

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated  
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.

This parasha series is dedicated  
in honor of Rabbi Menachem Leibtag and Rabbi Elchanan Samet.

## PARASHAT HUKKAT

Dedicated in memory of Cvi ben Moishe Reinitz (Nagykallo, Hungary) - whose yartzheit is on 2 Tammuz, from those who remember him.

## Mei Meriva

Rav Yehuda Rock

Much debate has surrounded the question of what exactly the sin of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva is. The scope of this *shiur* does not allow for a comprehensive review of all of the various opinions (the Abravanel counts no less than eleven of them!). Instead, let us try to define the parameters of the exegetical problem by noting the different types of solutions and evaluating them. We shall also propose a new explanation that combines two existing ones, as an attempt to address the complexity of this issue's exegesis.

First, let us take a look at the relevant verses in our *parasha, Chukkat (Bamidbar 20:2-13)*:

And there was no water for the congregation, and they gathered against Moshe and against Aharon. And the people quarreled with Moshe and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before God! And why have you brought God's community to this wilderness, to die there – we and our cattle? And why did you bring us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place – a place of neither seed nor figs nor grapes nor pomegranates, and with no water to drink?!"

And Moshe and Aharon went from the presence of the community, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces; and God's glory appeared to them. And God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Take the staff and gather the congregation – you and Aharon, your brother – and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it shall give forth its water, and you shall bring forth water for them from the rock, and you shall give the congregation and their cattle to drink."

So Moshe took the staff from before God, as He had commanded him. And Moshe and Aharon gathered the community before the rock, and he said to them: "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?!" And Moshe lifted his hand, and with his staff he struck the rock twice, and abundant water emerged, and the congregation and their cattle drank.

And God said to Moshe and to Aharon: "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the Israelites' eyes, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land which I have given to them." This is Mei Meriva (Waters of Strife), for the Israelites strove with God, and He was sanctified in them.

The following verses are also relevant to our discussion:

- "God said to Moshe and to Aharon at Hor Mountain: '...Aharon shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not come to the land which I have given to the Israelites, **since you rebelled against My word at Mei Meriva**" (20:23-24).
- "God said to Moshe, 'Go up to this Mountain of Avarim, and see the land which I have given to the Israelites. You will see it, and then you will be gathered to your people, you too, just as Aharon your brother was gathered. **Since you rebelled against Me**, in the Tzin Wilderness, in the congregation's strife, **to sanctify Me** by water before their eyes; they are Mei Meriva of Kadesh, Tzin Wilderness" (27:12-14).
- "And you all drew near to me and you said: 'Let us send men before us, that they may spy out the land...' But you would not go up, and you rebelled against the word of Lord your God... Yet in this matter you did not believe in Lord your God... And God heard the sound of your words, and He grew angry and He swore, saying: 'Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land...' And **God grew angry with me, too, on your account**, saying: 'You, too, shall not enter there. Yehoshua bin Nun, who stands before you – he shall enter there. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it... And your little ones, concerning whom you said that they would be prey, and your children who have not known good and evil – they will enter there; to them I will give it, and they will possess it" (*Devarim* 1:22, 26, 34, 37-39).
- "And God spoke to Moshe on that very day, saying: 'Go up to this Mountain of Avarim... and die on the mountain which you will go up... **For you transgressed against Me** among the Israelites at Mei Meriva of Kadesh, Tzin Wilderness, **for you did not sanctify Me** in the Israelites' midst" (*Devarim* 32:50-51).

We are familiar with the explanation offered by Rashi, based on the Sages' view (*Midrash Tanchuma, Midrash Aggada*, ad loc.): that Moshe sinned in striking the rock instead of speaking to it, as he had been commanded.

This explanation arises directly from the verses: in God's command to Moshe, He tells him to speak to the rock; immediately thereafter, we read that Moshe strikes the rock. This

explanation also suits the verses that speak of "rebellion" (at Aharon's death: "Since you rebelled against My word") – i.e., disobeying God's command. We can also understand how God can say (at Moshe's death), "For you transgressed against Me" – after all, this is a clear act of transgression.

Nevertheless, most of the commentators tend to avoid this simple explanation, offering other possibilities instead. In fact, we may list a number of exegetical reasons (some of which are mentioned by the commentators) for not sufficing with this explanation:

- Is it possible that Moshe Rabbeinu, the giver of the Torah, God's faithful servant, would deliberately rebel against an explicit command? This question is partly an issue of faith, but it also represents a serious exegetical consideration. Even if we propose that Moshe could, in fact, stumble and sin, the question remains – how could he stumble in a matter that is so clear, and what would be his motive for doing something different from what God had commanded?
- As noted, Moshe's action is later on referred to by God as "rebellion." However, in the narrative itself, in our *parasha*, God says only, "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the Israelites' eyes? Therefore you shall not bring this community to the land..." This would seem to suggest that the punishment is meted out not for some intentional, willful rebellion, but rather for a deficiency in the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, as a result of which they cannot be the ones to lead the nation into the land.
- The act of hitting the rock is performed by Moshe alone. Aharon aids him in gathering the people together, but only Moshe strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. Why, then, is Aharon also punished?

As noted, other commentators have tried to adopt a more forgiving view of Moshe's transgression, explaining the decree that he cannot enter the land as a necessary result of his failure or deficiency in leadership, or as indicating God's very stringent judgment of such a greatly righteous person. The Ibn Ezra, for example, says that Moshe's act is an unintentional mistake (because he loses his concentration and hence is not able to perform the sign by means of speech alone), but he nevertheless lessens the public sanctification of God's Name through that sign. The Ramban explains that what God really means is for Moshe to strike the rock, and that his sin lies in striking it twice, rather than just once. Rabbeinu Chananel (quoted by the Ramban) understands Moshe's sin as a failure to attribute the miracle to God, declaring instead, "Shall **we** then bring forth water...?" The Rambam (*Shemona Perakim*, Ch. 4) explains that Moshe expresses anger towards the people, while God expresses no anger (the Ramban rejects this possibility). Additional exegetical approaches have been raised (see the Ibn Ezra, Abravanel, and others). What is common to all of them is that they offer some explanation of Moshe's behavior that does not reflect deliberate rebellion, and they attribute the transfer of leadership from Moshe and Aharon to the failure to sanctify God's Name, in one sense or another.

We have already noted that these approaches are supported by God's words here – "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me...?" Their other advantages include, in some cases, a more "credible" view of Moshe's act (i.e., not as a direct, deliberate rebellion) and an explanation for why Aharon is punished along with Moshe. On the other hand, the supporters of these approaches are hard-pressed to explain some other details of the narrative, as well as the verses

from later on, which explicitly refer to the act as "rebellion" and "transgression." We may summarize and say that the root of the exegetical problem here lies in the fact that there are different elements that seem to point in mutually contradictory directions: at one end, there is a description of the act as a specific transgression, a rebellion; at the other end, there is a more nebulous idea of a general deficiency in leadership. Our task, then, is to find an explanation that will bridge this chasm.

Before proposing a full explanation, let us point out two further exegetical problems that are relevant to our discussion:

Firstly, in *Sefer Devarim* (cited above), Moshe mentions the decree that he will not enter the land: "God was angry with me, too, on your account, saying: 'You too, shall not enter there.'" However, these words are uttered in the context of the story of the Spies!

The commentators explain that Moshe is indeed speaking about the decree that appears in our *parasha*, following the events at Mei Meriva – all of this as an aside. The Ramban suggests two reasons for mentioning it in the context of the Spies. Firstly, Moshe wants to speak about all of the punishments that have prevented people from crossing into the land, so as to emphasize the consistent principle that sins cause exile. Secondly, after Moshe mentions Kalev ben Yefunneh, who does not allow himself to be carried away by the counsel of the Spies and merits to enter the land, he also mentions the matter of Yehoshua, since he too will be entering the land, because he followed God, like Kalev. For this reason he also mentions that he himself, Moshe, will not enter the land, and that the nation will be led by Yehoshua in his stead.

However, a simple reading of the verses indicates that God's anger with Moshe and His decree that he will not enter the land comes in the wake of the Sin of the Spies. This is not consistent with the text in our *parasha*.

Furthermore, there is an apparent contradiction in the verses in our *parasha*. First we read, "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me...?" – indicating that a sanctification of God's Name fails to occur. Afterwards, however, we read: "This is Mei Meriva, where the Israelites strove with God, and **He was sanctified** in them" – in other words, God's Name ends up being sanctified! Similarly, we read later on in *Sefer Bamidbar* (27:13), when Yehoshua is appointed: "**You rebelled against Me**, in the Tzin Wilderness, in the congregation's strife, **to sanctify Me** by water before their eyes"! What this actually means, according to the commentators (see Rashi, the Ibn Ezra), is that God is sanctified through the death of the righteous, when He is exacting in judging them. This concept is derived from God's words, quoted by Moshe to Aharon following the deaths of Nadav and Avihu (*Vayikra* 10:3): "I shall be sanctified in those who are close to Me." However, aside from the fact that there are other interpretations of the phrase in *Vayikra* (and we shall not elaborate here), in our case, the verses are not speaking about the deaths of Moshe and Aharon; what is emphasized is the fact that they will not enter the land. Obviously, this means that they will die before reaching *Eretz Yisrael*; still, the punishment that our *parasha* is meting out is not a death sentence. Similarly, it is not at all certain that at this stage the Israelites are aware of the decree (since God speaks only to Moshe and Aharon). If they are not aware of it, then, from the

perspective of this concept, there is no sanctification of God. At the very least we may suggest that since the people's knowledge of the decree is essential to their perception of the sanctification of God, then if the decree is indeed publicized, the text should note this. The Ramban notes this problem.

On the simple level of the verses, it seems that God is indeed sanctified through the miracle of the water gushing from the rock, as described in our *parasha*. The Ramban supports this view. However, this brings us back to our original question: if the sign, as it is performed in practice, does cause a sanctification of God, as the language of the verse – "And He was sanctified in them" – would suggest, then why are Moshe and Aharon punished for not sanctifying God? If the claim is that they diminish the sanctification – i.e., that the miracle would have been much greater had Moshe spoken instead of striking the rock – then this, too, should be reflected in the language of the verses, rather than the absolute condemnation: "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the Israelites' eyes?"

One exegetical approach answers the two latter points; we refer here to Rav Yedaya of Lunel's *Avvat Nefesh*, cited at length in the commentary of the Shadal on our verse:

For when the Israelites gather against Moshe and Aharon, demanding water — even though they do not ask in the right way, but rather through quarrel and strife — the proper response would have been to promise that they would receive what they wanted and to tell them, "Do not fear, God will not let you and your cattle die of thirst. Has He not sustained you with manna for forty years and struck the rock so that water would flow, so that you have lacked nothing? Therefore, do not rebel against God." In any event, it would have been proper to rebuke them and disapprove of the quarrel, not to be weak and afraid to answer them. For one of the essential requirements for a prophet is the attribute of *gevura* (internal strength, courage), not fearing or retreating from anything. Yet, these two prophets, of such sterling qualities and intelligence, who had led the nation for forty years in the wilderness, Moshe and Aharon — we find no evidence that they give any response, when the Israelites gather against them in the matter of the water. Rather, they are weak, and they retreat from the confrontation, heading away from the congregation, to the Tent of Meeting, as it is written: "And Moshe and Aharon went from the presence of the community, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting," and the Ibn Ezra comments, "as though fleeing."

According to Rav Yedaya, this is the crux of their failure: they do not know how to stand up to the people and give them moral guidance and encouragement, in order to stop the people's complaints and restore their faith in God.

According to this view, we can well understand how, on the one hand, God says, "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the Israelites' eyes?," while on the other hand the Torah also says, "And He was sanctified in them." What is expected of Moshe and Aharon is for them to stand before the nation and express their faith in Him, thereby bringing about a public sanctification of His Name. Since they fail to do this, God has to be sanctified in a different way —

through the sign and wonder of water gushing from a rock. While this sign is performed by Moshe, such that he does participate in the sanctification of God's Name that does actually happen, it is not through the expression of his own faith, as warranted by the situation. It is this failure that results in the reins of leadership being transferred from him to Yehoshua. Apparently, strengthening faith by means of signs and wonders is something that has its time and place, but here and now is a need for a more profound faith. The path to this faith leads through speech and pedagogy, not through miracles and wonders. Moshe, who is apparently not capable of embracing this manner of education, cannot be the leader of the Jewish nation in their own land.

In light of this explanation we can also understand why, in *Devarim*, Moshe attributes the decree that he cannot enter the land to the episode of the Spies. In that episode too – as in our story – Moshe and Aharon are helpless in the face of the nation's complaints (as we read in *Bamidbar* 14:1-5):

And all of the congregation lifted their voices and cried... And all of the Israelites complained against Moshe and against Aharon, and the entire congregation said to them: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this wilderness! And why is God bringing us to this land...?" And they said to one another: "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." **And Moshe and Aharon fell upon their faces before the entire community of the Israelite congregation.**

Moshe and Aharon's falling upon their faces amid the Sin of the Spies is apparently comparable to their falling on their faces in our case, where they leave the presence of the nation and come to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and again "fall upon their faces." In the case of the Spies, there is someone who takes on the challenge and addresses the people with words of faith. Immediately following the above verses, we read (*ibid.*, vv. 6-9):

And Yehoshua bin Nun and Kalev ben Yefunneh, of those who had scouted the land, tore their clothes, and they said to the entire Israelite congregation, saying: "The land which we passed through, to scout it, is an exceedingly good land. If God favors us, then He will bring us to this land and give it to us: a land which is flowing with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against God..."

Apparently, the deficiencies in the leadership of Moshe and Aharon are apparent already at the time of the Spies, while Yehoshua already shows himself to be worthy of the task. However, it seems that Moshe and Aharon are given more time with the hope that, on a different occasion, they will adopt a different approach. This opportunity arises in our *parasha*, at Mei Meriva, and their repeated failure here seals their fate.

Thus, while the verdict is sealed at Mei Meriva, the root of the phenomenon is revealed already in the reaction of Moshe and Aharon to the complaint of the Israelites in the wake of the Spies' report. For this reason, in the context of the story of the Spies, Moshe recalls: "God was angry with me, too, on your account."

God's command that Moshe "speak" to the rock "before their eyes" should be understood in light of the above. The command alludes to God's message to Moshe and Aharon. Seemingly, the fact that they stand helplessly in the face of the Israelites' complaint, uttering no rebuke or encouragement, arises from their sense of despair, their conviction that talking to the people will not help. After all of the nation's many complaints, despite all of the signs and wonders that they have witnessed, Moshe and Aharon have simply lost their faith in the power of speech and persuasion. God wants to strengthen their faith in the power of speech – and to this end He commands them to speak to the rock, as though telling them: If you have God with you, it is possible even to speak to a rock and thereby to draw water from it; how much greater the effect on the Israelites - human listeners! (Compare *Midrash Aggada*, ad loc.) However, like Yona in his generation, Moshe and Aharon refuse to take this route; they prefer that the miracle speak for itself. For this reason, they both refrain from speaking to the rock. Instead, the miracle is performed like the earlier wonders in their history (see *Shemot* 17:5-6): Moshe alone strikes the rock and brings forth water. We may say that not only do Moshe and Aharon not act to express before the Israelites their faith in God's power to bring them to the land, but they themselves lack faith in their own ability, with God's help, to strengthen the Jews' faith by means of speech.

The crux of the sin, then, is not the striking of the rock in and of itself, but rather the failure to speak. This failure is common to Moshe and Aharon, since both are commanded to speak to the rock. Similarly, their failure here is not a local problem; it is part of a broader failure of leadership. This "rebellion" itself expresses their despair, their lack of faith.

Thus, in each case, the Torah's explanation fits the context. In *Parashat Chukkat*, it is the question of national leadership, so that this failure requires handing over the reins before entering the land: "Since you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you will not bring this community to the land." In the context of imminent death, as Aharon's life draws to its end and his son Elazar replaces him, the Torah focuses on the personal rebellion: "since you rebelled against My word at Mei Meriva." At the end of Moshe's mission (when Yehoshua is deputized in *Bamidbar* 27 and when he actually assumes power at the end of the Torah), these two aspects are once again brought together: "For you transgressed against Me among the Israelites at Mei Meriva of Kadesh, in the Tzin Wilderness, for you did not sanctify Me in the Israelites' midst."

Translated by Kaeren Fish

