

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

הַאֲזִינוּ: *Teshuvah*, Punishment and the Leadership of Moshe

And the Lord spoke to Moshe that selfsame day, saying: "Go up to this mountain of Avarim, Mount Nevo, which is in the land of Moav, that is facing Yericho, and behold Eretz Kena'an that I give unto the Children of Israel as an inheritance. And die on the mountain which you will ascend and be gathered unto your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor, and was gathered unto his people. Because you both trespassed against Me in the midst of the Children of Israel at the waters of Merivat-Kadesh, in the Wilderness of Zin; because you both did not sanctify Me in the midst of the Children of Israel. For you shall see the land from afar, but you will not enter there, into the land that I am giving to the Children of Israel." (Devarim 32:48-52)

With this powerful, sad and tragic communication between God and Moshe, our Torah portion ends. After a lifetime of service to the Jewish people, Moshe is informed that he will not accompany the Jewish people into the Land of Israel.

The episode of “the waters of Merivat-Kadesh” responsible for this tragic decree raises a number of important questions, and has occupied the attention of Biblical exegetes and scholars from ancient times to the present day. For Maimonides, it represented “one of the most difficult problems in the Torah, concerning which many things have been said, and which has been asked many times” – “*safek mi-sfeikei ha-Torah she-ne'emru bo devarim rabbim ve-nishal p'amim rabbim.*”¹ First of all, what, exactly, was the sin of Moshe, described for the first time in *Bemidbar* Ch. 20? Remarkably, the Torah does not explicitly describe this most fundamental event in Moshe's life, and many different suggestions have been made to explain what happened. They range from his having hit the rock instead of speaking to it, hitting the rock twice instead of once, expressing anger at the Children of Israel (“*shim'u na ha-morim;*” *Bemidbar* 20:10), giving the impression that he and Aharon were responsible for the water coming forth from the rock instead of God, his apparent cowardice in retreating to the sanctuary when confronted by the Jewish people, and more. Abarbanel cited ten suggestions in his commentary to *Bemidbar* Ch. 20 and rejected most of them as being “far from the truth” – “*rechokim min ha-emet*” (Abarbanel, ad loc.). S.D. Luzzatto wrote, “Moshe our Teacher committed one sin but the exegetes have loaded upon him thirteen sins and more, for each of them invented a new sin.”² R. Isaac Arama noted that the matter is particularly complex because behavior considered by some (R. Chananel, for example) as rebellious, was considered by others (R. Yosef Albo, for example) as laudable, and he wrote that after all the suggestions, “we have no commentary that will assuage the ear with regard to the sin” – “*ve-ain lanu peirush yishakhech*

1. Maimonides, “Eight Chapters,” introduction to *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot*, Ch. 4, end. This formulation of his is also cited in Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah, Bemidbar* 20:1.
2. S.D. Luzzatto, *Perush Shada"l Al Ha-Torah* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 472.

et ha-ozen be-chet."³ At the end of the day, this matter is not conclusive and we can only hope to share the optimism expressed by Maimonides who wrote, after surveying all the existing suggestions, "*u-re'eh mah she-ne'amar bo u-mah she-amarnu bo anachnu, ve-ha-emet ya'aseh darkho*" – "Let what others have said be compared with our opinion and the truth will surely prevail."⁴

Second, whatever the sin may have been, why did it result in Moshe being denied his most fervent life's wish? After all, by this time in his life, what had Moshe *not* done on behalf of the Jewish people? In the words of the *Yalkut Shimoni*, even after only a short time as leader of the Jews, Moshe "took them out of Egypt, split for them the sea, brought down for them the manna, raised up for them the well, prepared for them the quail, surrounded them with clouds of glory, [and] fashioned the Tabernacle."⁵ Add to that his leading the Jewish people in the wilderness for four decades, surely, as the Torah repeatedly makes clear, no simple matter and no easy achievement. No one – ever – had greater merits than Moshe; no one – ever – was closer to God than Moshe. Even if his sin was a grievous one, did it warrant the apparently harsh punishment he received?

Third, it would appear to be the height of irony that this Torah passage, read every year on a *Shabbat* close to Yom Kippur, seems to deny or challenge the very efficacy of the act of repentance or *teshuvah* that is absolutely central to this time of year. Surely Moshe must have been embarrassed by what he did, whatever it may have been; surely

3. R. Isaac Arama, *Akeidat Yitzchak, Parashat Chukkat, Sha'ar 80*.

4. Maimonides, ad loc. For a summary of the sins that were suggested by medieval and modern commentators, see Shmuel Cohen, "Parashat Mei Merivah Ve-Shitat Rabbenu Chananel," *Megadim* 20 (1993), pp. 43–44, n. 1.

There is a large secondary literature on this episode. Among the presentations I found most interesting are Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 236–47; Jeffrey M. Cohen, "The Striking of the Rock and the Sin of Moshe and Aaron Reconsidered," *Niv Hamidrashia* 15 (1980), pp. 100–14; John A. Beck, "Why Did Moses Strike Out?: The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Moses' Disqualification in Numbers 20:1–13," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), pp. 135–41; Yaakov Blidstein, *Ezev Nevo: Mitat Moshe Be-Midreshet Hazal* (Alon Shevut, 2008), in passim; below, n. 8.

5. *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra 1:427*.

he must have regretted what he did, whatever it may have been; surely he must have resolved never to do it again, whatever that "it" may have been. What happened to the power of *teshuvah*? Were the gates of *teshuvah* closed to this greatest of all Jews? Here we are, deeply impacted by the drama of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* and the intensity of Yom Kippur, in the midst of attempting to engage in a genuine sincere introspective quest for personal salvation and atonement, and it would appear that we are being told that *teshuvah*, in fact, is impossible and makes no real difference. And, for all people, it seems to have made no real difference for the greatest of the great, for none other than Moshe our Teacher himself!

These problems are compounded by the fact that this was not the first time Moshe was commanded to draw water from a well. Many years before, one generation and close to forty years earlier, shortly after the Jewish people left Egypt, God told him to take his rod and *smite* the rock in order that water come out from it (*Shemot* 17:6). Assuming, as many commentators including Rashi do,⁶ that his sin this later time was hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, should not the fact that Moshe was explicitly commanded to *hit* the rock the first time such an event occurred significantly mitigate the nature of his sin here close to forty years later?

Perhaps the answer to these questions lies in the difference of the nature and character of these two generations, the one for whom God told Moshe to *hit* the rock and the one for whom God told Moshe to *speak* to the rock. The first was a generation that personally and directly experienced the awesomeness, might and power of God through the many explicit and dramatic miracles He performed for them, first in Egypt and then during and after the Exodus from that country. Those miracles were awesome and powerful, and when *that* generation needed water, God's miracle needed to be of the same order of magnitude. And, as a result, God told Moshe to *hit* the rock. This was the kind of act they could understand; this was the kind of God to whom they were accustomed.

Contrast this generation to the next one for whom God performed miracles of an entirely different order. This time there was no thunder and lightening, no striking choreography and no dramatic

6. Rashi, *Bemidbar* 20:12, s.v. *le-hakdishi*.

pyrotechnics, but rather manna falling gently from Heaven, a well quietly offering water and clouds of glory softly providing protection. This generation was accustomed to more subdued, subtle and quiet miracles and a more subdued, subtle and quiet God. And so, when *this* generation needed water, it was absolutely essential that Moshe *speak* to the rock. This was a generation that would not understand a rock-hitting God; it could respond only to a rock-speaking God.

From this perspective, God's denial of Moshe's fervent wish to lead the Jewish people into the Promised Land should not be understood as a punishment, and Moshe's inability to change the decree should not be understood as reflecting the lack of the power of *teshuvah*. Rather, when Moshe hit the rock this time as well, God realized, perhaps, that Moshe was viewing the second generation through the same lens through which he viewed the first, that he was communicating with the second generation the same way he communicated with the first, and therefore concluded that he would be an inappropriate leader for them. Of course, Moshe could be forgiven for whatever sin he committed. Moshe the individual could certainly be reconciled with the God whose teachings he so carefully transmitted, the God whom he so faithfully served, and the God whose people he so selflessly led for decades. The problem lay not in Moshe the individual; it lay in Moshe the leader. When Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, God perhaps realized that he would no longer be suited to serve as the leader of the next generation of Jews. Someone else would now be needed who could better lead them at this most crucial juncture in their developing national identity and early national history.

This point is sharpened by the striking rabbinic tradition which teaches that Moshe the private citizen was, indeed, given the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Had he wanted to enter as a student of Yehoshua's, that option would have been available to him, but it was something he could not bring himself to do. It was only Moshe in his capacity as Jewish leader who was prohibited from entering "the land that I am giving to the Children of Israel."⁷

7. See *Midrash Rabbah, Devarim* 9:9; *Sifre, Pinchas* #135. For the problematics surrounding this story, see Yaakov Blidstein, *Ezev Nevo*, pp. 123–33.

The essence, the substance, of the teachings of Judaism, needs to be constant from one generation to the next. But the idiom, style, manner, approach and mode of communication of that essence or that substance, may, and for some, must, change from one generation to the next. What was effective in the Middle Ages is not necessarily effective in the twenty-first century; what worked well in Eastern Europe will not necessarily work well in America. The message is the same; the medium changes from time to time and from place to place.⁸

8. For other suggestions more or less analogous to mine, see Steven D. Fraade, "Moses at Meribah: Speech, Scepter and Sanctification," *Orim* 2:1 (1986) pp. 43–67; Yitzchak Shaveh, "Chet'o shel Mosheh," *Megadim* 20 (1993), pp. 35–42; Nathaniel Helfgot, "And Moshe Struck the Rock': Numbers 20 and the Leadership of Moses," *Tradition* 27:3 (1993), pp. 51–58; and Mosheh Lichtenstein, "Moshe's Leadership and the Transition of Generations," www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.62/35chukat.htm. The Netziv also highlights Moshe's failure to differentiate between the generation that left Egypt and the one he was addressing here, although he describes the difference differently. See *Ha'amek Davar; Bemidbar* 20:1–12, in passim. See too R. Elchanan Samet, *Iyyunim Be-Parashot Ha-Shavua*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 225–26, idem., *Iyyunim Be-Parashot Ha-Shavua: Sidrah Sheniyah*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv, 2009), p. 253.

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