

## Chukat: Fear and Crossing a Narrow Bridge Together

In Chapter 5 of “Pirkei Avot,” the ethics of our ancestors, Ben Bag Bag, who tradition teaches was a convert of Judaism, said, when referring to the Torah, “Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it. Don’t turn from it, for nothing is better than it.”

This quote, which some of you may be familiar with, is such a beautiful reminder that The text does not change, but we do. Our experience shapes the lens through that we engage with the Torah, and the Torah always seems to give us precisely what we need, whether it is spiritual support, prayer, or lessons. This week when re-reading this week’s portion, Parshat Chukat, a lesson I needed to hear emerged. The lesson is on fear; I know I am not the only one thinking about fear this week. There are a lot of things that can bring up fear right now. One of the ways I knew I was not the only one thinking about this is that every week my mentor and friend, Rabbi Matt Cutler, texts me Shabbat Shalom and a text or quote that he has been thinking about this week or for this Shabbat.

I had already written this D’var, and he messages me, Shabbat shalom ....

“Ecclesiastes was right; there is nothing new under the sun! Check out this quote from the 1951 sci-fi film “the day the earth stood still”: “I am fearful when I see people substituting fear for reason.” I have not seen or even heard of this movie, but I was struck by the fact that we were both thinking about this, and really so many of us are.

It is important for us to hold fear in front of us right now to talk about it and notice it rather than letting it drive us entirely.

In this week’s Torah portion, Chukat. Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites have a lot to fear; as I mentioned earlier, the prophetess Miriam has died, and with it, their access to water.

"וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֶן בַּחֲדָשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִנְדָּשׁ וַתָּמַת שָׁם מֵרִיָּם וַתִּקְבֹּר נָשָׁם:

The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon,\*first new moon and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

וְלֹא־תָהְיֶה מַיִם לְעֵדָה וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן:

The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron.

וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר וְלֹא־גָנַעְנוּ בְּגִנְעֵי אֶחָיו לְפָנֵי יְהוָה:

The people quarreled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of יהוה !”

The description in [Num. 20](#):1 of the death of Miriam is immediately followed in verse 2 by the description of the community being without water. This juxtaposition of Miriam’s death and the Israelites being without water are why the Rabbis attribute Miriam as the reason for the existence of the well that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness on their way to the promised land and that with her death the Israelites did not have access to water. This caused a lot of fear, and Moses and Aaron went to God for support. God tells Moses to speak to the rock, but Moses becomes impatient and overwhelmed by fear and hits the rock instead. Water comes pouring out of the rock, but ultimately Moses is punished by not being able to accompany the Israelites into the promised land.

There are so many lessons we can learn from this well-known scene of the Torah, but as I have mentioned tonight, we focus on fear. I think the first step Moses and Aaron took was helpful when we are fearful of community or guidance from friends, family, or mentors. Moses turns to God, but then he lets his own fear overwhelm him and get in his own way.

Another place this shows up in the song

Gesher Tzar M’od

Music: Baruch Chait

Text: Based on Rabbi Nachman of Braslav

כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד והעיקר לא לפחד כלל

Kol Haolam Kulo

gesher tzar m'od

v'hayikar lo l'pached klal

The whole entire world is but a very narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid.

The original text is slightly different from the words of the song by Baruch Chait. Reb Nachman wrote:

וְדַע, שְׂהָאָדָם צָרִיךְ לְעֵבֵר עַל גֶּשֶׁר צָר מְאֹד מְאֹד, וְהַפְּלִל וְהַעֲקָר – שְׂלֹא יִתְפַּחַד כְּלָל

"Know that a person needs to cross a very very narrow bridge, and what is essential is not to be afraid [or "... is that one should not be overcome by fear]."

In the original phrase by Nachman of Braslav, the word for fear is יִתְפַּחַד which is reflexive, so it is not saying to not be fearful or to not have fear. It is such a natural response to having fear in order to protect ourselves from danger and from getting hurt. The phrase says rather should not cause fear to oneself. We should not add to our fears or be overcome by fear. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's version resonated with me because he is not saying do not have fear. There are a lot of things that can cause us to be fearful, especially right now. The key, Rabbi Nachman of Braslav says, is to not be overcome by fear. We must surround ourselves with a supportive community and turn to our friends, family, and God so that we are not alone with our fear and then can work through our fears. It is not that we should cross the narrow bridge without fear but rather remember that even when we have fear, we do not have to cross the narrow bridge alone.