

חִקָּת

MOSHE STRIKES THE ROCK

קח את המטה והקהל את העדה אתה ואהרן אחיך ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם ונתן מימיו

Hashem commanded Moshe to:

Take the rod and assemble the community, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock in their presence that it may give forth its water (*Bamidbar* 20:8).

Moshe took the rod in hand and assembled the community as he was instructed to do. At that point he chastised *Klal Yisrael* by exclaiming:

שמעו נא המרים המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים

Listen, you rebels! Can we extract water from this rock for you? (ibid. 20:10)

Then Moshe raised the rod in his hand and struck the rock twice; this resulted in an abundant rush of water. Moshe had thus committed a sinful act, and Hashem condemned Moshe and Aharon as follows:

יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל, לכן לא תביאו את הקהל הזה אל הארץ אשר נתתי להם

Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the presence of *B'nei Yisrael*; therefore you will not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them (ibid. 20:12).

This incident is reminiscent of an earlier episode in which Moshe was commanded by Hashem to pass before the people, take some of the elders of Israel along with him and strike into the rock with his rod so that water would come forth from it (*Shemos* 17:5-6).

In *Beshalach* (*Shemos* 17:5,6), Moshe was commanded to take his rod in hand and to use it in striking the rock; while in *Chukas* (*Bamidbar* 20:8), although Moshe was commanded yet again to hold this rod, he was instructed to merely speak to the rock. The episode in *Beshalach* took place in front of several of the elders, while in *Chukas* it was in front of the entire congregation. In *Beshalach*, Hashem maintained an actual presence during the episode; during the event related in *Chukas*, Hashem was not in evidence. In *Beshalach*, everything went as planned; in *Chukas*, Moshe criticized *Klal Yisrael*, and instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it. Moshe's "shocking" behavior resulted in his and Aharon's punishment of being barred from entering *Eretz Yisrael*.

The episode at *Mei Merivah* is one of the most confounding and least-understood in all the Torah. What was this sin of Moshe and Aharon which called for such a severe punishment? If Hashem only wished for Moshe to speak to the rock and not to strike it, why did He instruct Moshe to "take the rod"? Although Hashem did utter the words "speak to the rock," it could very

well have been understood as “speak to the congregation at the rock” — which Moshe actually did do (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 20:7). Is it any less miraculous to draw water from a rock by striking it than by speaking to it? There was a precedence for hitting the rock (in *Chukas*) from the first episode in *Beshalach*. Moshe may have intentionally hit the rock, rather than speak to it, in order to avoid an homiletic accusation against *Klal Yisrael*: if even this rock, which could neither speak nor hear, nevertheless obeys Hashem’s command, how much more so should *Klal Yisrael* obey His commands! (*Yalkut Mei’am Lo’ez*, *Bamidbar* 20:12). If, in effect, this was a violation at all, it was committed only for the sake of *Klal Yisrael*, and it was well-intentioned at worst. The miracle of an inanimate rock spewing forth water after being struck by a rod is certainly as spectacular a sight as an inanimate object responding to speech. And for this, Moshe lost his right to enter the land?

The fact is that Moshe initially did speak to a rock, but it turned out to be the wrong one (Rashi, *ibid.* 20:11). Moshe and Aharon then wondered if they were required to strike it, as they had done earlier in *Beshalach*. If indeed it was Hashem’s design that the rock be spoken to, why did the rock respond to the rod? Water should not have come forth until Hashem’s instructions had been followed to the letter. Rashi (*ibid.*) quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma* suggesting that Moshe and Aron happened upon the same rock as in *Beshalach*. Hence, this particular rock was used to giving water when it was struck.

If Moshe is to be criticized for altering Hashem’s command and his veracity as a prophet brought into question, his transgression was, at its worst, inadvertent. Moshe may also be criticized for losing his equilibrium when he castigated *Klal Yisrael* by crying “Listen, you rebels!” Ibn Ezra (*ibid.* 20:8) alludes to a Kabbalistic concept that when an individual’s mind clings solely to Hashem, he is then capable of performing miracles. Moshe lost this single-minded devotion to Hashem when he rebuked the nation for their complaints. This loss of concentration on his part was considered a sin since it led directly to a loss of holiness (see *Rashi Bamidbar* 31:21). The Ramban (*ibid.* 20:7) counters that such a weakness does not deserve the castigation of “you did not believe in Me.”

It is fascinating to note that when *B’nei Yisrael* complained about the lack of meat, Moshe criticized the congregation by exclaiming:

הצאן ובקר ישחט להם ומצא להם

Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? (*Bamidbar* 11:22).

Rashi (*ibid.*) indicates that Moshe seemed to doubt Hashem’s omnipotence; he questioned Hashem’s ability to produce enough food for the people. The Torah did not make his lack of faith public by pronouncing punishment upon him because the lapse occurred in private. Rashi nevertheless asks, “which is a more severe condemnation by Moshe, ‘Shall the flocks...’ or ‘listen here, rebels!’ ”? Hence, the question again: why such a severe punishment for a seemingly unremarkable sin?

The Rambam (*Shemoneh Perakim* 4) takes a different tack in explaining the sin of *Mei Merivah*. He says that Moshe was punished for publicly displaying anger toward *Klal Yisrael*, specifically because such an attack was unwarranted. The nation viewed Moshe as a role model; they sought to emulate all his characteristics. But anger is an evil trait, derived only from a

wicked characteristic of the soul. *Klal Yisrael*, due to their great faith in Moshe, did not accuse Moshe of possessing such wickedness, but assumed that Moshe's display of anger was in actuality a reflection of Hashem's anger with them. This was not the case at all. Hashem was not angry with them. Due to the fact that Moshe made *B'nei Yisrael* think that they had angered Hashem, when in reality they had not, Hashem, therefore, labeled Moshe as one who "rebelled against My word."

Although the Torah does not openly state that Moshe did display anger, the *Midrash (Yalkut Mei'am Lo'ez, Bamidbar 20:12,13)* does mention it, as does the *Sifri* (157). The Ramban (*Bamidbar 20:7*) attempts to refute the Rambam by asking, what lack of faith is there in anger? After all, Hashem remonstrated Moshe with, "you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me." Hence, it seems that a problem with Moshe's alleged anger never came into the picture. The Ritva defends the Rambam by explaining that Moshe requested of Hashem:

הודעני נא את דרכך

Make known to me Your ways (*Shemos 33:13*).

Moshe sought to understand Hashem's attributes so that he might emulate Him, the better to rule over *Klal Yisrael*, at which time Hashem informed Moshe that He was "slow to anger." At the incident of *Mei Merivah*, Moshe's quick anger demonstrated that he did not believe that this was really one of Hashem's traits. Hence, Hashem used the expression, "you did not believe in Me."

The Maharal (*Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 20:12*) takes the Rambam's position — but instead of claiming a flaw in Moshe's character, the Maharal represents it as a flaw in faith. Where there is complete faith, there is no anger. Complete faith entails only great joy.

The Ramban (*Bamidbar 20:7*), however, presents the *Rabbeinu Chananel's* position as the most probable reason for Moshe's punishment. In Moshe's statement, "Can we extract water from this rock for you?" (*Bamidbar 20:10*), he seemed to associate the performance of the miracle with his own person, as if he was taking credit for the miracle himself. Moshe should have asked: "Could Hashem extract water from this rock for you?" He should have made it clear that Hashem alone was responsible for the performance of this miracle. Because of Moshe's words, *Klal Yisrael* erroneously thought that Moshe and Aharon drew the water from the rock by some natural act that they had performed. Some members of *Klal Yisrael* believed that Moshe was expert in recognizing rocks which blocked up natural springs. Many rocks can, thus, "produce water" when struck correctly, and Moshe, having herded Yisro's flocks for many years, would be an expert in identifying this type of rock (*Yalkut Shimoni 20:4*). As such, no miracle would be apparent through smiting the rock — and since Hashem's name was not mentioned by Moshe, an opportunity to publicly sanctify Hashem's name was lost. And this was the reason that Moshe was condemned to his dire punishment (see Malbim, *Bamidbar 20:8*). The *Rabbeinu Chananel's* position is not necessarily conclusive. It could be argued that Moshe's intention in stating "Can we extract water..." actually did not detract from Hashem at all. Moshe was truly referring to Hashem's ability; he merely included himself as a messenger of Hashem, which in fact he was. In this line of thought, Moshe did not really associate himself with the miracle and never intended to take any credit for it. He simply meant that he was the conduit for Hashem's great feat.

Rashi (*Bereishis* 19:22) takes a similar approach to Rabbeinu Chananel in regard to the malachim (angels) who rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom. The malachim used the expression:

כי משחיתים אנחנו

For we shall destroy [Sodom] (ibid.13).

They ascribed the ability to destroy the city of Sodom to themselves, rather than properly giving Hashem total credit. They were, therefore, chastised by being forced to admit that the matter was really not within their jurisdiction (*Bereishis Rabba* 50:9).

The Ramban (*Shemos* 3:2; also *Ibn Ezra* ibid.) takes the attitude that it is perfectly acceptable for “the deputy to speak in the name of Him Who sent him.” Hence the malach (angel) who appeared to Moshe at the ‘burning bush’ exclaimed, “I am the G-d of your father” (ibid.6). (see also Ramban, *Bereishis* 19:24). This seems inconsistent with the Ramban’s consenting to the Rabbeinu Chananel’s position on Moshe Rabbeinu’s sin. At the ‘rock’, it seems inappropriate for Moshe, Hashem’s deputy, to associate himself as part of the act, according to the Ramban, while at the ‘burning bush’, the Ramban comments that it was indeed appropriate for the malach, Hashem’s deputy, to include himself as part of the act. Perhaps, according to the Ramban, it would be appropriate for a malach to include himself with Hashem, but conversely, it would be inappropriate for a human to do so. Maybe it was permissible for the malach to make his statement to a single- person audience of Moshe Rabbeinu, but Moshe, on the other hand, addressed the entire congregation, a situation with more room for misunderstanding. Perhaps, the malach merely articulated and echoed Hashem’s words, leaving little room for mistake; Moshe however, was commissioned to perform an actual demonstration on behalf of Hashem, circumstances which could leave much room for error on the part of the congregation.

It is interesting to note that Moshe placed the blame for his punishment squarely at the feet of *Klal Yisrael*:

גם בי התאנף ה' בגללכם

Also Hashem was angry with me for your sakes (*Devarim* 1:37).

ויתעבר ה' בי למענכם

And Hashem was wroth with me for your sakes (ibid. 3:26).

It is clearly stated in *Tehillim* (106:32):

ויקציפו על מי מריבה וירע למשה בעבורם

And they angered Him at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moshe for their sakes.

Considering all the above-mentioned arguments, it is still difficult to comprehend the relationship between Moshe’s transgression and the magnitude of his punishment. It is certain that whatever Hashem decrees is appropriate and well deserved. It is conceivable that Moshe’s leadership position, with its spiritual ramifications in its effect on *Klal Yisrael*, resulted in him being judged not only by his own actions, but by those of the assembly, as well. The phrases “you sinned,” “you rebelled,” and “you did not believe in Me,” relate to the entire nation; and the punishment was not only individual, but collective. They were penalized by losing their greatest

leader prematurely, and Moshe's punishment was that he lost the opportunity to lead them into Israel.

Their punishments were for a duality of reasons. Moshe blamed *Klal Yisrael* because they prodded and incited him to anger — while he is also blamed for the sin, because he displayed anger. Unwarranted anger by a leader of *Klal Yisrael* is unacceptable. Similarly, Eliyahu *Hanavi* was rebuked by Hashem after the slaughter of the *Nevi'ei Haba'al* (*Melachim* I 19:11-13) for his display of excessive rage. Hashem appreciates demonstrations of jealousy on His behalf by His zealots, but leaders of *Klal Yisrael* must demonstrate restraint and responsible calm. *Sefer Melachim* relates that Hashem presented a strong wind, an earthquake, a fire, and a still, delicate voice in quick succession to Eliyahu. The symbolic message was that Hashem's way is one of deliberate calm, not overbearing rage.

Eliyahu *Hanavi* achieved perfection in holiness; nevertheless he was chastised by Hashem for his fervent rage. Hashem reprimanded Eliyahu with: "I do not want your prophecy, since you plead for the prosecution of My children" (Rashi, *Melachim* I 19:16; Redak *ibid.*; *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* 8). Eliyahu's reward for a lifetime of zeal on Hashem's behalf was immortality: he "went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (*Melachim* II 2:11). The *Metzudas David* intimates that this miracle was enacted in order to remove Eliyahu from the scene — as the *Navi Hashem*. This, so that he could be replaced by Elisha, his disciple, who became the new, less harsh *Navi* (*Melachim* I 19:16; see *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:6).

Hashem wanted Elisha to be a milder *Navi*, and therefore tempered his rage on a number of occasions. Elisha reacted violently to the ridicule of querulous youths, by having them killed by bears (*Melachim* II 2:24). Yet, despite Elisha's justification in killing them, he fell ill as a punishment for this act (*Sotah* 47•, Redak *ibid.*). Again, in an encounter with Yehoshafat, king of Judah, Elisha displayed anger, causing the *Shechinah* to leave him (*Melachim* II 3:14). Elisha required the soothing sound of a musician's music to regain his equilibrium and to effect the return of the *Shechinah* to himself (Rashi *ibid.* 15, see *Pesachim* 66:). The strong emotions involved in an act of anger prevent the individual from concentrating on attaining prophecy (Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim* 7). It was therefore impossible for Elisha to prophecy at that time (Ralbag, *Melachim* II *ibid.* 3:15). It is obvious that anger and rage are inappropriate in a prophet. Elisha's prophet-personality had to be remolded by Hashem so that he could be different from his Rebbe and mentor, Eliyahu. Thus, Hashem disciplined him when he showed his anger.

There are many parallels between the life and passing of Eliyahu *Hanavi* and Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Moshe was exposed to Hashem's glory on *Har Sinai*, as was Eliyahu, albeit many years later. Moshe fasted for forty days; so did Eliyahu. Moshe departed this world on the eastern bank of the Jordan; so too was Eliyahu "taken up" from the eastern bank of the Jordan (Redak, *Melachim* II 2:1).

Eliyahu was delicately removed from the scene due to his "un-prophet-like" rage — so too was Moshe *Rabbeinu*. His display of anger at *Mei Merivah* was the final straw, the weakness which resulted in his being banned from entering *Eretz Yisrael*. This was not to be a mere punishment, it was *midah-kenaged-midah* —measure for measure — for both Moshe and *Klal Yisrael*. Moshe, the most glorious leader of *Klal Yisrael* ever, the molder of the nation, the man who was specifically created for the task of delivering the Torah to *Klal Yisrael*, should have been destined to realize his mission of delivering *Klal Yisrael* to *Eretz Yisrael* (see *Maharsha*,

Shabbos 55:). Hashem, however, detected in Moshe a failure or shortcoming of character (according to the aforementioned Rambam), or shortcoming of faith (according to the aforementioned Maharal) — so He saw fit to pull the plug and prematurely terminate Moshe's leadership position. *Klal Yisrael*, who incited Moshe to this unwarranted anger were, *midah-kenaged-midah*, prematurely denied the benefit of his exalted leadership.

A leader's zeal for the glory of Hashem must be tempered, or it could easily lead to the rage of a *kana'i* for vengeance on behalf of Hashem. The above-stated thesis can be understood in terms of an idea expressed by the Kotzker Rebbe regarding the *kana'i* Pinchas. Up until Pinchas' display of *kana'us* (*Bamidbar 25:11*), Moshe *Rabbeinu* had considered Pinchas to be his heir apparent. However, upon observing that Pinchas was capable of such a holy act of *kana'us*, he realized that Pinchas was incapable of becoming the *manhig* —leader— of *Klal Yisrael*. It is essential that a leader exhibit traits of moderation and flexibility. Moshe understood that Pinchas' rage for the sake of Hashem was commendable and worthy of praise, but it invalidated him as a leader of *Klal Yisrael*. When Hashem detected this leadership flaw in Moshe *Rabbeinu*, Eliyahu *Hanavi*, and in others throughout history, He summarily had them removed from office. They had become inappropriate shepherds for Hashem's holy flock.

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