

# Chukas

## *Problems, Repression, Self-Control, and Hope*

**I**n the *Torah* portion *Chukas*, we have many disparate elements. We learn about the *Porah Adumah*, the red heifer, whose ashes were used together with water and some other ingredients to purify a person who came into contact with the dead. That person had to be sprinkled with these ashes on the third and seventh day in order to be pure to enter the Temple.

We also learn about the death of Miriam, and we learn about Moshe and Aaron's sin, how Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to the rock, and we learn about the death of Aaron. We learn also about how the king of Arad attacked the Jewish people, took captives, and then, himself, was destroyed. We learn how the Jewish people asked permission to go through the lands of the Edomites and how the Edomites would not allow them to so the Jewish people had to take a circuitous route. We did learn how the Jewish people encountered snakes and how they conquered the land of Sichon, king of the Amorites Ha Amoree, that is the modern Golan Heights. We also learn about how Sichon's people had captured this land from Moab. The Jewish people were not supposed to attack Moab but, since the Amorites had already conquered this part of Moab, the Jewish people could keep this land.

Then we learn about a song of triumph that was sung by the Amorites after they had conquered the Moabites. It reads, "Come ye to Heshbon. Let the city of Sichon be built and established, for a fire has gone out of Heshbon, a flame from the city of Sichon. It has devoured Moab, the lords of the high places of Arnan. Woe to thee, Moab. Thou art undone, O people of Chamosh. He has given his sons as fugitives and his daughters into captivity unto Sichon, King of the Amorites." It seems strange that the *Torah* should teach us about the song of triumph the Amorites had sung after they had defeated the Moabites. Why should the *Torah* mention this song? The *Torah* does not usually tell us about the songs of triumph of other peoples, and why is it important that we should learn this song in this *Torah* portion? We can understand how we had to learn how the Amorites captured this land from the Moabites so we could have title to it, but why do we have to learn about their song of triumph, and why do we have so

many disparate elements in this particular *Torah* portion?

I think if we look carefully at what is written in this *Torah* portion before we learn about this song of triumph, we can answer these questions. This *Torah* portion is really talking about how the Jewish people changed from an unnatural people to a normal people. Up to this time, the Jewish people had been fed by the *manna* from heaven because of the merit of Moshe. A special well accompanied them because of the merit of Miriam, and special clouds of glory covered them, because of the merit of Aaron, which protected them from all enemies. They did not have to worry about snakes or different types of storms or enemies attacking them. They were secure. But now all this was ending. Miriam died, and they no longer had the well. Aaron died, and there were no more clouds, no more protection against the elements and foreign enemies. That is why the Canaanite king of Arad attacked them and took captives. They were beset by snakes. They also had problems because of shortages of water and food. They were becoming a normal people, a people who had to deal with the normal problems of life. They now had to become a normal people.

Up to this time, this was not so. Up to this time, everything was taken care of for them. Up to this time, they did not have to worry about these types of problems. All they had to do was to concentrate on becoming better Jews and learning *Torah*, but now they had to enter the world. Now they had to face the real problems of the world. This meant that they could no longer “pooh pooh” these types of problems. We all know that many people feel that they have no problems, but if they had any problems, they could easily solve these problems, but this is not so. Life is difficult. Life is hard, and we are all going to encounter problems. It is true that we have to shield our children from these types of problems, earning a living, etc. so that they can mature and blossom and gain the necessary wisdom in order to deal with problems. We know that those children who are not shielded from these types of problems, who have to deal with all sorts of hard economic and life and death issues, are maimed by this struggle by being exposed to these problems too early in life. Good parents shield their children from the hard problems of life until they are prepared to face the realities of life. We talk about these problems with them, but we do not make them solve them until they’re ready. This, of course, is why we have

to give them a *Torah* education because the *Torah* prepares them for the problems that they are inevitably going to face in life, the problems of relationships, the problems that we all have in marriage, the problems we are going to have earning a living. We have to set parameters for them. We have to show them how to deal with these problems in an ethical and moral way. We also have to teach them that we can never just suppress problems. We have to bring the problems out and discuss them, but we cannot do it in an exhibitionist type of way. This is why we learn the Amorite song of triumph. After they had defeated the Moabites, they uttered this song of triumph, little knowing that this song of triumph was just a passing phase. They had only been able to conquer the Moabites so that later the Jewish people could conquer them and, thus, gain clear title to the land. They exhibited a lack of restraint and a lack of control which was not seemly. Therefore, we learn about their song here.

That is explained in the *Gemora BoboBasra*. The *Gemora* explains that the sentence which introduces the Amorite song and which is usually translated "Those who made parables, Come to Heshbon," should be translated "Those who rule over themselves, they will make a reckoning." We all know that we are not supposed to suppress our problems but bring them out. Freud has taught us that we become neurotic when we suppress our problems, but people do not understand what this means. In the popular consciousness, they think that that means that the first thing that comes to your mind you should say, that you should never suppress your feelings or suppress talking about your experiences. What you feel or have experienced, you should say; otherwise, you'll become neurotic. This is wrong. This is not what Freud taught. What he taught about were unconscious repressed experiences. Repressed experiences that we do not know about. They are in our unconscious. If we know about them, they are, by definition, not repressed experiences. If we know about them, then we should deal with them in a controlled and rational way. We should never use exhibitionism to try to solve the problems like is done today on TV. That just makes our problems worse. When we talk about repressed emotion and problems, we are talking about problems that we do not even know that we are repressing. They are in our unconscious and they cause us to act in a neurotic fashion. In other words, because these experiences have been so

very painful, the only way that we could handle them is to suppress them. Because they have become part of our unconscious, we do not know that they even have occurred.

We know of children who have been abused who have become either depressed or depressing people who sometimes have become very violent because of abuse which they don't even consciously know about. They do not know why they do what they are doing because this abuse has become part of their unconscious. They consciously do not know why they are doing terrible things. We all know adults who, many times, act in a crazy way. The reason they act in this crazy way is because when their defenses break down and their unconscious seems about ready to burst into their consciousness, they do all sorts of things which will cause these experiences to stay in their unconscious. They do not want to be consciously aware of their abuse they endured or other terrible experiences. Many times we find people will do very nice things and, at the very last minute, they will say something or do something that will ruin everything nice they did before, because they do not want to receive a compliment. They do not want to get a good image of themselves because then their defenses will crumble and their repressed experiences will come to the fore. That is what Freud was talking about when he says we should not repress our emotions. It only refers to experiences and emotions that are in our unconscious, those that we are consciously aware of. If we know about our abuse or other terrible problems, we are supposed to confront them in a rational and right way and not in an exhibitionist way.

In this *Torah* portion the Amorites displayed abundant enthusiasm and exuberance, but they did it for naught and they did it in the wrong way. That's why we read about their song. When we know that we have problems, we have to face these problems, but we cannot go overboard. We have to deal with our problems in a controlled and dignified way. Moshe Rabbeinu lost the leadership of the Jewish people because he lost his self-control. He called the Jewish people rebels. He hit the rock. He did not know anymore how to deal with the public problems of the people in a controlled and rational way. That is also what the *Gemoroa BabbaBasra* is teaching us. Those people who rule over themselves will make a reckoning. In other words, when we know about our problems, we must deal with

them in a proper way. How are we to deal with the problems of life?

First of all, we have to realize that we have to share our problems with our friends and our families because we cannot solve all our problems all by ourselves. We know this especially when it comes to the problem of death. That is why we start this *Torah* portion by learning about the *Porah Adumah*. You cannot deal with the problem of death by yourself. That is why we have *Shiva* and *Shlosheem* because it is hard to get over a death, and that is what the *Porah Adumah* was interested to accomplish. When it comes to problems caused by a death, we all need to be touched by other people. We all need their counsel and help. We also, in order to confront problems, need criticism. We need to realize that we are not perfect. Some people do not want to admit they said anything wrong. We need criticism. It is good to get the input of different people. If two or three people tell you the same thing, then maybe you had better start thinking about it. There is a Russian proverb which says that if one person says you are drunk, ignore him. If two people say you are drunk, you better sit down, and if three people say you are drunk, you had better lay down. This is true. If we want to deal with the problems of life, we have to be willing to accept criticism.

The last thing, of course, is to have hope, to believe that G-d is always there to help us. When the Jewish people looked up to their Father in heaven, the plague of snakes stopped. First, we have to recognize that we have a problem. After we recognize that we have a problem, then we have to be willing to accept criticism and we also have to believe that G-d will help. If we are willing to do all these things, then rest assured that we will be able to solve our problems, and we will be able to lead good lives. We must not suppress our problems, but we must remember that this refers to problems which are not in our unconscious, but once problems have come into our consciousness, then we have to deal with them in a controlled fashion. Those who rule over themselves will make a reckoning. They will reckon with the support of the community, they reckon with the advice of others, and they know that they can always count on G-d's help. This is something that the Amorites did not know. In their enthusiasm and exuberance over their victory, they failed to take into account that this may have been just a pyrrhic victory that what they had accomplished was only a

prelude to their own destruction by the Israelites.

We also must always do everything soberly and realistically. We should never try to pretend life does not have any problems. Life has many problems. They are difficult but we can overcome them with G-d's help by accepting criticism and by accepting also the support of our community and family. Let us all hope that we will do these things so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.