



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Chukat

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Chukat

Daily Miracles



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do we even know what’s happening in our lives? Do we know how much has to go right for us to breathe? Are we aware of the miracles that sustain our nature?

When we stop to think about it – or even if we don’t stop – we realize how much the people in our lives do for us, how much they love us ... how our parents care for us, how our children invigorate us, how our employers provide us with opportunities, how our employees facilitate us.

If this is true of us, humans of flesh and blood, how much more so – infinitely more so – is it true of the Master of the Universe. Every second of every moment of every day our Master makes us, remakes us, creates us, recreates us, enlivens and ignites every fiber of our being.

A seemingly far-out interpretation from Rashi on a seemingly straightforward series of Torah verses teaches us the behind-the-scenes presence of God.

And a powerful story about the previous Chabad Rebbe (who was miraculously released from prison on the 12th of Tammuz in 1927) instructs us how to access the power to perceive and realize the hidden miracles in our lives.

DAILY MIRACLES: DO YOU APPRECIATE WHAT YOU HAVE?

1. Newfound Appreciation (Joke)

One afternoon Moshe comes home from work to find total mayhem. His two young children are in the front garden, naked, soaking wet and playing with the garden hose. There is food all over the lawn, rubbish spilled everywhere and some of the plants have been pulled up and are lying on the path.

The front door to the house is wide open, and there's no sign of the dog. As Moshe enters his house, he finds an even bigger mess. The coffee table is lying on its side, all the vases have been knocked over and wet flowers are on the floor, the armchair cushions are lying where they were thrown and one of the children has been sick all over the carpet. The radio is blaring out and the children's room is strewn inches deep with toys and various items of clothing.

Moshe goes into the kitchen and finds the sink full of unwashed dishes from the morning's breakfast, none of the food has been cleared up, the fridge door is wide open and there's dog food on the floor.

He's quite worried by now and heads up the stairs to look for his wife Fay. He has to step over yet more toys and piles of clothes. He's worried Fay might be ill, or even worse.

As Moshe passes the bathroom, water is trickling under the door and into the hall. So he peers inside and sees wet towels, spilt bath oils, his shaver lying on the floor and toothpaste smeared everywhere. He turns off the bath tap and rushes to his bedroom. There he finds Fay.

She's curled up in bed, still in her pajamas and reading a book. She smiles at him and says, "How did your day go, darling?"

Moshe looks at her bewildered and asks, "What happened here today, Fay?"

She again smiles, "You know how every day you come home from work and you ask me what in the world did I do today?"

“Yes,” he replies.

“Well,” says Fay, “today I didn’t do it.”

2. Are We Appreciative?

Do we even know what’s happening in our lives? Do we know how much has to go right for us to breathe? Are we aware of the miracles that sustain our nature?

When we stop to think about it – or even if we don’t stop – we realize how much the people in our lives do for us, how much they love us ... how our parents care for us, how our children invigorate us, how our employers provide us with opportunities, how our employees facilitate us.

If this is true of humans of flesh and blood, how much more so – infinitely more so – is it true of the Master of the Universe: every second of every moment of every day our Master makes us, remakes us, creates us, recreates us, enlivens and ignites every fiber of our being.

Do we ever stop to appreciate it? Forget stopping; do we appreciate it even on the go?

And when we do realize what the Master of the Universe does for us individually and globally, how do we react? Do we not dance? Do we not offer songs of praise?

3. Parshat Chukat – Cryptic Narrative

Our Torah reading – Parshat Chukat – contains a series of verses that describe the journeys of Israel. The words of the Torah are often written in an abstract, cryptic fashion, open to various interpretations.¹ No less so the verses we read today:

¹ See R. Aryeh Kaplan’s Living Torah to Numbers 21 for a comprehensive list of the commentators and their interpretations.

From there they journeyed, and they encamped on the other side of the Arnon, which was in the desert, extending from the Amorite border, for Arnon was the Moabite border between Moab and the Amorites. Concerning this it is told in the account of the wars of the Lord, "What He gave at the [Sea of] Reeds (besufa) and the streams of Arnon. And the spilling of the streams that turned to settle at Ar and leaned toward the border of Moab. From there to the well; that is the well of which the Lord 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. From the gift, to the streams, and from the streams to the heights. From the heights to the valley in the field of Moab, at the top of the peak, that overlooks the wastelands."²

On their way to the Promised Land, the Children of Israel journeyed along the Nachal Arnon, the Arnon River east of the Jordan, which was situated between Moab to the south and the Amorite to the north. Then the people came upon the well, which provided water, and they sang a song of praise.

Very nice. But there doesn't seem to be that much subject to interpretation here.

4. Rashi, a Fascinating Midrash

Yet, the 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, elaborates extensively on these verses. Culling from Midrashic and Talmudic sources, Rashi reads this seemingly straightforward progression of verses in a seemingly non-literal, "far-out" way.

Reading the word besufa to refer to the Yam Suf, the Reed Sea, Rashi parallels the miracles of the Red Sea with the miracles that happened at

²Numbers 21:13-20.

the streams of Arnon, for here too, many great miracles happened. What were those miracles?³

And the spilling of the streams that turned to settle at Ar and leaned toward the border of Moab.

The simple meaning would seem to say that a stream flowed and settled at Ar, which was along the border of Moab. But Rashi quotes the Midrash⁴ to suggest something radically different: the “spilling” of the stream refers to the blood of the Amorites, who were hidden in the mountains along this gorge through which the Israelites passed.

What transpired? Two high mountains, the Amorite to the west and the Moabite to the east, stood close side by side, creating a gorge between them. The mountains were so close that one could stand on the tip of one and communicate with someone standing on the opposite mountaintop.

Upon hearing that the Hebrews would traverse the narrow gorge, the Amorites said, “When the Israelites enter the land by passing through the gorge, we will come out of the caves in the mountains above them and kill them with arrows and stones shot from catapults.” There were clefts in the rock on the Moabite side of the canyon, and directly opposite those clefts, on the mountain on the Amorite side, there were protrusions, likened to horns and breasts.

So, what happened? What happened to the ambush? A miracle happened. When the Israelites prepared to pass through, one mountain trembled and moved toward the other mountain, effectively closing off the top.⁵ Then those protrusions entered the clefts, killing the Amorites. This is the meaning of that turned to settle at Ar. The mountain swung from its place and moved toward the side of the Moabite border, and attached itself to it. Thus, it leaned on the border of Moab.

In other words, the spilling of the streams refers to the blood of the ambushing Amorites; the turned to settle at Ar refers to the Amorite moun-

³ Cf. Midrash Tanchuma Chukat 20, Bamidbar Rabbah 19:25.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This only occurred toward the top of the mountains; otherwise the people in the gorge would have been crushed as well. See Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 149 fn. #9.

tain turning to the Moabite mountain across from it, and when it leaned on the border of Moab, it crushed the Amorites lying in ambush of the unsuspecting Israelites.

This was the massive miracle akin to the Splitting of the Sea. But the unsuspecting Jews walking below had no idea what transpired until:

From there to the well; that is the well of which the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather the people, and I will give them water.’”

What does Rashi say about this?

From there the flow [of blood] came to the well. How? The Holy One, blessed is He, said, “Who will inform My children of these miracles?” The Book of Proverbs states, “If you give a child bread, inform his mother.”⁶

After they passed through, the mountains returned to their places, and the well descended into the stream, and brought up the blood of the slain, their arms, and their limbs, and carried them to the camp. The Israelites – realizing what great miracle had just happened, that their very nation was saved from certain annihilation – broke out in spontaneous dance and sang a song.

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. From the gift, to the streams, and from the streams to the heights. From the heights to the valley in the field of Moab, at the top of the peak, that overlooks the wastelands.”

Now, this is a highly unconventional interpretation, to say the least. Why is Rashi, who endeavors to be as literal as possible,⁷ compelled to understand these verses in this non-literal manner? Mountains slamming into each other, crushing would-be ambushers, streams of blood leading to song? What does this mean?

⁶Shabbat 10b.

⁷See Genesis 3:8 for example.

5. Sea Splits and Stream Flows

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that Rashi is compelled to quote the Midrash in interpreting the verses,⁸ because of the fact that something special happened here that never happened before, except once: Israel sang a song.

Israel almost never felt inspired to sing a song, even when great life-saving miracles occurred. Israel did not sing when the manna fell or when the well water flowed – and that was for a full forty years – miraculously sustaining them until the Promised Land! Neither did they sing when surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, or when they received the Torah.

The only two times the Jews sang was at the Splitting of the Sea and here, at the flow of the Arnon River.

The fact that Israel sang a song of praise following this miracle – something they did only once before by the parting of the sea – compels Rashi to find an explanation. There must be something, senses Rashi, about this miracle that is similar to the miracle of the parting of the sea. Why did they sing only these two times? What was the common denominator between this miracle at the River Arnon and the one at the Splitting of the Sea?

The uniqueness of the Splitting of the Sea, what made this miracle song-worthy, was – as the verse states, The Lord will fight for you, but you shall remain silent⁹ – that the Creator Himself fought the battle for Israel and Israel said not a word.

Usually humanity has to deal with its own problems, fight its own battles, overcome its own challenges. At the Splitting of the Sea, God did all the work, vanquishing and drowning the Egyptian enemy, while Israel simply walked to freedom without lifting a finger or breaking a sweat.

When Israel saw that God would fight their battle, Israel began to rejoice in song. When Israel realized that God had their back, even when they didn't have to invest effort, Israel knew that they were blessed.

⁸Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23 pp. 148-156.

⁹Exodus 14:14.

The same was true at the River Arnon.¹⁰

Israel gave Moab a wide berth, traveling the long way around it, reaching the River Arnon and thinking they were safe, unaware of a lurking ambush just ahead in the narrow gorge.

Innocent Israel walked through the gorge without doing a thing and made it to the other side intact.

Little did they know that the Master of the Universe was their bullet-proof vest all the while, smashing mountains atop of them and crushing their enemies.

Later, when they came to the well and saw the blood and limbs of their giant enemies, Israel realized what had happened – how close they came to extinction and how the Master of the Universe saved them and destroyed their enemies.

So, here too, Israel broke out into song, realizing that God fights their battles – even if they don't realize it – just as He did at the Splitting of the Sea.

6. Personal Lesson: Miracles Unknown, Wonders Unrecognized

How many miracles happen in our daily lives that we are unaware of?

Who knows?

Every one of us benefits a myriad of miracles daily that we don't even know exist – we don't realize the dangers, and we don't know the salvations.

This week's Torah portion teaches us an invaluable lesson – one we must always remember: As we walk through the valleys of life, often

¹⁰ Perhaps even more acutely, for at the Splitting of the Sea, Nachshon ben Aminadav did play an initiating and integral part, and the Jews were aware of the miracle as it occurred; but here no one initiated anything – even Moses wasn't involved – and the Jews weren't aware of the miracle until after.

overshadowed by giant mountains on both sides, as we travel through the twists and turns of our life's journey, filled with threats everywhere – we must know that when we forge ahead bound for the Promised Land, the Guardian of Israel watches over us.

Sadly, our daily routines overwhelm us and we can lose sight of the miracles taking place right in front of our noses.

Here is a practical suggestion that can help us become more aware and cognizant of the miracles in our lives:

After Shabbat, take a pen and paper. Sit down and make a list. Enumerate every single thing that is going right in your life, no matter how mundane, prosaic, or habitual it may seem. If you breathe, list that you breathe. If you can see, hear, smell, feel, walk, touch, speak, think, feel, list all those things.

When you realize how many battles God fights for you, you too will certainly break out into spontaneous song.

7. Do You Know That You Don't Know? (Story)

This coming Monday is the 12th of Tammuz, the commemoration and celebration of the Previous Chabad Rebbe's liberation from prison and exile, which has many universal lessons for all of us, especially regarding the hidden hand working miracles in our lives.

On 14 Sivan 5687 (June 1927), the Previous Rebbe was arrested by the Soviet communists and sentenced to death for his "counter-revolutionary" activities on behalf of spreading Judaism. All the while in prison, the Rebbe, like Moses in his generation, dedicated his life to marching with Israel toward the Promised Land as the Jews did all those years ago under the stewardship of Moses, knowing with complete confidence that God Almighty would shield him as he walked through the proverbial gorge between the evils of the Moabite and Amorite in the then-present-day form of the soviet tyrants.

⁸ See Likkutei Sichot ibid p. 1046.

The Rebbe knew and taught his Chassidim to know as well that the Master of the universe pulls the strings and can crush mountains if need be.

Miraculously, on the 3rd of Tammuz, the Rebbe's death sentence was downgraded to exile for three years in Kastrama. Even more miraculously, less than 10 days later, on the 12th of Tammuz, the exile was revoked completely and the Rebbe was freed.

This confidence, that God rules the world and everything herein, is exemplified in an episode that the Previous Rebbe documented 7 years earlier, at another 'summons' by the Soviets:

In the summer of 1920 I was summoned to the Tcheka - the name GPU was not yet in use at the time - of Rostov-on-the-Don. The summons was carried out by the Judaism-hating "Jewish section" of the communist party, the infamous Yevsektzia.

The summons was typical to the manner of the Tcheka. I had not yet concluded the morning prayers (I was leading the prayers myself, for it was within the year of mourning after my holy father's passing) when the three emissaries from the court of death entered the room - dressed in their uniforms of red and black, rifles in hand, their belts filled with bullets and hung with a pair of revolvers and another pair of Cossack knives, with helmets of brass and their faces aflame. They approached me and said: "You are summoned to immediately accompany us to the offices of the Tcheka."

Two of the messengers were from the Yevsektzia and the third a non-Jew. The two Jews wished to strip me of my tallit and tefillin on the spot. When I told them that I must first finish my prayers - we were at the Monday supplement Vehu Rachum - and the study of mishnayot which follows, they let loose a barrage of curses and yelled at me to remove my tallit and tefillin immediately. (Incidentally, one of them was a refugee from the city of Shavel who had come to me for assistance. I had arranged a position for him at a cigarette business and later I had loaned him money to establish a business of his own. For the next three years - up until the revolution - he earned a respectable living.) Were it not for the intervention of

their non-Jewish colleague, they would have forcefully interrupted my prayers.

When I finished reciting the final kaddish which follows the study of mishnayot, I removed my tallit and tefillin and went along with my armed guardians. One walked on my right, a second on my left, and a third behind me - in the manner that those accused of treason against the regime are led.

When we arrived at the courtyard of death, they led me to a large chamber in which some fifteen persons sat along both sides of a long table. At the head of the table sat another two, and I was seated opposite them at the foot of the table. My three guards sat behind me, left, right, and center.

One of those seated at the head of the table addressed me: "We are the members of the Party's Committee to Investigate Religions, now occupied in investigating the Jewish religion. We have various questions. We have already summoned Rabbi Berman and Rabbi Gold- enberg - we asked what we asked and they answered what they answered. Now we have summoned Rabbi Schneerson to resolve certain issues pertaining to Kabbalah and Chassidism."

All this was said in the Russian language.

I answered in Yiddish: "I have already made it clear on the two former occasions on which I was summoned to the Tcheka that I will not budge from my principles. There is yet to be born and never will there be born, the man or demon who will move me in the slightest degree from my principles..."

Before I finished my words I was interrupted by a "committee member" seated on the right side of the table. He lifted the revolver which lay on the table - in addition to the arms which they all wore on their belts, a revolver lay on the table before each of the assembled - and pointed it at me, saying: "This toy does away with 'principles.' Fear of it has opened many a mouth. Also the dumb have become talkative before it."

“You are utterly mistaken,” I replied. "This toy impresses only the cowardly atheist, who has but a single world and many gods (ein velt un asach getter) - every hedonist has his many gods. But as for us, who have but a single G-d and believe in two worlds, the toy which you are brandishing not only fails to frighten, it makes no impression whatsoever.¹¹

8. The Will Of Heaven (Conclusion)

The miraculous liberation of the 12th of Tammuz – and the firm belief of the Rebbe in “one God and two worlds” – teaches us about the hidden miracles happening behind the scenes in our own lives. And how we must always stand strong in our faith and trust on God, as we march toward the Promised Land.

Next time we are in a difficult situation, instead of focusing on the challenge and the pain, let’s focus on all the things that are occurring and reoccurring constantly behind the scenes.

We are all on the way to the Promised Land. Any enemy or challenge or obstacle we see we shall overcome and vanquish. How? God will do it for us.

And, as this week’s Torah reading demonstrates, any enemy or challenge or obstacle that we don’t see, God will overcome and vanquish for us, paving a smooth and direct path to the Promised Land.

Shabbat Shalom!

¹¹ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2779/jewish/Monotheism-in-Rostov.htm.

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