

The Middle Path • Parshat Chukat

Parshat Chukat opens with the cryptic commandment to sacrifice a “cow, completely red, without blemish, on which no yoke has been laid” (Num. 19:2). Although the laws regarding this red heifer ritual are described as a *chok*, a law that transcends logic and reason, commentaries provide symbolic readings that offer practical moral advice. Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (1475-1549) gleans an essential message about character change from the ingredients used in this ancient purification ceremony.

The priest was commanded to “take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson” and throw them into a fire (Num. 19:6). Cedar, the tallest of the trees, represents arrogance. Hyssop has very small leaves; it’s a simple herb that symbolizes humility. A crimson thread, representing sin, is also in the mix. According to R. Sforno, this indicates that both arrogance and humility, in the extreme, are vices. Additionally, water and ash are mixed in the cleansing ritual (Num. 19:17) since, according to Sforno, they “are two extremes combined to evolve a middle path.” He continues that, “through this middle path the sinner shall be corrected, and this is called purification.” The path to repentance and virtue is discovered and cultivated through traveling on the middle path.

The middle path as an ideal was paved by Aristotle and was popularized in rabbinic literature by Maimonides. Positive psychologist Dr. Ryan Niemiec reviewed current findings of this ancient idea in his article *Finding the Golden Mean: The Overuse, Underuse, and Optimal Use*

of Character Strengths. Researchers found that following the middle path of positive psychology’s 24-character strengths was associated with greater flourishing and life satisfaction and less depression, whereas both overuse and underuse of the traits were associated with less flourishing, less life satisfaction, and greater depression. The goal for each individual is to identify in “each situation of any context, a strength’s sweet spot or strength’s zone, no matter how narrow for the circumstance.” Echoing Aristotle, Niemiec writes that this requires the individual “to apply the right combination of character strengths to the right degree and in the right situation.” He concludes his article with seven strategies for calibrating traits to the middle path, including helpful self-reflective questions such as, “When do you find that you get irritated or upset by others? Are you overplaying or underplaying any of your character strengths in these situations?”

According to Maimonides, divergence from the middle path led Moses to hit the rock at *Mei Meriva* (“Waters of Strife”) later in our parsha. In the fourth chapter of his introduction to *Ethics of the Fathers*, Maimonides suggests that “the sin of Moses consisted merely in that he departed from the moral mean of patience to the extreme of wrath in so far as he exclaimed, ‘Hear now you rebels, for the er how narri3eb p of the Fatunbearted m-1.2

model, he faced severe consequences and was not allowed to enter the land of Israel.

In discussing how Torah law aims to cultivate the middle path, Maimonides cites the precept to help support the fallen donkey of your enemy (Ex. 23:5). This anger management technique will help override hostility towards someone when anger is the more natural sentiment. This example may provide added insight into the incident at *Mei Meriva*. It was perhaps justified for Moses to feel anger at the persistent and consistent complaining of the Israelites. Yet, he was afforded an opportunity to overcome that anger by providing

water for those who provoked him. Through this act of service, he would have traveled the middle path, productively sublimating his anger in an unexpected act of kindness towards those he led.

Staying balanced and emotionally regulated in trying times is difficult. The extremes of character are often vices, necessarily avoided. While we should be cautious in judging Moses, as he was reeling from the loss of his sister and was consistently tested by the Israelites, learning from the commentaries, we can be inspired to strive to maintain an equilibrium of traits and virtues by aiming for the middle path.

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