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The Well and the Clouds

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1.

THE WELL AND THE CLOUDS OF GLORY

The well that supplied water for the Jewish people in the desert did so in Miriam's merit.¹ Therefore, immediately following Miriam's passing, Scripture says,² "There was no water for the people." The Clouds of Glory³ appeared in Aharon's merit, and "when Aharon died, the Clouds of Glory departed."

Nevertheless, after the passing of Miriam, the well remained; and even after the passing of Aharon, the Clouds of Glory remained. As our Sages teach, after Miriam and Aharon passed away, "they {the well and the Clouds of Glory} both **returned** in Moshe's merit."⁴

At first glance, Rashi's commentary on the Torah, which presents the *pshat*,⁵ follows the approach of the above-quoted Gemara:

On the verse,² "There was no water for the people," Rashi comments: "From here we see that for the entire forty years {in the desert}, they had the well in Miriam's merit" And on the verse,⁶ "The Canaanite king heard...", Rashi remarks: "He heard that Aharon had died and the Clouds of Glory had departed." On the other hand, we see that the well supplied the Jewish people with water even after Miriam's passing, as the Torah relates further on⁷ (regarding the miracle of "the outpouring of the valleys"). In addition, **Rashi himself** explains the clause, "*from the heights to the ravine... in the field of Moav* — For there Moshe died; and **there**, the well ceased {to be with them}."⁸

¹ *Taanis* 9a; *Sifri*, "Devarim," sec. 305; *Mechilta* "Beshalach," 16:35; et al.

² *Bamidbar* 20:2.

³ {In the Hebrew original, "ענני הכבוד." Although always translated as above, in truth, a more accurate semantic and pragmatic translation would be "Clouds of Honor," as they accorded "honor" to the Jewish people, much like the role that honor guards play. However, see fn. 44 in the original, where the Rebbe points out that homiletically, כבוד, is an allusion to the Shechinah. Homiletically, therefore, the translation "Clouds of Glory" is more appropriate.}

⁴ *Taanis* 9a; *Sifri*, "Devarim," sec. 305; *Mechilta* "Beshalach," 16:35; et al.

⁵ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: "I have come only to explain the straightforward meaning of the Scripture." Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi's commentary aims to explain the straightforward meaning.}

⁶ *Bamidbar* 21:1.

⁷ *Bamidbar* 20:10-11; 21:16, et passim; Rash, ad loc.

⁸ *Bamidbar* 21:20; Rashi, ad loc.

This implies that Rashi presumes Hashem restored the well in Moshe's merit. It is therefore reasonable to presume that the Clouds of Glory also were restored, for it is unreasonable to posit that Moshe's merit only sufficed to restore the well, but not the Clouds of Glory.

In light of this, we must clarify a perplexing issue. The Torah relates how the well returned: "There was no water for the people and they gathered together against Moshe... the people quarreled." Hashem commanded Moshe to "take the staff...", and the Jewish people then were provided water from the rock.

In contrast, regarding the Clouds of Glory, neither the Chumash nor even Rashi, tells us **how** and **when** they returned!

We must also clarify: Just as the disappearance of the well after Miriam's passing caused the Jewish people to collude against Moshe, the disappearance of the Clouds of Glory after Aharon's passing should have elicited a similar reaction. Why did the Jewish people not voice any complaints when "the Clouds of Glory departed?"

2.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CLOUDS OF GLORY

Seemingly, we can understand that according to the *pshat*, the Clouds of Glory did not return after Aharon's passing. This was simply because they were no longer **necessary**.

Rashi explained earlier that the clouds surrounded the Jewish people "from four directions... from above... from below":

a) "so that they would not be smitten by the scorching heat and sun";⁹

⁹ The Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*, "Orach Chaim, beg. of sec. 625, quoted from *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, loc cit; see *Yeshayahu* 4:6.

- b) as Rashi explains,¹⁰ “the clouds would rub their clothes {clean} and press them;” and another cloud went in front of them, in order
- c) “to guide them along the way”;¹¹ and
- d) to flatten the path and neutralize hazards: “lowering that which was high and raising that which was low, and killing snakes and scorpions.”¹²

After Aharon’s passing, the Jewish people no longer needed all the help that clouds provided because “Mount Hor” {where Aharon died} was located “on the boundary of the land of Edom,”¹³ at the edge of the desert near settled land. Understandably, this was already a place where the desert’s “heat and sun”¹⁴ were considerably milder.

[The heat of the sun wasn’t only less intense because of the geographic location of Aharon’s passing, but also because of the season. Aharon died in the month of *Av*, close to the time when the sun’s heat becomes more temperate: “From the fifteenth day of *Av* and on, the strength of the sun gets progressively **weaker**.”¹⁵

This does not contradict **Rashi’s** comments in *parshas Noach*¹⁶ that “heat” refers to, “the end of the hot season — half of *Av*, *Elul* and half of *Tishrei*, when the world is **exceedingly hot**... The end of the summer is worse than the summer itself.”¹⁷ There, the reason is, as Rashi explains precisely: “The **world** is exceedingly hot,” “for all the air and creatures **have become warmed** through the heat of the summer **that has passed**.”¹⁸ The heat of the **rising sun**, however, becomes weaker from the fifteenth day of *Av*, as we clearly see.

¹⁰ *Devarim* 8:4; see Rashi, ad loc.

¹¹ *Shemos* 13:21.

¹² *Bamidbar* 10:34; see Rashi, ad loc.

¹³ *Bamidbar* 20:23.

¹⁴ {*Yeshayahu* 49:10.}

¹⁵ *Taanis* 31a.

¹⁶ *Bereishis* 8:22.

¹⁷ *Yoma* 29a.

¹⁸ *Yoma* 29a; see **Rashi**, ad loc.

In our discussion, since **until** Aharon's passing (during summer), the clouds had shielded the Jewish people from the sun's heat, the phenomenon that "(all the air and the) creatures have become warmed through the heat of the summer that has passed," **did not** apply. Since from the fifteenth of Av the sun does not rise with the same intensity, they did not require the Clouds of Glory to keep them from being "smitten by scorching heat and sun."]

Similarly, they had (almost) no more need for the other functions:

- a) for the Clouds of Glory to "rub their clothes and press them, etc.," since if someone's clothing had worn out, the person could purchase new clothes in one of the nearby gentile towns.¹⁹
- b) They had no more need for the miracle of the cloud guiding them on the way because they had already reached a region in which there were leveled roads, etc.
- c) They also had no need for the snakes and scorpions to be killed, since they were already on the edge of civilization.

[Seemingly {as mentioned above}, the cloud had to level the mountains, as Rashi explains, "*Mount Hor* — Although the cloud went before them and leveled the mountains, yet three mountains remained... and Mount Nevo for Moshe's burial place."²⁰ This shows that the cloud was still with them even (after Aharon's passing) when the Jewish people approached Mount Nevo (where Moshe passed away).

We can resolve this (albeit with difficulty) and say that the cloud (did not level the mountains when the Jewish people arrived at a location. Rather, the cloud prepared the way ahead of time, to ensure easy passage, and leveled all the mountains (aside for Mount Nevo) before the Jewish people arrived (at a distance of three days),²¹ **before** Aharon passed away.

¹⁹ *Yoma* 75b.

²⁰ *Bamidbar* 20:22.

²¹ *Bamidbar* 10:35; see Rashi, ad loc.

In light of this, Rashi lists the three mountains that were not leveled in the correct order, “Mount Sinai... Mount Nevo... Mount Hor.” Without our earlier explanation, Rashi should have mentioned Mount Nevo **after** mentioning Mount Hor {according to chronological order, Aharon passed away before Moshe.}

However, in accord with the above explanation, we can explain the order as follows: By listing Mount Nevo before Mount Hor, Rashi hints that the fact that the cloud did not level Mount Nevo so it could be used for Moshe’s burial did not happen at a **later** time than Mount Hor (i.e., only when the Jewish people actually arrived there). Rather, this happened **at the same time** that the cloud left Mount Hor untouched for Aharon’s burial.]

3.

THE CLOUDS OF GLORY DID RETURN

In truth, however, we must conclude that the clouds did indeed continue to guide the Jewish people even after Aharon’s passing. The reason:

- a) **Understood simply**, the phrase, “to guide them on the way,” does not (only) mean that the Clouds of Glory would protect them from stumbling in the desert (where there are no roads). Rather, the cloud would guide the Jewish people on the correct path that Hashem wanted them to take. Since after Aharon’s passing there were still **many** journeys, the cloud was still needed.
- b) Rashi says clearly²² that after Aharon’s passing, “they turned back toward the Sea of Reeds... **seven** journeys” back **into the desert**.
- c) The clouds also protected the Jewish people from war with their enemies. Rashi already explained, regarding the war with Amalek, that the words “**go out** and wage war with Amalek” mean “go out **from the cloud** and

²² *Bamidbar* 21:4; see Rashi, ad loc.

fight against him.”²³ This shows that the entire time that the Jewish people were encircled by the clouds, their enemies could not fight them. **Rashi** himself explained earlier that the cloud absorbed “the arrows and stone missiles” that “the Egyptians hurled.”²⁴

[Consequently, immediately after Aharon’s passing, it says, “The Canaanite king heard... he waged war with the Jewish people.”²⁵ Rashi explains that since he saw that “the Clouds of Glory had disappeared,” he assumed that “he was given license to wage war with the Jewish people.”²⁶]

Therefore, the Clouds of Glory were still necessary to protect the Jewish people during any upcoming battles.

- d) The purpose of the cloud during the forty-two journeys in the desert was not only to guide them on the correct path but also (as the Torah elaborates in *parshas Behaaloscha*,)²⁷ to inform the Jewish people **when** and **for how long** they should “camp” or “travel.” This is relevant for all the journeys until they would actually enter the Land of Israel.
- e) The main point: In *parshas Balak* (**after** Aharon’s passing), on the verse,²⁸ “hang them before Hashem opposite the sun,” **Rashi** comments: “The sun made known who were the sinners, for **the cloud rolled itself up** from before a sinner so that the sun shone upon him.” Rashi clearly says that the cloud was present (and protected the Jewish people from the sun) even after Aharon’s passing!

Our original difficulty returns: Why is no mention made anywhere that the Clouds of Glory returned (and how they did so)? Also, as mentioned above, why did their disappearance not evoke any protest from the Jewish people?

²³ *Shemos* 17:9; see Rashi, ad loc.

²⁴ *Shemos* 19:4; see Rashi, ad loc.

²⁵ *Bamidbar* 21:1

²⁶ *Bamidbar* 33:40; see Rashi, ad loc.

²⁷ *Bamidbar* 9:17 ff.; see *Bamidbar* 40:36 ff.

²⁸ *Bamidbar* 25:4.

4.

CLOUDS OF GLORY AND PLAIN CLOUDS

We will resolve our difficulty by prefacing with an analysis of a nuanced difference between Rashi's various comments on the Torah: Sometimes²⁹ Rashi refers to the clouds as "Clouds of **Glory**," and sometimes, he refers to them (plainly) as "clouds."

These two terms are also used in the Midrash, which says that there were in fact, seven clouds: Sometimes the Midrash says,³⁰ "there were seven clouds" (or similar), and other times, "there were seven Clouds of **Glory**"³¹ (or something similar). In his commentary on Torah, Rashi decides upon and writes, "seven clouds are written...."³²

The explanation: The difference between ordinary clouds and Clouds of **Glory** can be stated simply: "Clouds of **Glory**" means, literally, that their entire purpose is to exhibit the glory of the Jewish people. The purpose of some clouds was to protect the Jewish people and to provide them with their critical **needs**. Although this **itself automatically** showcases the preciousness (and the honor) of the Jewish people, there were additional clouds whose entire purpose was to express the degree to which Hashem honored the Jewish people.

In this light, we understand that not all the clouds were "Clouds of **Glory**": The cloud that would "lower that which was high..." and "kill snakes and scorpions" was **not** among the "Clouds of Glory" because its purpose was to provide a **critical** means to traverse the desert. Similarly, the cloud that shielded the Jewish people from the heat of the sun or from their enemies during war was present not (only) to extol the glory of the Jewish people, but to furnish a critical function. Therefore, Rashi uses the word "cloud" (unqualified) in these instances.

²⁹ Rashi on *Vayikra* 23:43; *Bamidbar* 20:29, 21:1, 26:13, 33:40; *Devarim* 8:4, 10:6.

³⁰ *Mechilta*, "Beshalach," 13:21; et al.

³¹ *Tanchuma*, "Beshalach," ch. 3; et al.

³² *Bamidbar* 10:34; see Rashi, ad loc.

[For example: “Go out and wage war with Amalek — go out from the cloud”;³³ “the Egyptians threw arrows... the cloud absorbed them;”³⁴ “Mount Hor — Although the cloud went before them and leveled the mountains...”;³⁵ “opposite the sun — the cloud rolled itself up... the sun shone upon him;”³⁶ “{Amalek cut down} all the stragglers in your rear... — whom the cloud had expelled....”]³⁷

In contrast to the clouds that departed after Aharon’s passing, the wording used is: “(Only) the Clouds of **Glory** departed.” Only the clouds whose purpose was only to promote the honor of the Jewish people vanished, but **not** the clouds that supplied their needs. These “Clouds of **Glory**” did **not** return (according to the *pshat*, and it is plainly understood why the Jewish people lodged no complaints when the Clouds of **Glory** disappeared, as they had when Miriam’s well disappeared).

[In light of this explanation, we can resolve the difficulty presented by *Mizrachi*: Since there were clouds on all six sides (four directions, above and below), and the *sukkah* is modeled after the clouds (as **Rashi** explains, “For I made the Jewish people dwell in sukkos — the **Clouds of Glory**”),³⁸ a *sukkah* should also call for six panels, corresponding to “four directions, above and below.” (Yet, the law is that two complete walls and a third partial wall, the length of a handbreadth, is sufficient.)³⁹

We can compound this difficulty: Why do we not commemorate in any way the seventh cloud, which “led them?”

In light of the above explanation, this question is answered: The *sukkah* that we build only commemorates the “Clouds of **Glory**” — the clouds whose **sole** purpose was to extol their “glory.” However, the cloud that “led them,” as

³³ *Shemos* 17:9.

³⁴ *Shemos* 19:4.

³⁵ *Bamidbar* 20:22; see Rashi, ad loc.

³⁶ *Bamidbar* 25:4.

³⁷ *Devarim* 25:18; see Rashi, ad loc.

³⁸ *Vayikra* 23:43; see Rashi, ad loc.

³⁹ *Sukkah* 6b.

well as some of the other six clouds, were (also) meant to serve the **needs** of the Jewish people, as mentioned above.

Consequently, the **number** of walls necessary for a *sukkah* is unrelated to the **number** of Clouds of Glory, particularly, since the role of these seven clouds changed: During a journey that did not need protection from a certain side, the cloud on that side served as a Cloud of **Glory**.]

5.

AMALEK LUNGED FORWARD

In this context, we will understand a nuance in Rashi's commentary (mentioned in Section 3) on the verse, "*The Canaanite king heard* — {He heard that} the Clouds of Glory had departed and he presumed that he was given **license** to wage war with the Jewish people." Seemingly, Rashi should have mentioned the **primary** novelty "that he was given the **opening** and **license** to wage war with the Jewish people." Until then, the Jewish people were surrounded by the clouds and it was **impossible** to do battle with the Jewish people (as mentioned above).

Based on the above, the explanation is that even after the Clouds of Glory had disappeared, the cloud that protected the Jewish people from their enemies **remained**. The Canaanite king assumed that since the Clouds of **Glory** had gone, Hashem was no longer showing so much of **glory** towards the Jewish people. This implies that "he was given **license** to wage war" with them. However, regarding the feasibility of actually waging war, nothing changed (because of the presence of other clouds).

[We cannot ask: How was it possible, and how did it unfold, that the Canaanite king attacked the Jewish people while they were surrounded and protected by a cloud? This was a result of his brazenness and folly — he figured that the Jewish people would leave the protection of the cloud in order to wage war.

This {foolish miscalculation) is even more palatable according to Rashi's earlier remark, which explains that these Canaanites were none other than Amalek. Amalek was the nation that already had attacked "all the stragglers in your rear, whom the cloud had expelled," even when "**all the nations** were afraid to wage war against you... he lept into it... although he **scalded** himself..."⁴⁰ Amalek again attempted to attack the Jewish people; "he lept" disregarding the protection of the cloud.]

6.

THE MIRACLE OF THE CLOTHES AND TRUE HONOR

There is another difficulty based on this distinction between "regular" clouds and the "Clouds of Glory": Rashi says that the "Clouds of **Glory** would rub their clothes and press them... and their young, too, as they grew, their clothes grew with them." Seemingly, these two functions of the clouds were geared toward addressing essential human needs and were not (only) an expression of honor {for the Jewish people}.

Truthfully, this is not a question. **Simply**, with the clause, "and their young, too... their clothes grew with them," Rashi does not mean to continue his description of the functions of the Clouds of Glory. After all, what connection do the Clouds of Glory have with the fact that "their clothes grew with them"!? Rather, since Rashi was already speaking about the effect of the clouds on their clothes in the desert, he mentioned a miracle (**unrelated**) {to the clouds}: "Their clothes grew with them." This miraculous detail was not brought about by, or related to, the Clouds of Glory. Rather, it happened through the bodies of the Jews (as **Rashi** explains there) "just like the 'clothes' (shell) of a **snail** that grows together with **its body**."

[Rashi brings this clause immediately following his explanation that the clouds, "would rub their clothes," because a difficulty would immediately arise:

⁴⁰ *Devarim* 25:18; see Rashi, ad loc.

It is plausible that the adults would never have needed new clothes, for “the clothes on you **did not wear out.**”⁴¹ The children, however, could not have worn the same clothing continuously since they were still growing. Therefore, Rashi immediately clarifies that Hashem miraculously ensured that “their clothes would grow with them.”]

That the “**Clouds of Glory** would rub their clothes and press them” was not imperative. Even if the Clouds of Glory had not laundered their clothes; the Jewish people could have washed them in the normal manner, without a miracle.

[Similarly, “the clothes on you did not wear out” was not a miracle that met a critical need. The Jewish people could have obtained **new** clothing, if necessary, either from the multitude of “garments” that they took with them from Egypt, or by manufacturing new clothing from the sheep’s wool from their flocks. Alternatively, they could have occasionally purchased new clothing when they were close to some settlement.]

The Clouds of Glory “rubbing” and “pressing” their clothing was (not a critical need for the Jewish people, but) a service that spared the Jewish people an inconvenience. This is the very definition and sign of “glory”: This miracle displayed how much Hashem treasures and honors the Jewish people; consequently, this miracle was done through the Clouds of **Glory**.

⁴¹ *Devarim* 8:4.

A FAITHFUL SHEPHERD

Still, we need to clarify: Since Rashi says that the well disappeared after Moshe's passing, this implies that Rashi presumes that the well returned {after Miriam's passing} in Moshe's merit (as discussed in Section 1). Why, then, did the Clouds of Glory not return {following Aharon's passing} in Moshe's merit?

The answer: According to *pshat*, the beneficial things that happened for the Jewish people through Moshe expressed his role as their **faithful shepherd**. (With Aharon or Miriam, however, it was in their **merit** that the Jewish people were provided with the Clouds of Glory and with the well). Moshe provided the Jewish people with all of their **needs** at the **time** that their needs arose.

In this light, the solution becomes even more elegant: We see that Moshe's assurance that the Jewish people would have their critical needs met (was not contingent upon his merit, which would **cease** after he died, but his assurance) endured even after his demise. He ensured that (they would still obtain, or,) they would no longer need those things.

Even though the well disappeared after Moshe's passing, the Jewish people did not need the well anymore because they had already reached the Jordan River.⁴² Similarly, regarding the manna, **Rashi** explains that (although) "when Moshe died on the seventh of *Adar*, the manna stopped **descending**; however (they still had the manna later on because) they had a **sufficient** supply from the manna that they had gathered on that day, which would last **until they had brought the omer on the sixteenth of Nissan**."⁴³

⁴² *Bamidbar* 22:1.

⁴³ *Shemos* 16:35; see Rashi, ad loc.

8.

THE MOSHE IN EVERY GENERATION

This lesson can apply to the leaders of the Jewish people in every generation: Even after their passing, when we don't physically see all that they provide (just like the manna, which we clearly saw with our own eyes had stopped falling after Moshe's passing), the known principle still applies: **"They will not abandon their flock."**⁴⁴

This is not only because they continue "to stand and serve (**from On High**),"⁴⁵ which is impossible to behold with fleshly eyes. Rather, their **actions** on behalf of the Jewish people while they still lived in this world have an **on-going** effect. Even after their passing from this world, we "derive sustenance" from them.

9.

THE CONNECTION WITH CHAG HAGEULAH

This is the special connection between all the above and the *Chag HaGeulah*⁴⁶ of the Friediker Rebbe on the 12th and 13th of Tammuz, which falls (in many years) during the week of *parshas Chukas*.⁴⁷ This theme is clearly discernible in the redemption of the Friediker Rebbe:

We see empirically that the victory and redemption that occurred on the 12th and 13th of Tammuz at that time, which even bolstered Judaism and Torah in that country, continues to have an effect **until today**. This victory already succeeded in establishing in that country *three* generations of Torah observant Jews. And when Torah is adhered to for three generations, the Torah rules:⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Rebbe Rayatz's Igros Kodesh*, vol. 1, p. 141.

⁴⁵ *Sotah* 13b.

⁴⁶ {The day of his release from prison.}

⁴⁷ {This connection is emphasized based on the Zohar that "*minei misbarchin*," that Shabbos "blesses" or generates energy for the entire week.}

⁴⁸ *Yeshayahu* 59:21; see *Bava Metzia* 85a.

“{The Torah} shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children’s children... from now on, for all time.”

Furthermore, Jews that for many generations had been **torn away** from Torah and Judaism because of the dire situation and conditions in that country, “benefit” from the effects of the redemption **until today!** This event inspires them to return to a life of Torah and Judaism **now**.

By performing the activities, as befitting, on the *Chag HaGeulah*,⁴⁹ to bolster and publicize Torah and Judaism, including the timely charge to spread the wellsprings of *Chassidus* outward, we expedite “the arrival of the Master,” the King Moshiach, speedily in our days. Amen.

— From talks delivered on *Motzaei Shabbos*, *parshas Matos-Masei*, *parshas Devarim*, and 15 Av, 5739 (1979)

⁴⁹ See the letter sent by the Friediker Rebbe for the first anniversary celebration of *Yud-Beis Tammuz* in 5688 (1928), printed in *Sefer Hamaamorim 5688*, p. 146.