



CHUKAT

AS METAL IS CAST, SO IS OUR METTLE FORGED

True Strength and Deep Commitment Emerge from the Smelting Pot of Life

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Chukat

Moses is taught the laws of the red heifer, whose ashes purify a person who has been contaminated by contact with a dead body.

After forty years of journeying through the desert, the people of Israel arrive in the wilderness of Zin. Miriam dies, and the people thirst for water. G-d tells Moses to speak to a rock and command it to give water. Moses gets angry at the rebellious Israelites and strikes the stone. Water issues forth, but Moses is told by G-d that neither he nor Aaron will enter the Promised Land.

Aaron dies at Hor Hahar (Mount Hor) and is succeeded in the high priesthood by his son Eleazar. Venomous snakes attack the Israelite camp after yet another eruption of discontent in which the people “speak against G-d and Moses”; G-d tells Moses to place a brass serpent upon a high pole, and all who will gaze Heavenward will be healed. The people sing a song in honor of the miraculous well that provided them with water in the desert.

Moses leads the people in battles against the Emorite

kings Sihon and Og (who seek to prevent Israel’s passage through their territory) and conquers their lands, which lie east of the Jordan River.

If G-d offered you a chance to live problem-free for the rest of your life, would you accept?



TEXT 1A

*David Chanoff, Warrior
(New York: Simon &
Schuster, 1989), pp. 146–
149*

The pilots reported that the pass seemed empty. . . . I didn't expect opposition inside Mitla pass. The jets flying over that morning had seen nothing other than burned-out trucks.

Motta [Gur, commander of the paratroopers] left. But within a mile of the entrance, the first half-track was slammed by a volley of fire high on the defile walls. The driver was killed instantly, and the half-track swerved sideways and stopped. The second half-track moved up and was also hit and stopped. . . .

Motta Gur was on the spot. But he had no question about what to do. He moved in. And as he did, he was drawn into battle with an entire Egyptian infantry battalion that had dug themselves into the ledges and caves of the cliff walls and had not been noticed by our planes. . . .

The battle was raging. With Motta Gur still pinned down, the reconnaissance unit skirted the cliffs on the right side, hoping to come down on the Egyptians from above. But when they got to the ridge they were hit by a hail of bullets from the caves and hidden ledges on the far side. Unable to identify the source of fire, they assumed it was coming from below them and stormed down the wall. Here, some of them fell to their deaths while others were caught by fire from the positions below as well as from those opposite them.

TEXT 1B

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:15

אמוריים שהיו נחבאים שם. שהיו ההרים גבוהים, והנחל עמוק וקצר, וההרים סמוכים זה לזה. אדם עומד על ההר מזה, ומדבר עם חבירו בהר מזה, והדרך עובר בתוך הנחל.

אמרו אמוריים: כשיכנסו ישראל לארץ לתוך הנחל לעבור, נצא מן המערות בהרים שלמעלה מהם ונהרגם בחצים ואבני בליסטראות.

The Amorites were lying in wait. There were two towering mountains with a deep narrow gorge between them. The cliff walls stood so close that a man could stand on one side and talk to his friend on the other side. The walking trail ran through this gorge.

When the Jews entered the Amorite lands through this canyon, the Amorites intended to emerge from the caves in the mountains above and kill them with arrows and catapulted boulders.

TEXT 2A

*David Chanoff, Warrior
(New York: Simon &
Schuster, 1989), pp. 150*

By this time, the enemy positions had been located, and after nightfall, two small units were sent along the cliff walls. . . . Moving slowly along the cliff face, they attacked one Egyptian cave and firing hole after another in hand-to-hand fighting. For two hours, the sounds of battle reverberated through the pass before finally giving way around eight o'clock to an ominous silence.

When morning came it was evident that the battle in the pass was over. From the caves and recesses where the Egyptians had been, there was no movement. Inside them, 260 Egyptian soldiers lay dead. Whatever survivors there might have been had slipped away during the night. But thirty-eight paratroopers had also been killed.

TEXT 2B

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:15

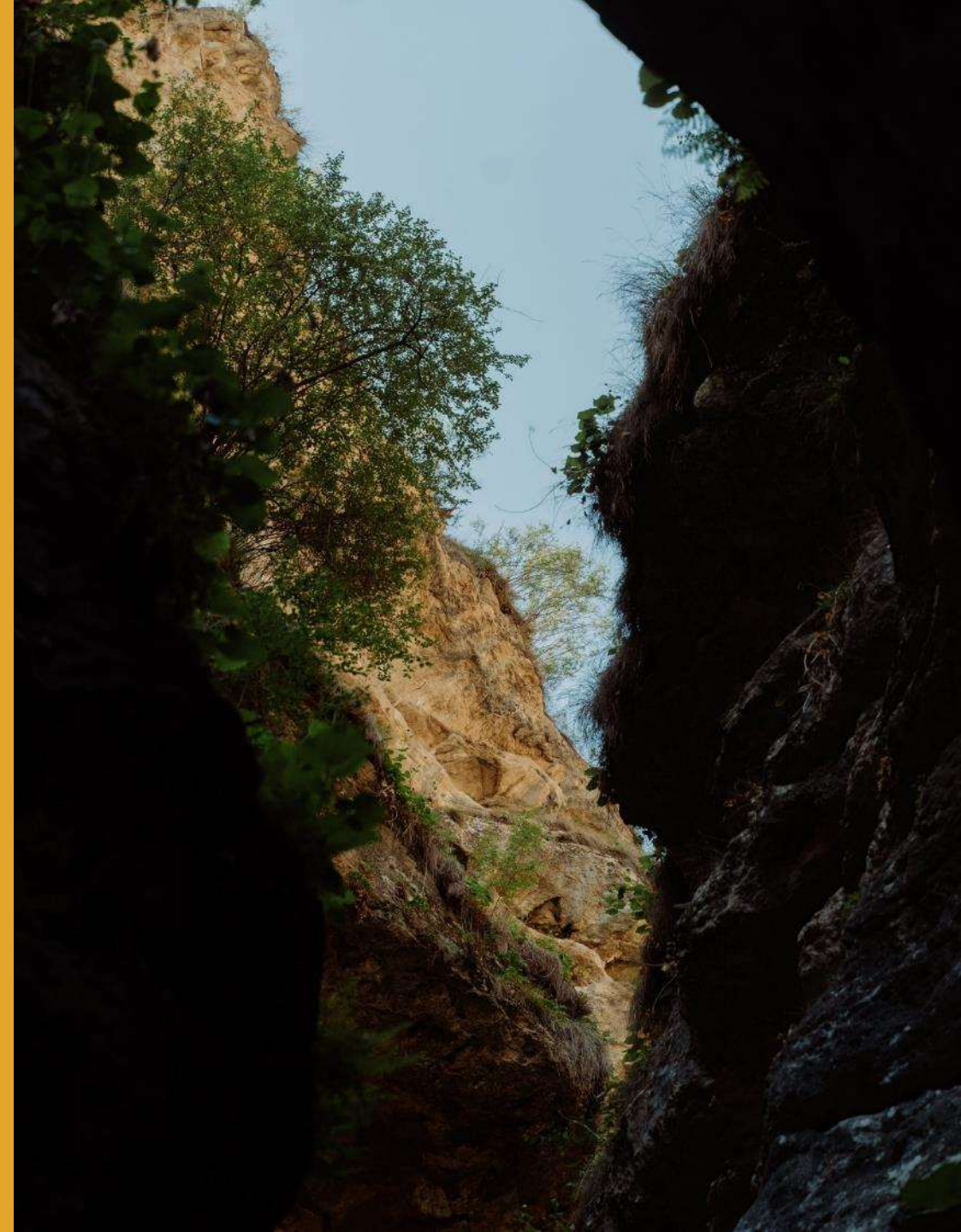
והיו אותן הנקעים בהר של צד מואב, ובהר של צד אמוריים היו כנגד אותן נקעים כמין קרנות ושדים בולטין לחוץ.

כיון שבאו ישראל לעבור, נזדעזע ההר של ארץ ישראל, כשפחה היוצאת להקביל פני גבירתה, ונתקרב לצד הר של מואב. ונכנסו אותן השדים לתוך אותן נקעים, והרגום.

There were clefts in the mountain on the Moab side of the canyon. Directly opposite these clefts, on the mountain on the Amorite side, there were protrusions that looked like horns and breasts.

When the Jews prepared to pass through the canyon, the mountain on the side of [what would soon be] Israel trembled like a maidservant emerging to greet her mistress and moved toward the mountain on the side of Moab. Its protrusions entered the clefts on the other mountain, thus killing the Amorites.

Upon entering the Amorites' lands, the Jews were blissfully unaware of the miracle G-d had performed to save them from the enemy's ambush.



TEXT 3

Rashi, Bamidbar 21:16

משם בא האשד אל הבאר.

כיצד?

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: "מי מודיע לבני הנסים הללו?" המשל אומר: "נתת פת לתינוק, הודיע לאמו".

לאחר שעברו, חזרו ההרים למקומם. והבאר ירדה לתוך הנחל והעלתה משם דם ההרוגים וזרועות ואיברים ומוליכתן סביב המחנה, וישראל ראו ואמרו שירה.

From there, the blood [of the slain] flowed into the well.

How did this happen?

G-d said, "Who will inform My children of these miracles?" The proverb says, "If you give a child bread, inform his or her mother."

After the Jews passed through, the mountains returned to their original location. The well descended into the river and brought up the blood, arms, and limbs of the slain and carried them around the Jewish camp. The Jews saw [what had happened] and sang an ode.



The Jews sang their second ode to G-d upon discovering how He had slain their enemies.

TEXT 4A

Numbers 21:17

אָז יִשְׁרֹאֵל יִשְׁרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת,
עֲלֵי בָּאֵר עֲנּוּ לָהּ.

At that time, the Israelites sang this ode to G-d: “Ascend, O well; sing to it!”

TEXT 4B

Exodus 15:1

אָז יָשִׁיר מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת
הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה.

At that time, Moses and the
Children of Israel sang this ode
to G-d.

QUESTION

1. Why were odes only sung for the miracles of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the slain Amorites?
2. Why was the first ode led by Moses and the second by the Jews?

The miracles
occurred without
the Jews ever
lifting a finger.



TEXT 5A

Exodus 14:14

ה' יִלָּחֶם לְכֶם, וְאַתֶּם תִּתְּרִישׁוּן.

G-d will fight for you, and you remain silent.

TEXT 5B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 23, pp. 153–154*

דער חידוש מיוחד שבזה איז געווען
(בלשון הפסוק) "ה' ילחם לכם ואתם
תחרישון". אין אנדערע אזעלכע פאלן,
ווען אידן זיינען געווען אין א מצב פון
סכנה מצד די אומות, איז דער נס
הישועה וההצלה געווען באופן אז אידן
האבן מיט זיי מלחמה געהאלטן, און
דער אויבערשטער האט אזוי געפירט
אז די אידן זאלן מנצח זיין, ביז צו א
נצחון באופן נסי.

ביי קריעת ים סוף אבער, זיינען אידן
געווען "תחרישון", ניט געטאן קיין
זאך אויף צו ראטעווען זיך פון די
מצרים. דער אויבערשטער אליין און
נאר ער איז "ילחם" מיט די מצרים.

The unique novelty of this miracle was (as the Torah specified), “G-d will fight for you, and you remain silent” (Exodus 14:14). In other instances of endangerment, our ancestors had to go to war and battle their enemies. Only then did G-d ensure their rescue, salvation, and victory in miraculous fashion.

At the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, however, Jews were in a state of silence; they did nothing to save themselves from the Egyptians. G-d, and only G-d, fought off the Egyptians.

TEXT 5B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 23, pp. 153–154*

און דער ענין - וואס דער
אויבערשטער האט אלץ געטאן
אנשטאט די אידן . . . ווייזט אויף א
חיבה יתירה וביותר (אז ניט נאר איז
דער אויבערשטער מציל אידן פון
סכנה, נאר ער פארשפארט זיי אפילו
צו טאן עפעס דערצו), און דערפאר
האט דוקא דער נס געבראכט אז אידן
זאלן זאגן שירה.

און דאס איז אויך דער נקודת החידוש
אינעם נס וואס איז געשען ביי נחלי
ארנון: אויך דא איז הצלת בני ישראל
געקומען אין אן אופן פון "ה' ילחם
לכם ואתם תחרישון", און דערפאר
האט אויך דער נס מעורר געווען אידן
צו זאגן שירה.

When G-d steps in for us and does all the heavy lifting in our stead, He demonstrates His extreme love for us. (Not only does He save us from danger but He also spares us the need to perform even a slight effort.) This is why this miracle spurred the Jews to sing an ode to G-d.

The same occurred at the Arnon River. Here, too, G-d saved us in a manner of “G-d will fight for you, and you remain silent” (Exodus 14:14). Thus, this miracle also inspired the Jews to sing an ode.

TEXT 5C

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, ibid., pp.
154-155*

דער ענין, אז נאר "ה' ילחם לכם" איז
דא געווען עד כדי כך אז אידן האבן ניט
געוואוסט, ניט פון דער סכנה און ניט פון
דער הצלה! . . .

אין יעדן פאל ווען ביי בני ישראל האט
עפעס געפעלט, אדער זיי האבן זיך
געפונען אין אן עת צרה, האט משה
רבינו זיך דערמיט אפגעגעבן (אדער
מתפלל געווען להקדוש ברוך הוא).

אבער בנדון דידן איז די גאנצע הילף און
ישועה אויפגעאטן געווארן ניט דורך
משה רבינו. ס'איז געקומען אינגאנצן אין
אן אופן פון "ה' ילחם לכם ואתם
תחרישון" . . . נאך מער ווי ביי קריעת
ים סוף, וואס דארט האט מען געוואוסט
פון דער סכנה, און אויך - האט משה
מתפלל געווען.

The element of "G-d fighting for you" was prevalent in the miracle at Arnon to the extent that the Jews knew neither of the danger nor of the salvation.

In every other trial, Moses either solved the problem or prayed to G-d for salvation.

In this case, salvation was facilitated without Moses's involvement. G-d did the fighting, and the Jews remained silent. . . . This was even truer now than at the Sea of Reeds. At the Sea of Reeds, the people were aware of the danger, and Moses prayed for them. [In this case, G-d saved them before they even knew of the danger.]

ANSWER

1. The two miracles were acts of pure love from G-d; thus, the Jews were moved to compose odes.
2. Moses did not lead the second ode because he did not play a leadership role in the miracle.

TEXT 6

*Rabbi Yosef of Orleans,
Bechor Shor, Numbers
21:17*

משה לא שר לפי שנכשל בו.

Moses did not sing because the well was his stumbling block.

ANSWER, cont.

2. Additionally, Moses did not lead the second ode he had sinned in relation to the well.

QUESTION

If the Jews needed leadership, Moses would have stepped up, even if it was not necessary or comfortable.

Why didn't the Jews require Moses's leadership?



TEXT 7A

Exodus 17:6

וְהִכִּיתָ בַצּוּר, וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם
וְשָׁתָה הָעַם.

Strike the flint stone and water
will emerge from it, and the
nation will drink.

TEXT 7B

*Midrash, Yalkut
Shimoni, Chukat (763),
Bamidbar 20:8*

"ודברתם אל הסלע". והכיתם לא נאמר. אמר לו:
כשהנער קטן, רבו מכהו ומלמדו. כיון שהגדיל, בדבור
הוא מיסרו.

“Talk to the rock.” The passage does not say, “Strike the rock.” G-d was telling Moses, “When students are young, the teacher is sometimes required to restrain them to teach them [to avoid danger]. Once they grow older, they can only be taught with words.”

TEXT 7C

*Rabbi Moshe Alshich,
Torat Moshe, Bamidbar
20:8*

ויהיה הענין לכאורה כי ברפידים
רפו ידיהם מן התורה ועל כן
חסרו להם המים. ורצה הקדוש
ברוך הוא להורות להם כי היו
צריכין הכאה, כי עדיין נער
ישראל, וחדש בתורה. ולא
יוסרו הבלתי הרפות מהתורה
אם לא במכות.

ורמז זה להם בצור, שעל ידי
מכות נתן מים. כן המה על ידי
מכות יחזיקו בתורה המשולה
למים, כמקרה הנער עם רבו . . .

When the Jews were in Rephidim, their
commitment to the Torah grew slack. The spiritual
consequence was that they ran out of water [the
spiritual symbol of the Torah]. G-d wanted to
teach them that people in their spiritual infancy—
new to the path of the Torah—sometimes require
physical restraint. They might not take up their
slack [allow the flow of their spiritual water]
unless physically compelled to do so.

G-d indicated this by instructing Moses to make
the flint stone give water by striking it. Similarly,
the people might require physical restraint to
embrace the Torah, which is often compared to
water. This is the manner of teachers with young
students [who are about to get into trouble]. . .

TEXT 7C

*Rabbi Moshe Alshich,
Torat Moshe, Bamidbar
20:8*

אך אחרי כן בקדש כבר גדלו
וסבלו עול תורה, ובדברים לבד
סרו. וזה הורה להם באומרו:
"ודברתם וכו' ונתן מימיו".

However, forty years later, when they were in the desert of Kadesh, they had spiritually matured and embraced the yoke of the Torah. Therefore, a verbal reminder would have sufficed to help them avoid their spiritual pitfalls. G-d implied this by instructing Moses to talk to the stone . . . and it would give its water.



We all have a “wellspring,”
a spark of G-d within us.

In our spiritual infancy,
we need to break the
wellspring’s seal and allow
the connection to flow.

As we mature, spiritual
inspiration comes more
naturally to us.

ANSWER

The Jewish people had reached a level of spiritual maturity and were able to compose an ode to G-d on their own.



TEXT 8A

United States Geological Survey, "Groundwater Storage and the Water Cycle," www.usgs.gov

Large amounts of water are stored in the ground. . . .

The upper layer of the soil is the unsaturated zone, where water is present in varying amounts that change over time, but does not saturate the soil. Below this layer is the saturated zone, called groundwater, where liquid water is stored in all the pores, cracks, and spaces between rock particles.

The term aquifer refers to water-bearing foundations or rocks that can hold large amounts of water. Aquifers are a huge storehouse of Earth's water, and people all over the world depend on groundwater in their daily lives.

TEXT 8B

*Andrea Gracia Duran,
“Widespread River
Water Leakage into
Aquifers Could Lead to
Disappearing Streams,”
www.bren.ucsb.edu*

Most rivers exchange water with surrounding groundwater aquifers. Waterways can either gain water from, or leak water into, the ground, depending on the underlying rock formations and groundwater levels. Where groundwater levels lie below those of nearby streams, water can infiltrate, thus reducing river streamflow and recharging the aquifer below.

TEXT 8C

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Taamim Uminhagim
LeHaggadah Shel
Pesach, Shulchan Orech*

The water is crudely filtered in the rock, and the time spent underground allows debris and mud to fall out of suspension. If underground long enough, lack of sunlight causes most algae and water plants to die.



When water travels through layers of underground rock, it emerges cleaner and fresher than it was before.

After forty years of encountering challenges in the desert, the Jews became spiritually refined and pure.

TEXT 9

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Likutei Torah,
Chukat, pp. 62c–d*

וכל ימי חיי האדם אשר נתלבשה נפשו
בגופו בעולם הזה, הוא רק להיות בחינת
באר שנובע מתחת לארץ דייקא. שעל
ידי שהמים הולכים דרך עפר הארץ הם
נתבררים ונעשים צלולים יותר, כך
הנשמה מתבררת יותר בקיום התורה
ומצוות מעשיות שבענינים גשמיים.

וגם על ידי תגבורת כח נפש האלוקית
על נפשה הבהמית, לאכפיא ולהפכא
חשוכא לנהורא כו'.

ואי לזאת, חומריות הגוף וגשמיות
העולם הזה אינו אלא בבחינת מעבר
לנשמה, ועיקר דביקותה תהיה בשרשה
באלקים חיים. . . . אך להיות גילוי
בחינת באר זו, צריך להיות "חפרוה"
"כרוה". חפירה וכריה היא להשליך את
עפר הארץ הסותמים את פי הבאר. . .

Our souls are vested in physical bodies for our duration on the earthly plane for only one reason: to become a subterranean wellspring. When water travels through soil, it is filtered and purified. Similarly, our souls are filtered when we perform physical acts of mitzvot with tactile objects.

Deeper still is when our G-dly soul prevails over our animal soul, to restrain it and to transform its darkness into light.

In other words, our bodies' corporeality and the world's physicality form a passageway through which the soul reconnects with its root—the living G-d. . . . Creating this wellspring entails digging and carving—the removal of the soil that seals the mouth of the wellspring.

TEXT 9

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Likutei Torah,
Chukat, pp. 62c–d*

וכך צריך להעביר כל המסתירים ומכסים על האהבה המסותרת, ולאכפיא לסטרא אחרא. הן באיסור, להיות סור מרע כו', והן בהיתר, "קדש עצמך במותר לך" (יבמות כ, א), "ובטל רצונך מפני רצונו" (אבות ב, ד), והן בקיום המצות, להתחזק בלימוד התורה יותר מהרגילות, וליתן צדקה יותר מטבעו, וכיוצא בהן. שכל הדברים האלה וכיוצא בהן, הן הן בחינת חפירה וכריה, להעביר כחות החומריות שמצד הקליפה, ולבטלן בבחינת ביטול לגמרי, בטל רצונך כו', כדי לגלות מצפוני האהבה מהעלם אל הגילוי.

Similarly, we must remove everything that conceals and covers our innate love for G-d. We accomplish this by restraining our competing drives—compelling ourselves to avoid the forbidden and to “indulge in the permitted only for the sake of Heaven” (Talmud, Yevamot 20a)—for holy purposes. This “subordinates our will to His will” (Mishnah, Avot 2:4).

This includes committing to study the Torah for longer periods than we are accustomed to, giving more charity than we are naturally inclined to give, etc. These and similar behaviors dig, carve, and remove our inner coarseness rooted in impurity till they are completely nullified. This brings our hidden love for G-d into the open.

TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei
Taamim Uminhagim
LeHaggadah Shel
Pesach, Shulchan Orech*

דהנה בסוף המ' שנה שהלכו במדבר נאמר: "ולא נתן ה' לכם לה לדעת ועינים לראות עד היום הזה" (דברים כט, ג).

ואמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה: "מכאן, שלא קאים אינש אדעתא דרביה עד מ' שנים" (עבודה זרה ה, ב). אבל לאחרי מ' שנין, קאים אינש אדעתא דרביה.

After the Jews traveled in the desert for forty years, the Torah states, "And G-d did not give you a heart with which to know and eyes with which to see until this very day" (Deuteronomy 29:3).

Our sages of blessed memory observed, "From this, we infer that it takes forty years for pupils to ascend to the level of their teacher's knowledge." However, after forty years, one does indeed master one's teacher's knowledge.

After forty years, the
Jews came to see and
know G-d as Moses did.

Their self-made ode was
a pure and authentic
gesture to G-d.



TEXT 11

*Rabbi Menachem
Mendel of Lubavitch,
ibid., p. 873*

וזהו "אז ישיר ישראל", שזכו למעלת באר מים חיים
מה שלא זכו לזה הדור שלפניהם, והיא בחינה גבוה
לאין קץ.

That the Jews sang their ode to G-d [without Moses's leadership] tells us that they merited to become like a wellspring of living waters. This is an exalted level of purity that their predecessors in the previous generation did not merit to attain.

A DEEPER LOOK

- Moses did not take a leadership role in the miracle because he saw that the Jews had matured spiritually.
- Moses's failure at the well was a failure to recognize the people's spiritual maturity. He kept silent here as an acknowledgment to their achievement.



Life's challenges force us to connect to our inner strength and make us better people.

KEY POINTS

1. Sometimes, we have a problem, and G-d takes care of it. Sometimes, we don't know we have a problem. We discover it only after the problem is solved.
2. The latter leaves us feeling even more grateful than the former. It gives us a powerful sense of being cradled by G-d.
3. Nevertheless, we do not yearn for a problem-free life. Life without problems would be pleasant and smooth, but without resistance, there would be little growth.

KEY POINTS

4. As spring water is filtered by traveling through the soil, so is our character formed and our mettle forged by overcoming the problems of life.
5. Our Jewish mettle is forged by confronting and overcoming weakness and temptation. Disciplining ourselves to give more charity than we want or spend more time in prayer and study than we intend creates inner fortitude and spiritual maturity.

