

Table Talk: Parshat Chukat

In this week's *parsha*, we read about yet another complaint with which the new Jewish nation attacks God and Moshe. Chapter 21 verses 4-5 tell us that Bnei Yisrael are fed up with their travels and complain that there's "no food or water".

Q.) Now, we know that they received manna from heaven and that G-d did provide water. As a matter of fact, in Devarim Chapter 8 verses 14-15, Moshe tells the Jews never to forget G-d, even after they enter Eretz Canaan and start taking care of themselves: "...then thy heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God, who brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; who led thee through the great and dreadful wilderness, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint..."

So what were they complaining about?

A.) It seems that they were just overwhelmed with the dangers and uncertainty of desert life, and understandably so, but they should have had more faith and trusted that if G-d could take them out of Egypt with the display of miracles they witnessed, then He could provide for them in the desert.

G-d punishes them for this lack of trust. This week's parsha continues this story with: "And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died" (21:6).

Q.) How is this a just and fair punishment? How will this teach the nation a lesson?

A.) G-d felt that the only way to show Bnei Yisrael how much He really is present in their lives and how much He is taking care of them, is by removing that care/protection and letting them feel what it's like to exist without Him. Then they'll stop complaining and realize He is always guarding them! The word for "sent" is usually וישלח, read "va^yishlach". But here, the word is vocalized "VaYishalach" which means "sent free" or "sent loose". This tells us, just as Devarim later explicitly states, that all along G-d was keeping these snakes away, but the nation didn't even know so they couldn't appreciate it. Now, G-d "lets them loose," taking away His protection. The Jews will thereby come to realize just how much G-d is there with them and how there is no need to fear.

Discuss: What have you ever taken for granted that was only appreciated once it was taken away? Why are humans like that? What can we do to generate/practice more appreciation? How is this true with both all that we receive from G-d and on a more mundane level, all that children receive from parents?

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