

TIMELESS TORAH

CHUKAT - Forty Years Wandering: The Immediate Aftermath

A New Generation

An important phrase, strikingly repeated throughout Parshat Chukat, provides a springboard for discussion about the transition of the Jewish people at this crucial stage of their wandering. Chapter 20, verse 1 describes how '*kol ha'eidah* — the entire congregation' arrived at Midbar Tzin. Rashi explains that this phrase — 'the entire congregation' — is a reference to the fact that all those who were destined to perish in the desert had already passed away, and all of this new generation would be able to enter Eretz Yisrael. More specifically, though, the Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) points out that the term '*eidah*' could be used both positively and negatively, depending on the context. Indeed, in previous *parshiyot*, this word was often used to describe those who had sinned. Here, however, the verse mentions '*Bnei Yisrael — kol ha'eidah*' indicating that the entire congregation were now worthy of being called *Bnei Yisrael*, which is the appellation that connotes the lofty spiritual level of the nation.

This interpretation is significant because immediately following this verse, the Torah seems to highlight negative issues. We find in the coming verses the now familiar complaints about the scanty water supply and Moshe's harsh censure of the people: 'Listen now, you rebels!' With the Ohr HaChaim's observation, however, we develop a completely opposite perspective to this episode. When dealing with the previous generation, Moshe and Aharon had sometimes had to strongly reprimand the people. This generation, however, had already imbued the lessons of their forty years of wandering and were ready to enter the land.

In fact, according to the Ohr HaChaim, the criticism levelled by Hashem against Moshe in this parshah was for being too exacting with the people; there was a need for the leadership to recognise the qualitative difference between this generation and the previous generation.

Strength of Independence

While the Ohr HaChaim interprets the phrase 'the entire congregation' in a positive light, the Ramban (d.1270) offers a very different perspective. He proves from several places that this term is invariably used when the Torah is relating the complaints of the Jewish people. In this case too, it is being used to introduce the complaint of a lack of water following the death of Miriam and to emphasise that all the people joined in these complaints.

What is fascinating about the Ramban's explanation is that the same expression is found a few verses later (20:22) in reference to the passing of Aharon. In fact, in that passage, the phrase is used not once, but three times. The Ramban himself mentions this and explains that, indeed, just as everyone had taken part in the complaints, they also all participated in mourning the death of their beloved leader.

We could add, possibly, that the repetition of this phrase, together with the juxtaposition to the previous parshah, indicates the power of the figure of Aharon. As a 'lover and pursuer of peace', Aharon was a unifying individual, able to transform the negative connotation of *kol ha'eidah* to something positive.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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When the people realised that their leaders were passing away and they would have to begin to take responsibility for their own future, their negative attitude faded away, and they were able to transcend their differences. It is striking that at this early stage of the journey of our nation, it took the tragic passing of a great leader to spur the people to a sense of positive unity over their future.

If this suggestion is correct, it would help us understand another repetition. On verse 1, Rashi comments that when 'the entire congregation' reached Midbar Tzin, they were complete because none of them were destined to die. On verse 20, when this phrase is repeated in the passage of Aharon's death, Rashi again makes the same comment. The difference between Rashi's two comments is, however, that on the second verse, Rashi adds that the people were not only complete but *ready to enter Eretz Yisrael*. After Aharon's passing, the people were shocked into the realisation that they would not have these leaders forever. Now, they finally internalised fully that inheriting Eretz Yisrael would require independent growth and unity of the people.

A Nation of Leaders

Although Parshat Chukat contains the death of Miriam and the cessation of the miraculous well that accompanied the Jews in her merit, it also contains the *Shirat HaBe'er*, the Song of the Well, which was sung in appreciation for this miracle. Of course, the question that begs to be asked is why this *shirah* was sung only now and not earlier, when it began sustaining the people with life-giving water at the start of their desert journey.

The Sefat Emet (d.1905) finds an answer to this by analysing the actual words of the song. The first line reads, '*Be'er chafaruha sarim* — The well that princes have dug' (21:18), which refers to the forefathers, in the merit of whose holiness the well was opened. In the second line, however, there is a reference to the ordinary members of the nation: '*karuha nedivei ha'am* — excavated by the benefactors of the people'. Although the initial merit for the well needed the leaders and the princes of the nation, it was the regular people who continued to 'dig' it with their good deeds and prayers. Just as a real pit might need powerful tools to open it at first but every subsequent shovel-full will make it even deeper, so were the good deeds of regular Jews sufficient to build and improve on what their great leaders had achieved before them.

It was this revelation that the people saw after Miriam died. The well disappeared but was then renewed even without Miriam's merit. It was now that they fully appreciated the leadership that they had been given; following the example that Miriam had shown them, they could keep the well going themselves. Rabbi Sacks used to say that 'good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders.' That is what the Jewish people saw here. The magnificence of this moment was that the people saw their own potential and understood that although their leaders were leaving them, they were able to maintain their glorious tradition and become leaders themselves.

Next Week: Balak - A Nation That Rises Like a Lion: Understanding Bilaam's Blessings