

Dvar Torah – Kiddush – Congregation Bais Pinchas – Brookline, MA

Shabbat Chukat – 1st Yahrzeit of Ilana Hefter Feuerstein a”h

Dr. Jesse Hefter – July 5, 2025

The famous Shirah in Parshat Chukat begins with the words “Oz yashir Yisrael” – then did the Jewish people sing. The song centers on the Be’er – the well of water that provided sustenance for us, the Jewish people, throughout our trek in the desert.

I believe that there are lessons embedded within this Shira that reflect the legacy of our dear daughter, Ilana a”h, and that can inform our lives as practicing, committed Jews. I would like to share an interpretation of a verse from this song, as provided by the Sfas Emes – the Gerrer Rebbe (Annotated as having been orally shared in 1872).

The pasuk (Bemidbar 21:18) states: “Be’er chafaruha sarim” – The well that was dug by the chiefs. The Sfas Emes comments that the Be’er is a symbol of the Oral Tradition (the Torah She-Beal Peh), which must be discovered since it differs from the Written Tradition given to the Jewish people at Sinai. The profundity and essence of the Oral Torah that is hidden or embedded within everything in the natural world must be discovered by us. We need to work at it, and we also need to be attuned to the challenge of the search. Who are the “Sarim,” the chiefs? He explains that the Sar is a master, and in this context, the master is each of us; we are the masters of our choices and decisions. When we conquer our penchant for acting in ways that are not positive, we become the “Sarim”. It is within our grasp.

The verse continues “Karuha nedivey ha-am” – the well is further widened and deepened by those from the “am” – our Jewish community, who live their Jewish lives with the constant awareness that God’s essence in this world can be discovered everywhere we look. A “nediv” is someone who freely gives of themselves. This attribute is one that permeates the Jewish people, and our Tradition continues to this day to be shared, explained, and uplifted by those among us, and by us, who willfully give of themselves. Just as the Oral Tradition expands the Written Word, so we, in every generation and in every life, expand the reach and discovery of the Torah everywhere.

The verse continues “bim’chokek b’mishanotam” –, with their engraving tools, with their staffs. There are a variety of interpretations in Chazal about whom this segment of the verse refers. The Sfas Emes interprets this phrase by saying that the power that HaShem embedded within every object requires us to be mindful of utilizing that object for its proper purpose. And all the while, we remind ourselves that everything we are blessed to have in this world depends (like a person leaning on a staff) on HaShem. Whether we realize it or

not, HaShem is “behind the scenes” orchestrating everything. In that way, God gives us a gift – a Matana – of constant blessing and generosity.

Thus, the final strophe of the verse – “u”miMidbar Matanah” – and from the desert a gift. The Written Torah was given to us in the desert as an eternal gift to us, the Jewish people. When a person receives a special gift, they are apt to turn it over and over, looking at it from every perspective – enjoying its shape and color. Similarly, the Torah is a gift that we look at from every direction and perspective, and we feel blessed to have received it.

Today is Shabbos and we don’t share hespedim-eulogies. I do wish to share that the Hefter and Feuerstein families are sponsoring this Kiddush to mark the first Yahrzeit of our dear daughter, Ilana a”h. She loved the Torah inside and out. She shared Torah in so many ways with so many people. The Torah informed her view of the world. Her legacy of caring for her family and patients is emblematic of her firm commitment to embodying the lessons of Torah, Tefillah, and Chesed in her life. While we miss her every day, we recognize the impact her life had on the lives of so many and we pray that our continued memories of her will serve as a continued Aliyah of her neshama.

May her memory always be for a bracha-blessing.