

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Chukat)

There is no more tragic figure in the entire Torah than Moshe Rabbeinu (our ultimate teacher).

And there is no part of the story of his life in the Torah that is more confounding and more mysterious than the story, in this week's portion *Chukat*, of his hitting the rock and consequently being denied entry into the Promised Land.

But what went wrong? The people (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 20:1-13) arrive at the desert of *Tzin* and have no water, so they complain to Moshe, because that is what you do when you are Jews in the desert with no water. In fact, it's exactly what they had done in the past; not long after the splitting of the Red Sea they arrive at *Refidim* and have no water (*Shemot* (Exodus) 17:1-7), and complain to Moshe. And then as now, Moshe takes his staff and hits the rock and presto! Everybody's happy.

So what went wrong? Why, this time, does G-d subsequently punish Moshe (and Aaron) preventing them from entering the land of Israel?

Interestingly, a careful look at the verse will note that Hashem (G-d) does not say they cannot enter the land of Israel, but rather that they will not lead the Jewish people home; almost as if to accentuate the fact that the issue here is all about leadership.

The commentaries offer many different explanations for what mistake Moshe made here, precisely because it is not at all clear, especially given that Moshe is essentially following a previously tested and proved strategy. Some (Rashi) suggest he was meant to speak to the rock which would have been more powerful than hitting it, while others (the Ramban) suggest that the way in which Moshe seems to berate the people (v. 9: "*Shimu na haMorim*" "*Listen now you rebels!*") was the problem; Moshe got angry....

It is worth noting that this story actually takes place in the 40th year, when Moshe's expectations might have been different. Nonetheless, it would seem strange that Hashem wants Moshe to speak to the rock and yet enjoins him to take the staff which was used previously to hit the rock! If Moshe was only meant to speak to the rock, why was he taking the staff?

It is also interesting to note that Aaron's role is very unclear here. The people complain to Moshe (v.3), and yet Aaron joins Moshe (v. 6) in running to G-d (to the Tent of Meeting). So G-d tells Moshe to take Aaron with him (v.8), and Aaron goes along (v.10), but does not actually say or do anything, and yet (v. 12)! he is equally punished!

Perhaps there is one detail that most seem to overlook, that might shed light on this story in an entirely different way. Hashem tells Moshe to take with him (v. 9) the "*Mateh mi'lifnei Hashem*", the "*Staff from Before G-d*".

But which staff is this? In fact, at the end of last week's portion (though chronologically 38 years earlier) Hashem commands Moshe to place the staff of *Aaron* before the Ark in the tabernacle (see 17: 24-25), so maybe Hashem is telling Moshe to take *Aaron's* staff with him!

Perhaps this would also explain why Aaron is along for the ride. Of course if this is true, we need to understand the purpose of Aaron's staff being in the Tabernacle (the Mishkan) in order to understand why it should be taken along.

Hashem (ibid v. 25) tells Moshe, after the rebellion of Korach, and the miracle of the flowering of Aaron's staff, demonstrating him to be the true High Priest, that he should place the miraculous staff of Aaron before the Ark (Called the *Eidut* in the Torah) "*le'ot li'vnei Meri*" "As a sign for *rebellious ones*", which is the exact term (v. 9: "*Shimu na haMorim*", "Listen now you rebels!") Moshe uses in berating the people!

Perhaps it was the energy this staff represented that was meant to be the solution to the conflict?

Interestingly, in last week's portion of *Korach*, after Korach and his followers are swallowed by the earth and/or burned by fire, one would have expected the rebellion to be over. And yet, it is precisely then that Hashem tells Moshe to gather the staffs of the different tribal leaders setting the stage for the miraculous blossoming of Aaron's staff and assuring his place in Jewish leadership. Why wasn't the earthquake and firestorm enough to end the conflict?

Perhaps, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in one of his posts, the Torah is trying to teach us that we don't really solve conflicts with violence; true conflict resolution requires dialogue. Even after Korach is swallowed up by earthquake, the people are still complaining, still rebellious (Bamidbar 17:6).

But considering that last week's portion and the rebellion of Korach was in the second year in the desert, whereas this week's story is a full 38 years later, the blossoming of the staff obviously worked; there seems to have been no conflict and no complaining for the entire remaining 38 years.

Interestingly, the staffs are left in the Tent of Meeting overnight implying successful conflict resolution to be gradual. And the miracle is not the bombastic earth shattering fire from heaven or powerful earthquake, but rather an almost natural blossoming of a flower, in Aaron's staff, surrounded by all the other staffs, implying that real conflict resolution must be *with* the other and not at *the expense* of the other, and it must be made to seem the almost natural solution, rather than one that is imposed....

Perhaps in this week's story, a new generation, readying itself to enter the land of Israel and conquer a land, needed to learn that conquest does not solve problems, though it may sometimes create opportunities. And wars even when they must be fought are not solutions but will always create new challenges.

Interestingly, Moshe, in approaching a recurring problem and applying an old tested method to its solution, may be demonstrating that new generations need new approaches. Maybe Moshe and Aaron did not necessarily do anything wrong per se', but it was nonetheless time for them to step aside.

One wonders whether some of our current leaders are approaching recurring problems and applying old tested methodologies, without realizing that this new generation needs a different approach and perhaps even new leadership. But then, that is a discussion for another day (or the Shabbat table?)

Wishing all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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