

## PARASHAT CHUKAT

### SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

#### The Sin of Moshe and Aharon

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"And God said to Moshe and Aharon: Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael, therefore you shall not bring this congregation to the land which I have given them." (20:12)

This verse describes a great tragedy □ Moshe and Aharon, who have been the leaders of Am Yisrael for a generation and a half, and who have done so much for the nation, will not be permitted to enter the land. This tragedy disturbed Chazal and the various commentators greatly, especially in light of the fact that the Torah does not state explicitly what they did wrong. Because their sin is not altogether clear, the commentators offer several different explanations.

Rashi maintains that God had commanded them to speak to the rock (verse 8) and they sinned by striking it (verse 11). This, then, represented a deviation from the command that they were given, and Rashi explains that their action also diminished the scale of the kiddush Hashem (sanctification of the Divine Name):

"For had you spoken to the rock and then it gave water, I would have been sanctified in the eyes of the nation. They would have said, 'This rock - which does not speak, nor does it hear, nor has it any need of sustenance □ obeys the command of the Holy One; how much more so should we.'" (Rashi on verse 12)

Briefly, the crux of the sin according to this view lies in the deviation from God's command.

The Rambam, in his Eight Chapters (chapter 4), explains that Moshe and Aharon's sin was that they became angry and said, "Hear now, rebels..." (verse 10). Although the Rambam teaches that in every trait man should adopt the "golden mean," there are nevertheless a few traits concerning which a person must adopt the one extreme and distance himself from the other. One such trait is anger (Hilkhot De'ot 2:3). The Rashbam, too, suggests that Moshe struck the rock "out of a sort of anger and rage." It appears that this anger itself had a negative result: the nation then thought that God was angry with them, while this was not the case.

A third possibility is cited by the Ramban in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel (quoted also in Rabbeinu Behaye): Moshe and Aharon sinned in that they said, "Shall WE bring forth water from this rock?" instead of "Shall GOD bring forth water for you?" The nation may have received the impression that it was Moshe and Aharon who had brought forth the water by their own wisdom, and the opportunity for a kiddush Hashem was thereby lost. For that reason, according to this view, God says, "Why did you not believe in Me TO SANCTIFY ME..."

The Midrash (19:5) follows Rashi's understanding of the sin (hitting the rock instead of speaking to it), and raises the question that since it was specifically Moshe who struck the rock, why was Aharon also punished?

"This may be compared to a creditor who came to claim the threshing floor of the debtor, as well as that of his neighbor. The debtor asked, 'I may be guilty, but what has my neighbor done?' Similarly, Moshe here says, 'I may have been too strict, but what is Aharon's sin?' Therefore the Torah praises him: 'And to [the tribe of] Levi he said: Your tumim and urim be to Your righteous one whom You tested at Masa and with whom You strove at the waters of Meriva' (Devarim 33:8)."

The verse in Devarim shows that Aharon in fact did not sin at Meriva. The question then becomes even more problematic □ why was he punished? Further on, the Midrash (19:6) answers this based on the following verse:

"There is vanity which is performed upon the earth, where the righteous suffer in accordance with the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people who enjoy the benefits of the deeds of the righteous; I said that this, too, is vanity." (Kohelet 8:14)

The Midrash compares this to the snake who was punished by God, although he could have argued that Adam was at fault for having listened to him instead of to God □ "If the rabbi speaks and his student speaks, to whom do we listen?" (Sanhedrin 29a). Likewise, Aharon could have claimed, "I did not transgress Your words; why, then, should I die?" But God gave him no opportunity for such an appeal, nor did He argue on Aharon's behalf. The Midrash explains his fate as falling under the category of "the righteous who suffer."

It is certainly difficult to accept the line of thinking proposed by the Midrash, especially in light of the fact that Moshe pleads at length for God to cancel this tragic decree, to the point where God is forced to say, "Enough □ do not speak to Me any longer concerning this matter" (Devarim 3:26). Why does Aharon not offer his own plea, especially since his claim is much stronger?

In light of all of the above, it seems that we must seek some other way of understanding the sin. The verse does not state that they sinned, but rather that they did not sanctify God's name: "Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael?" and likewise "Because you did not sanctify Me amongst Bnei Yisrael" (Devarim 32:51). The punishment, it seems, is not for a sin which was committed, but rather for something which they did not do. (Rabbeinu Behaye similarly explains that they did not sin, but he explains the punishment in accordance with kabbalistic principles.)

Had they spoken to the rock, God's name would have been sanctified to a much greater degree: everyone would have witnessed the obedience of the rock, and there would have been a clear demonstration of the verse, "Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit..." Moshe and Aharon missed a golden opportunity that would perhaps never be repeated. Although it was Moshe who struck rather than speaking, Aharon was also punished because he hesitated rather than speaking immediately to the rock, and did not object when Moshe struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Both were therefore responsible for the missed opportunity.

This failure is not only severely punished but is also referred to with great severity. Later on in the parasha God says,

"Aharon will be gathered to his people... because you REBELLED AGAINST MY WORD... at the waters of Meriva." (20:24)

Their sin is regarded as rebellion. Similarly, in parashat Haazinu (32:51) we read, "For you ACTED TREACHEROUSLY (ma'altem) against Me amongst Bnei Yisrael." The Gemara (Me'ila 18a) compares acting treacherously (me'ila) to idolatry and adultery.

This severe attitude is certainly related to the fact that God is very exacting of the righteous. We read, "These are the waters of Meriva, for Bnei Yisrael strove with God and He was SANCTIFIED THROUGH THEM" (20:13), corresponding to the verse, "By means of those close to Me I shall be sanctified" (Vayikra 10:3). It was not even as though Moshe and Aharon missed completely the opportunity for a kiddush Hashem; they merely brought about a kiddush Hashem that was on a smaller scale than what would have been possible.

The very fact that God punishes them although they did not actually sin but rather missed an opportunity for something greater, holds a lesson for us. God relates to each individual according to the relationship between what he does and what he could have done. A person can learn Torah and fulfill the mitzvot but nevertheless be punished because there was more that he could have done, but he did not. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 99a) teaches that anyone who could study Torah but does not do so is included in the verse, "For he has spurned the word of God." The Gemara (Berakhot 12b) teaches that someone who could have pleaded for mercy on behalf of his fellow but does not do so is called a sinner. Nowhere is it written that a person is commanded to pray for his fellow, but nevertheless a person who fails to do so is called a sinner since he could have helped his fellow but did not.

There are two reasons for such a severe view of someone who all in all does not do as much as he is able:

- i. Wasted potential is considered like actual damage. The Rambam (Hilkhos Sekhirut 20:3) writes in the name of his teachers (i.e. the Ri Migash) that someone who gave over his vineyard to a watchman or tenant on condition that the latter will dig or prune, and he does not do perform these acts of cultivation, "he is as culpable as one who actively caused a loss."
- ii. Such a missed opportunity arises at best from laziness and at worst from apathy. If someone fails to pray for his fellow, it is a sign that his fellow is unimportant to him.

The Gemara (Berakhot 5a) teaches that if a person is overcome with suffering he should examine his deeds, and if he finds no fitting reason, he should assume that he is being punished for wasting time that could have been spent on Torah study. In other words, if someone finds no specific sin that could be the cause of his suffering, he should assume that the punishment is for missed opportunities. It is unclear whether missing an opportunity for Torah study is forbidden from the formal halakhic perspective □ a person is not obligated to study Torah every minute of his whole life; but there is certainly an element of wasted opportunity.

All of this teaches us that a person should always strive to achieve the maximum that he is able to. A person may never set himself a standard for action in accordance with what his peers are doing, or what previous generations did, since his potential may differ from theirs. Each person has to recognize his own personal potential and then strive with all his might to fulfill it.

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