

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Chukat

In parshat Chukat we're faced with a situation the likes of which we've never seen before. It's been difficult enough to grapple with the sins of the Jewish people these last few weeks. But this week it's not the people who sin; it's the leaders. And that's much more disturbing.

Truth be told, the sin of Moshe and Aaron at the Waters of Mara is very subtle. It's so subtle it's hard to figure out exactly what it was. (The Or HaChaim HaKadosh quotes no less than ten different opinions.) But the greater you are, the more G-d expects of you. So our inability to comprehend sin at the level of Moshe and Aaron comes as no surprise. But study it we must, not to know their failure, but to learn its eternal message for ourselves.

The story goes like this: Miriam passed away, and as a result, the miraculous Well of Miriam that had followed the Jews around the desert suddenly vanished. The people are in a precarious situation, to say the least. Humans can't last very long in a desert without water. Predictably, certain Jews of little faith raise their ugly voices: "They began demonstrating against Moshe and Aaron... 'Why did you bring G-d's congregation to this desert? So that we and our livestock should die? Why did you take us out of Egypt and bring us to this terrible place?'" Yada yada yada.

G-d appears and tells Moshe and Aaron to take the staff, speak to a rock and "it will give forth its water." (Speak softly and carry a big stick?) Moshe hits the rock twice and a huge amount of water gushes out. The Jews are saved, but our celebration is short lived. Something has gone very wrong.

"G-d said to Moshe and Aaron, 'You didn't have enough faith to sanctify me before the Jews! Therefore, you shall not bring this assembly to the land that I have given you.' (Bamidbar 20:1-12)

What does G-d mean when he says that Moshe and Aaron failed to sanctify Him? Rashi, quoting the Midrash, offers the following explanation: "For if you had spoken to the rock and brought out [the water that way], then I would have been sanctified in the eyes of the congregation. They would say [to themselves], 'If this rock that can't speak and can't hear and isn't in need of a livelihood fulfills the word of G-d, how much more so should we?!'" By hitting the rock, Moshe deprived the people of this opportunity for inspiration and thus failed to sanctify G-d.



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What kind of logic is this? We're looking at a miracle here – G-d made water flow out of a rock. Why would the rock's "obedience" inspire? The rock had no say in the matter!

The answer is obvious. G-d has many ways to communicate. The Jews of the desert were no fools – they knew that everything G-d did held a message for them. If water flows from a rock by Moshe's command, that means the Jews better start listening to Moshe. And by doing so, unimagined potential might just rise to the surface.

Not only was this message lost when Moshe hit the rock, a new and frightening message replaced it. Bringing out water by striking the rock indicated that G-d had no patience to see if people will follow His commandments. When a job needs to get done, obedience would be gained by force. This was not at all what G-d wanted to say, so G-d quickly sent a new message to rectify it.

Moshe and Aaron were punished and they lost the privilege to lead the Jews into Israel. They would die in the desert, never to enter the Promised Land. Why? Because by hitting the rock instead of talking to it, they gave the people the wrong impression about G-d. And by denying them entry into the land, G-d demonstrated the truth. It's not about getting the job done. It doesn't matter if you brought water out of a rock and it doesn't matter if you saved a nation. G-d doesn't need you to save the world; He just needs you to do the right thing.

G-d was making another point here. The people had complained to Moshe that they were still in the desert and he had as yet failed to bring them to Israel. But their complaints were misdirected. It isn't in Moshe's power to bring them to the Promised Land; it's up to G-d. So G-d finally clarified that point, once and for all. Moshe himself won't be going in! Entry into the land doesn't depend on Moshe and it doesn't depend on past merits, heroics or military strategy either. It depends on one thing and one thing only service of G-d. And even Moshe himself, if he fails to serve G-d on the level expected of a man of his stature, even he will be denied a visa to the Holy Land.

Shabbat Shalom.

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