

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chukat  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Parashat Chukat – What was the sin of Moshe and Aharon

In this week's Parasha of Chukat, we read about the sin of Moshe and Aharon. The miraculous well stopped providing water after Miriam's death and Bnei Yisrael was thirsty. Hashem told Moshe to take his staff and, together with Aharon, to speak to the rock and it would give forth its water for Bnei Yisrael. The rock eventually did bring forth water in a miraculous fashion and Bnei Yisrael were able to satisfy their thirst. But the Torah states that Moshe and Aharon committed a serious sin (on their level), the punishment for which was that they could not enter the Land of Israel.

After gathering the nation to the rock, Moshe said: “Listen now, O rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Moshe then struck the rock twice with his staff and abundant water came forth. Hashem then said to Moshe and Aharon: “Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them”.<sup>1</sup>

The Torah does not specify the exact nature of their sin. The commentators have various opinions on this. Let's explore the various opinions on what constituted the exact nature of the sin, as explained by the Ramban in his commentary.

Rashi explains that their sin was that they hit the rock instead of speaking to it. This was a great sin, explains Rashi, because had Moshe and Aharon only spoken to the rock, it would have resulted in a great sanctification of Hashem's name. The people would have seen that a simple rock which can neither speak nor hear and has nothing to gain by following Hashem's word and nothing to lose by transgressing, still fulfils Hashem's will. How much more so should Bnei Yisrael fulfil Hashem's will.

The Ramban does not agree with Rashi's explanation. He points out that Hashem specifically told Moshe to bring his staff, presumably in order to hit the rock. The Ramban also argues that Moshe did in fact speak to the rock as well as hitting it. Thus there was no transgression of Hashem's word. Finally, the Ramban argues that a rock giving forth water miraculously is still a sanctification of Hashem's name, regardless of whether it is spoken to or hit.

The Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe's sin was that when Bnei Yisrael complained and verbally attacked Moshe, he became distracted and failed to concentrate sufficiently on his close connection with Hashem. Therefore, he was unable to perform the miracle of bringing forth water the first time that he hit the rock.

The Ramban rejects the Ibn Ezra's explanation. He argues that according to this explanation there was no lack of faith and therefore it fails to explain why Hashem said, “You did not **believe** in Me to sanctify Me”.

The Rambam argues that Moshe's sin was that he became slightly angry when he said to Bnei Yisrael “Listen now, O rebels” before striking the rock. Such behaviour constituted a desecration of Hashem's name because it is a demonstration of a negative middah, and the people could learn from Moshe that it is okay to become angry.

The Ramban takes issue with the Rambam's approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, the verse we quoted above describes Moshe's behaviour as “You did not believe in Me”. Becoming angry, argues the Ramban, does not demonstrate a lack of faith. Second, when Moshe became angry after the war against Midian,<sup>2</sup> he was not deemed to have sinned. Furthermore, the Ramban argues that there is no evidence in

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 20:12.

<sup>2</sup> See Bamidbar 31:14.

the text that Moshe actually became angry. When he said: "Listen now, O rebels," that was not necessarily an expression of anger, but rather a legitimate rebuke towards Bnei Yisrael. Finally, Aharon certainly did not become angry but he was also punished together with Moshe.<sup>3</sup>

So what did the Ramban think was the true nature of Moshe's sin? He explains the sin in Kabbalistic terms, which are beyond the scope of this article (and beyond the scope of my understanding). But on a simple level, the Ramban agrees with Rabbainu Chananel's<sup>4</sup> approach. He explains that Moshe's sin was that he said: "Shall **we** bring forth water for you from this rock?" It would have been more correct to say: "Shall Hashem bring forth water for you from this rock?" Even though it should have been obvious that Hashem was behind the miracle, there was a risk that some of the people might misinterpret Moshe's words and understand that Moshe and Aharon were bringing forth the water from the rock through their own wisdom. That is the meaning of "You did not sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael". And the Ramban interprets the verse "you did not believe in Me", in the causative sense, that is, "you [Moshe] did not **cause** Bnei Yisrael to believe in Me".

This explanation reminds us of another incident that occurred many years earlier, from Sefer Breishit. The Midrash<sup>5</sup> teaches us that when the angels were sent to destroy Sodom, they told Lot "**we** are about to destroy this place".<sup>6</sup> This made it sound like they themselves were destroying Sodom, without Hashem's command.<sup>7</sup> This was deemed a sin for which the angels were punished with an exile that lasted for 138 years. They were only allowed back to Heaven when Yaakov had his famous dream with the ladder.

It was well known that Moshe did not say or do anything on his own volition. Everything was at the bidding of Hashem.<sup>8</sup> Yet he still had to be careful that there was no possibility of the people misinterpreting his words and erroneously believing that Moshe and Aharon had power independent of Hashem chas v'shalom. This teaches us just how careful we should be with our own speech. We may make statements which suggest that matters are fully up to us and under our control. But the reality is that we can't even lift our little finger if Hashem does not grant us life every moment and allow it to happen. It is ironic that we often call a rich person who worked hard for his wealth a "self-made man". As if he really did it all himself!

People who are sensitive to this issue will often use terms like "B'ezrat Hashem", "Im Yirtzeh Hashem" or "G-d willing" in their daily speech – to acknowledge that Hashem is behind everything. Saying the words out loud, and often, is a great way to internalise the message. But even if you don't say these words often, at least try to remember that you alone do not control any outcome and rather it is Hashem that is behind everything we do.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember how even Moshe needed to be careful with his words so as not to give the false impression that he had any power independent of Hashem.
2. Try to be more conscious of the fact that Hashem is behind everything we do and control your words accordingly.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> There are other explanations given by the commentators. For example, the Abarbanel writes that the real sins took place earlier – Aharon's sin was his involvement with the Golden Calf and Moshe's sin was sending the spies. The Chiddushai HaRim explains that Moshe and Aharon failed to demonstrate conclusively to the people that Hashem provides us with whatever we need to carry out his will.

<sup>4</sup> 11th-century, a student of one of the last Geonim, best known for his commentary on the Talmud. He is the teacher of the Rif.

<sup>5</sup> Breishit Rabba 50:9.

<sup>6</sup> Breishit 19:13.

<sup>7</sup> This is R' Tanchum's explanation of the sin. R' Levi explains the sin differently (i.e. that the angels revealed a secret to Lot). The idea of angels being able to sin is surprising. Most of us understand that angels do exactly what they are commended to do by Hashem – no more and no less. But the Midrash teaches us that even angels are able to err on their level. Obviously, this is a very esoteric topic which we don't fully understand.

<sup>8</sup> See Rashi to Bamidbar 17:13. The Gemara teaches us that there were only three exceptions when Moshe decided something on his own initiative, and in each case Hashem agreed with him (see Gemara Shabbat 87a).