

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Chukat

Education 101

The sin of Moshe hitting the rock is beyond our comprehension, however, the commentators express numerous lessons that can be learned from the event. Interestingly, the hitting of the rock is seen by the sages to refer to Moshe acting as the teacher and the rock being the student. The sin represents something that went wrong in that dynamic. It is important not to wrongfully attribute sins to Moshe, but the commentators shed light and share some important educational outlooks based on the entire episode.

Ten Interpretations

The Ohr HaChaim (1696- 1743) lists off ten opinions as to what Moshe did wrong. Each one is a most relevant lesson to us both in the classroom, at home, and in our personal relationships.

1- Rashi (1040 - 1105): “Hashem (G-d) told Moshe to speak to the rock, but Moshe instead hit it.” We must always bear in mind that properly speaking to someone will accomplish more than physical impact.

2- Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089- 1167): “Moshe did not have the right concentration when he hit the rock because he was distracted by the nation’s bickering and complaining about the fact that they were thirsty.” An educator must always remain calm and focused. No actions should be taken from a place of confusion. If the educator is frazzled, it is better not to act at all and wait until one calms down.

3- Ibn Ezra (2nd suggestion): “Moshe was only supposed to hit the rock once, because that constituted speaking to it, but he hit it twice.” Sometimes a “verbal hitting” may be necessary, but it must be exact. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (1914- 2005) zt”l says over in the name of his great mentor, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian (1876- 1970) zt”l, that hitting a child should not constitute a punishment of pain, but rather it is a light tap of love that expresses that the parent expects more from the child and the present behavior is not acceptable.

4- Ibn Ezra (3rd suggestion): “The Jews should have sung a song of thanks to Hashem. Moshe should have facilitated this.” The educational messages that we share with our children should highlight the importance of giving praise Hashem and to recognize His Guiding Hand and Eternal Kindness.

5- Ibn Ezra (4th suggestion): “Moshe called the Jews ‘rebels’”. Educators must be so careful not to label children as failures. A child who is called a name by a teacher can be scarred for life. I dealt with the sweetest student who once confided in me that he thought of himself as a liar because that was a name that he was once called by a teacher who had falsely accused him of doing something wrong. It took months for me to show him that he was truly a good person with strong ethics, honesty, and so much to offer.



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6- Rambam (1135- 1204): “Moshe got angry which lead the Jews to incorrectly think that Hashem was angry at them as well, which was not the case.” This is powerful because as educators we represent the Torah and Hashem and our children often associate the feelings that we produce in them to be emanating from Hashem. This is a sobering wakeup call for how we interact and communicate with them.

7- Rabbeinu Chananel (936- 1055): “Moshe made it sound as if he and Aron were bringing out the water themselves and not Hashem.” We must educate our children to see the Hand of Hashem in everything.

8-Rabbi Moshe Kohen (1020- 1080): “Moshe made it sound like it was impossible for Hashem to make water come from the rock.” Hashem is all-capable and can do anything.

9- Rabbi Yosef Albo (1380- 1444): “Moshe and Aharon should have brought the Jews water before they even had to complain that they lacked it. And when the Jews did complain this showed their lack of reliance in Hashem.” The educator must be in tune with the needs of the students and he must instill in them a deep belief in Hashem.

10- Maaseh Hashem (R’ Eliezer Ashkenazi, 1512- 1585): The Jews and Moshe were arguing and Moshe threw his stick onto the rock in anger.” There is no room for anger in an educational setting, ever. I always tell my students, “you can get angry, or you can solve the problem, but you can’t do both.” If someone feels angry, that is okay, but there is never a time to express anger. It is fire that destroys relationships.

Conclusion

We have seen some thought provoking ideas about proper education. It must be stressed that Moshe is called by the dear title of ‘Rabbainu, our teacher’, because he was the master pedagogue of the Jews. The commentators are expressing a sin that Moshe did that was the minutest fraction of the above listed transgression, and Hashem was extra strict on Moshe. May we learn to be effective, thoughtful, and warm educators who instill a love and curiosity of learning in our children and students.

Shabbat Shalom!

