**Weekly Parasha Insights by Rabbi Eli Mansour**

**ParashatHukat:**

**Believing in Repentance**

ParashatHukat tells one of the most perplexing stories in the Humash – the story of Meh Meriba, when Moshe Rabbenu struck a rock in order to produce water for the people. G-d reacted angrily to what Moshe did, and decreed that he would die in the wilderness and not cross into the Land of Israel together with the rest of Am Yisrael. Numerous different interpretations have been offered to explain the precise nature of Moshe’s sin, and why he was punished so severely.

There is one answer that has been suggested which presents us with a very important lesson. When Moshe assembled the people by the rock, he spoke to them indignantly, shouting, “Listen, O rebellious ones!” (20:10). This was an inappropriate insult which the people did not deserve.

Our Sages teach us that if we ever see a righteous person sin, we must realize that he immediately acknowledges his wrongdoing and repents. Undoubtedly, then, Moshe Rabbenu, one of the greatest Sadikim who ever lived, repented immediately after making this inappropriate remark to Beneh Yisrael. He recognized that he had spoken improperly, and regretted this mistake.

This sin disturbed him to the point where he could not bring himself to fulfill G-d’s command to speak to the rock to produce water. After having sinned with his mouth, Moshe assumed that his mouth was now tainted and thus incapable of producing water. And so he lifted his staff and struck the rock, instead.

Moshe’s mistake was that he did not, for that brief moment, trust in the power of repentance. We must all believe with firm conviction that once we regret our mistake and sincerely resolve never to repeat it, G-d accepts our repentance. One of the most dangerous weapons in the Satan’s arsenal is the notion that we are too sinful to repent, that we are permanently tainted, or that G-d despises us because of our sins.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Any parent can attest to the fact that he or she continues to love, cherish and care for the child no matter how many times the child misbehaves. We are all G-d’s children, and so certainly after we sincerely repent, G-d welcomes us back with open arms and loves us just as He did before. Teshuba, as the Rambam writes, has the ability to change a person’s status, from being repulsed by G-d to being beloved by G-d.

The Satan wants us to believe that our repentance is useless, so that we will continue acting wrongly. We must constantly reinforce our belief in the power of repentance, in G-d’s loving mercy and compassion, and realize that we are always able and encouraged to repent.

And so G-d responds to Moshe’s act by saying that he failed to “believe” – “Ya’an Lo He’emantem Bi,” and that he failed “to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel” (20:12). By momentarily losing faith in the power of Teshuba, Moshe conveyed the dangerous, mistaken message that Teshuba does not always work. And for this he was punished.

Too often, the heavy weight of our baggage from our past hinders us from advancing and moving forward. The story of Meh Meriba should remind us that Teshuba is always an option, and an option we must pursue. If we ever feel that G-d despises us and is no longer interested in us, we must immediately recognize these thoughts as the Satan’s clever scheme to ensnare us in the trap of despair.

King David famously exhorts in Tehillim, “Sur Me’raVa’asehTob” – “Turn away from evil and do goodness.” This has been explained to mean that we must turn away from the thought that we are evil, and instead convince ourselves of our innate goodness and potential for greatness. This is the mindset we are to have, regardless of the mistakes we have made, trusting in our ability to change and in G-d’s infinite mercy and compassion.