

## Chukat 5774: Quantity brings Quality

The author Harlan Coban writes, "Writing is one of the few activities where quantity will inevitably make quality. The more you write, the better you're going to get at it."

Quality in quantity.

Quality. Quantity.

Two values, two goals, often seen as being mutually exclusive in any one situation.

From one perspective, quantity is just numbers, without quality. The demands for quality may, in fact, reduce numbers, to those who meet certain standards. We increase quantity, and we invariably reduce those standards, diminish ourselves, water down what we offer and lose our character.

This is one view of things.

On the other hand, a perspective I'd like to focus on, quantity enhances quality, in more arenas than just writing.

Listen to this quote from the Albany Law Review:

"The utility of dissenting opinions has long been the subject of debate among the bench and bar. Proponents urge that the dissenting opinion "safeguards the integrity of the judicial decision-making process," both "by keeping the majority accountable for the rationale and consequences of its decision," and by forcing the prevailing party to deal with the most difficult questions offered by its opponent."

Implicit in this concept is that we need to have sufficient quantity in order to maintain quality. Moreover, I would add, the dissenters, the challengers to the standards, to the status quo, cannot always be the same, or else we will be stunted in where and how we want to grow.

Granted, this is quite abstract and may make no sense to you on a warm, lazy, summer Shabbat morning.

That being said, parashat Chukat puts the harmonization of quantity and quality on our radar screen, in quite an interesting way -- and in a way which we ought not avoid as we pay tribute to our volunteers, and as we survey our future as a congregation which needs to slowly grow in quantity in order to safeguard our terrific quality.

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Right after the curious *chok*, unexplained law, of the red heifer, which encourages B'nai Yisrael's unconditional obedience to the covenant, we return to history, where B'nai Yisrael is anything but obedient.

Miriam, the third and senior member of the sibling troika of leadership of B'nai Yisrael, dies. Although cloistered in a box where most women remain in the Torah, Miriam has spoken strongly with words and actions in several key developments -- saving her infant brother and securing his raising; leading the women of the community in praise and song after the crossing of the Reed Sea; keeping tabs on her brother, to keep him honest in leadership and in family-life, which gets her into a bit of trouble; and, as touted by the Midrash, is the life-force which keeps water flowing to B'nai Yisrael in the desert.

Suddenly, in parashat Chukat, Miriam dies. Or perhaps not so suddenly. According to some commentators, B'nai Yisrael has just rapidly accelerated through its 40-year stint in the desert. So it might be time, like for the rest of the adult generation, for her to die.

What happens when Miriam dies, however? The troika is weakened -- in character, smarts, intellect, and ultimately decision-making. The music of the twosome of Moshe and Aaron is not nearly as smooth as the former threesome. Rocked by another clamor by the community for water, Moses and Aaron are much less decisive than they are in the situation with Korach. They seem to regress in the maturity of their leadership and return to God for direction on how to respond.

Once told by God what to do, they don't abide by God's message. Moses frames the coming miracle as the achievement of he and Aaron, not God, as Ramban notes. As the text reads, "Listen, you rebels, *shall we* [not God] get water for you out of this rock?" Moreover, famously, Moshe strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. Clearly, consultation with God did not still Moshe's impulsiveness and skittishness in this situation.

The commentator Gersonides, the Ralbag, states the following, "I think

Miriam, in her wisdom, must have drawn people to serve God. It is as if the Torah were telling us that, had Miriam not died, the people would never have quarreled with Moses. Moreover, Moses and Aaron would have consulted with her when God told them to speak to the rock, since she was a prophet and their elder; she would have kept them from doing anything stupid." Abarbanel cites a verse in Zechariah which equates the three siblings. "But I lost three shepherds in one month -- Miriam, Aaron and Moses."

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The quality of B'nai Yisrael's leadership and decision-making erodes almost immediately when it loses one its vital cogs, even more notably a female, elder vital cog.

Miriam's death hastens the quick end of the entire leadership team. Aaron dies in this same parasha, and Moshe just months later. This team has done its work, but is now broken, and needs to be replaced by fresh blood to tackle the very new challenges ahead for B'nai Yisrael. New characters suddenly emerge -- such as Joshua and Pinchas, one trained by the team and another a young firebrand from the new generation born in the desert.

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Leadership that remains static loses the qualities of leadership. Leadership without fresh blood will not be challenged to consistently articulate, as they always should, what qualities are eternal and lasting about about a community, and, on the other hand, what can be refined and expanded to meet the changing needs of the community. As we see in this parasha, without additions, transitions and substitutions in leadership, its conduct ultimately suffers as well. Quantity helps maintain quality.

And at the same time as Joshua is nurtured and Pinchas emerges in leadership, B'nai Yisrael continues to assimilate new community-members, according the midrash, people who see the light of our people, God and message -- and want to be a part of it.

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As for B'nai Yisrael, so may it be for B'nai Israel. We know who we are as a community, baruch hashem. For this to be the case for years to come, however, we will need to transform more interested parties into

congregants, more congregants into volunteers, and more volunteers into leaders. The first objective necessitates exposing more people to our our rigorous and egalitarian approach to observance and tefilla, bringing friends from outside our synagogue community to minyan, Shabbat services and our learning opportunities, discussing with those in our demographics what B'nai Israel gives to us, and ultimately expanding our pool -- from which will emerge our future volunteers and leaders. We cannot be complacent in our commitment to BI and its future. It's also natural to want to share a good thing -- so why don't we?

Blessedly, we also have a very active membership, with a much greater percentage of volunteership than most any synagogue I know. Still, there are regular volunteers to be made. People have stepped up to populate minyan, partner with Kol Ami in social action, prepare kiddush lunch, welcome people on Shabbat, served as gabbaim, organize and read Torah and haftara reading, arrange individual activities, and solicit funds for the synagogue, amongst many other volunteer activities. Still others have joined the board to set policy for the synagogue as a whole.

I don't believe in passive membership, and as a small synagogue, we

truly can't afford it. We need more volunteers to walk in the spirit of our current ones, and we need our volunteers to take even greater leaps into leadership.

I know that our new president, Frank agrees, and he articulated this in his own persuasive way at the annual meeting. I hope you all agree as well.

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It says in Parashat Lech L'cha, in Genesis 15, "God took Avraham outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And God added, "So shall your offspring be."

Quantity will bring quality to our shul. Regular Israelites, levites, Joshuas, Pinchases and others.

May all our volunteers and leaders be blessed with continued ruach of hiynadvut, leadership, and manhigut, leadership, over the coming year. And may there be more of both when we celebrate again one year from now.

Shabbat shalom.