we saw the cat trying to drag something. We advanced and saw that the cat stood on the soldier we were looking for.”

They removed the body to the bottom of the hill and headed south. During the withdrawal, Moshe radioed his unit: “There's a small cat with us that helped us find exactly what we were looking for. Don't chase it away.” When Moshe glanced behind him, the cat had disappeared.

On the way back to the border, one of the officers fell in next to Moshe and whispered to him, “Did you see? The army couldn't help us with a hunting dog, so G-d sent us a hunting cat.”

### *The Vessel of the Mouth*

It is written, “Any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it is contaminated” (Bamidbar 19:15).

The Peleh Yoetz, Rabbi Eliezer Papo, would usually interpret this verse figuratively:

“Any open vessel – this consists of our mouth. If it is constantly open and speaking slanderous, forbidden, or useless words like any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it – meaning that it does not protect itself from evil speech – the Torah calls it contaminated.”

### *An Angel*

It is written, “We cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice. He sent an angel and took us out of Egypt” (Bamidbar 20:16).

How is it possible that Moshe, the most humble of all men, could glorify himself to the king of Edom by describing himself as “an angel”? Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, the author of *Oznaim LaTorah*, explains Moshe’s behavior by means of an incident related by the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Gordon in regard to Rabbi Eveli Possovoler. The latter went for a walk outside of town, and there he met a villager who was driving a wagon hitched to both a horse and a cow. Rabbi Eveli pointed out to him that the Torah prohibits this, but the villager paid no attention to him. Rabbi Eveli then stressed the Torah’s prohibition so he would understand the gravity of this sin, but it was useless.

At that point Rabbi Eveli said to him, “Do you know who I am? Do you know who is speaking to you? I am the greatest Rav in Vilna, known around the world. As soon as I return to Vilna, I will have you excommunicated and condemned!” Terrified, the villager unhitched the cow from the wagon and held the strap in his hand.

This is an example of a tzaddik who took advantage of his position as a giant in his generation and boasted before a villager in order to distance him from a transgression. Similarly, we may explain the words used by Moshe to address the king of Edom. Seeking to rattle and worry the king of Edom so he would allow the Children of Israel to pass through his territory, Moshe described himself as “an angel” sent by G-d to bring the people out of Egypt.

### *Joy, Not Sadness*

It is written, “Vehaya [And it will be] that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live” (Bamidbar 21:8).

The term vehaya (“and it will be”) always denotes joy. Yet what joy existed in this case?

Rabbi Meir Simcha Hacoen of Dvinsk explains: anyone who was bitten – including people who were ill and on the verge of dying because of some other condition. If such a person was bitten by a serpent, he would look at the bronze serpent and be completely healed.

Such a person would therefore be happy to have been bitten! Hence the verse uses the term vehaya, which always denotes joy, rather than vayehi, which denotes sadness.

### *Vera’ah Oto Vachai*

It is written, “And it will be that anyone who was bitten will look [vera’ah] at it [oto] and live [vachai]” (Bamidbar 21:8).

The book *Avnei HaShoham* explains this verse allegorically:

And it will be that anyone who was bitten – by the advice and trickery of the evil inclination;

will look [vera’ah] – the letters of vera’ah being the initials of the phrase Ve’achshav Rodef Acharei Hamitzvot (“And now, pursue the mitzvot”);

at it [oto] – the letters of oto being the initials of the phrase Ashrav Oumitkabelet Teshuvato (“Happy is one whose repentance is accepted”);

and live [vachai] – the letters of vachai being the initials of the phrase Ouvatorah Yehegeh Chochma (“And in Torah he will attain wisdom”).

### *Water in the Desert*

It is written, “The well, of which Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Assemble the people and I shall give them water’” (Bamidbar 21:16).

This well never left them. It may be asked, “How could they all draw [water] from it?” It issued into 12 streams and a channel went forth in every direction, and when Israel encamped and required water, they used to stand by it and recite this song: “Ascend, O well, bring up your waters to provide water for all, so that they may be watered from you.”

Likewise they sang the praises of the well: “Well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated” [Bamidbar 21:18]. ... So here, the Israelites spoke words of truth so as to set [the powers above] in motion.

– Zohar III:183b

## In the Light of the Parsha

### *By the Merit of the Patriarchs*

It is written, “Well that the princes dug” (Bamidbar 21:18).

These princes, say our Sages (Tanhuma, Chukat 21), allude to the merit of our holy Patriarchs, who are called “princes.” This teaches us that the Children of Israel attributed the merit of this song (shirah) to the Patriarchs. We may therefore ask: Was this well dug by a man? It was made of stone – it was not some hole in the ground! Therefore what does the verse mean by saying “that the princes dug”? In reality, it means that the Children of Israel received prophesy only on account of Moshe, who taught them to make an effort to obtain it. Moshe had already created this well with his staff, meaning with his help and support. When did this happen? It happened at the time of the first “well,” near the Sea of Reeds, when Moshe taught the Children of Israel to sing a song of thanks for the miracle by the water. Furthermore, Moshe did not repeat this song in Sefer Devarim, for in this song he said: “You will bring them and plant them on the mount of Your heritage” (Shemot 15:17). Since it had been decreed that Moshe would not enter the land of Israel, he feared that the Children of Israel would lose hope and say: “If Moshe himself is unable to enter, how much more are we!” Hence Moshe preferred not to repeat the phrase, “You will bring them and plant them,” so as not to worry the Children of Israel.

However his words became reality, as the Gemara states: “They prophesied and knew not what they prophesied” (Bava Batra 119b). Moshe did not say, “You will bring us,” but rather, “You will bring them,” alluding to the fact that Moshe himself would not enter the land of Israel.

Nevertheless, in Sefer Devarim Moshe alluded to this song by saying: “I implored Hashem at that time, saying” (Devarim 3:23) – and yet we find no place where Moshe implored Hashem at that time! In reality, Moshe was referring to what he had said in the Shirat Hayam (Song of the Sea): “You will bring them and plant them.” Since it had been decreed that Moshe would not enter the land of Israel, G-d said to him: “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this” (v.26). In order not to violate Hashem’s words, Moshe did not repeat this song. Instead, he only mentioned it by allusion using the term va’etchanan (“and I implored”), which has the same numerical value as the word shirah (“song”), for Moshe implored G-d in the Shirat Hayam to let him enter the land of Israel.

### *The Right Word at the Right Time*

At the most difficult time in Aaron's life, at the end of his role in this world as a kohen officiating in the Holy of Holies, the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Moshe: "Take Aaron and Elazar his son" (Bamidbar 20:25). The verse does not mention how Moshe was supposed to take Aaron, but Rashi explains this as follows:

"Take Aaron – with words of solace. Say to him, 'You are fortunate that you can see your crown given over to your son, something that I do not merit.'"

As the priesthood was being transmitted from one generation to another, it was a moment filled with sublime emotion in Aaron's heart, a pure heart that yearned to remain close to Hashem by assuring the daily service. It was then that the Holy One, blessed be He, taught Moshe to establish a path for the Jewish people, a path of working on oneself. It was precisely at that moment that the duty to comfort and console Aaron rested upon Moshe – to "take Aaron with words of solace," which he would accept on account of the great joy he would have in seeing his crown passing to his son after him. What a marvelous example of demonstrating to us the duty we have to cleave to Hashem's middot and to walk in His ways, to encourage, strengthen, and console others whenever we see them worried or sad.

This is especially the case when something happens within the family, when a relative is angry or upset with something that is aggravating him. One who cleaves to Hashem's middot is fully aware of his role at such a time: To encourage, console, and rejoice others.

On the verse, "Worry in the heart of man weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad" (Mishlei 12:25), the Vilna Gaon wrote the following in his commentary on the book of Proverbs: "When a man is worried, it weighs upon his heart. However if someone comes and speaks good words and consoles him, these words will rejoice his heart."

### *The Value of a Broken Heart*

One day the Chozeh of Lublin ordered his disciple, Rabbi Shalom of Belz, to stand at one end of the Beit HaMidrash, next to the furnace, where the poor and uneducated normally gathered. Rabbi Shalom went and sat next to the furnace, where he listened to people recounting their misfortunes to one another.

He heard them bitterly complaining, telling one another of their profound concern and pain because they had made an enormous effort and suffered greatly in traveling over a vast distance to see the tzaddik and benefit from his presence. However they were returning home empty-handed, having felt no spiritual elevation.

Rabbi Shalom then realized that the Chozeh had sent him next to the furnace for their sake, in order for him to encourage them.

He therefore addressed them and said, "Do you know that one day the merits of Israel – including tzedakah, hospitality, generosity and helping young newlyweds – were brought before the Celestial Court. The Satan hastened to bring similar deeds performed by non-Jews, since he had found generous and hospitable people among them. Ever on the alert, the angel defending Israel also brought the broken-hearted of Israel, which tilted the balance to the side of merit, for the Satan was unable to find the same among non-Jews."

Rabbi Shalom then added, "And why am I telling you this? So you may know how valuable your broken hearts are to the Sovereign of the universe, even when you are devoid of good deeds and middot, as it is written: 'A broken and contrite heart, O G-d, You will not despise' [Tehillim 51:19] – not even from someone worthy of scorn."

### *The Tzaddik's Shoes*

A Jew told our teacher Rabbi David Pinto Shlita an incredible story that occurred to his grandfather, who earned a living as a fisherman. One day he went out fishing, but caught nothing for the entire day. In bitterness of heart, he went to see Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, and told him that he hadn't caught any fish that day. The tzaddik looked at him for a moment, took off his shoes, and gave them to him. He said, "Take these shoes and throw them into the ocean. You will catch many fish."

The man took the tzaddik's shoes and did what he said. When he placed his shoes into the ocean, fish immediately rose toward him and filled his net, so much so that he couldn't even carry it.

That night the fisherman returned to the tzaddik with a gift: A basket filled with fish. When he explained what had happened, the tzaddik refused to accept any of it. He handed him back the basket and said, "These fish are yours. I cannot take anything from you."

Rabbi Haim Pinto was like a father to everyone. When anyone had a problem, he considered it his own problem. Imagine a fisherman with a similar problem going to his neighbor and telling him that he hasn't caught any fish. What would his neighbor say to him? "What do you want me to do? Can I help you catch fish?"

However Rabbi Haim Pinto was like a father to whom people went to vent their feelings and pour out their hearts.

If a story like this were to happen today, people would say: "How could these shoes help? Has anyone ever heard of shoes attracting fish? If I gave my shoes to a fisherman so he could throw them into the ocean, the odor would certainly scatter all the fish! And yet the shoes of the tzaddik attracted them!"

Such was the power of the simple faith that people had in the tzaddik. The tzaddik removed his shoes and gave them to a fisherman, who didn't think twice about it. Why? Because his faith in the tzaddik was so strong that if he told him something, that was it. This recalls the teaching of the Sages, "He Who told oil to burn can tell vinegar to burn" (Ta'anit 25a). In earlier times, Jews possessed this kind of simple faith.

"When I heard this story," our teacher Rabbi David Pinto Shlita said, "it greatly strengthened my faith. That is the kind of fishing that I took away from this story, a fishing of faith that I have found nowhere else."

## *Guard Your Tongue*

### *Innocent Before the Celestial Court*

As long as we are not perfectly certain, according to a strict interpretation of the law, that the words we are about to say do not constitute slander, gossip, or dissension, we must make an effort not to say them. Even if the evil inclination tries to convince us that these words are part of a mitzvah, and that we can merit a place in the World to Come by saying them, we must not listen in order to be declared innocent before the Celestial Court. In fact suppose that we have not acted according to the law, and the Celestial Court rebukes us by saying: "Why have you not condemned such and such a person concerning a given issue? It would have been a mitzvah!" In such a case we can always reply, "Given that I wasn't sure, I preferred to abide by the rule that it is better to remain silent." Yet if, on the contrary, we condemn others or ignite a dispute while still being in doubt or under the influence of the evil inclination, which tries to convince us that what we are doing is a mitzvah, we will not be able to claim that we spoke on account of a doubt, for in case of doubt it is better to remain silent.