

The Politics of Anger
Parashat Hukkat
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Yet another *parashah* with yet more bad news.

A few weeks ago, in *Parashat B'Ha'alotcha*, we encountered the Israelites complaining about the food.

Last week, in *Shlach Lecha*, we encountered them maligning the Land of Israel and speaking far too positively -- *ridiculously* positively -- about the Land of Egypt. (When was Egypt ever a “land flowing with milk and honey”?) As a result, finally, they were punished by being told that they would not live to enter the Promised Land, for they didn't deserve it. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who'd come back with positive reports, would.

That should have gotten us wondering: well, **did that mean even Miriam, Aaron and Moses?** After all, they too were part of the people of Israel, the people who were being collectively punished. Would they too die before entering the land?

And in this week's portion, we come to learn that, yes, even Miriam will die, even Aaron will die, and yes, even Moses will die before entering the land.

But whereas Miriam simply dies without any explanation, without any focus on what led her to suffer that fate, when it comes to Moses (and Aaron), it is different. Moses and Aaron are told that they won't enter the land because of what they did.

And what is that? We're told (Numbers 20:12) that they behaved in a way that called into question their **faith in God**.



That's at least what the text says.

But what exactly did Moses or Aaron DO to justify that interpretation and warrant their fate?

Well, let's leave Aaron aside for the moment, because we're not told what Aaron did. We *are* told what Moses did, and that leads to some simple possible explanations.

One view is that Moses can't enter the land because he disobeyed God. God said "speak," but Moses "hit." He didn't do exactly what he was supposed to do. Done.

This is a reasonable explanation. After all, think of the specific instructions in the previous chapter regarding the preparation of the ashes of the red heifer. It's clear that they are to be followed to the letter. We've got stories in the Bible about people who didn't do things exactly as they were told to do them, and they were consequently punished. The classic example is the case of King Saul. (His rule was taken away from him because he refrained from utterly wiping out the Amalekites. His punishment might not seem fair, either, but it's consistent with a Biblical "No exceptions" policy.)

Another explanation is that Moses seems to have lost his empathy for the people. He spoke sharply to the people, calling them "rebels." He seems to have lost his patience for them.

Another view is that by saying "Shall *WE* get water for you out of this rock," Moses was suggesting that he and Aaron were going to solve the problem, not God.

That actually seems close to the words used to describe the punishment, namely: "because you did not trust me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people."

But all of these explanations -- and there are of course others -- suffer because, even if they're accurate, the consequence of the behavior seems to represent

disproportionate punishment. For this you don't get to enter the land, the goal of the effort begun forty years before?

We could offer a defense to Moses, right? After all, soon after leaving Egypt, God had specifically told him to hit a rock to get water. (Exodus 17:6) He'd done just that and the people got water. Isn't it reasonable that in this week's parashah, almost forty years later, the same technique would work?

So it's puzzling. It's not clear at all. Which is why there are so many explanations. No one seems to suffice.

I want to share with you one more interpretation, which makes sense to me.

To appreciate it, recall two things. First, this incident is taking place in the 40th year in the Wilderness. The people are now on the brink of entering the Land. Egypt is far behind them. And who are these people? Moses and Aaron are standing before the **new generation**, two generations younger than they. Our focus, as we look upon this scene, should be on what is about to happen, not on what happened in the past. And what is about to happen is that they are about to enter the Promised Land.

Second, let's recall that Moses and Aaron are not told here that they won't live to **enter** the land. They're told that they will not **lead** the congregation into the land ("*lo taviu et hakahal hazeh el ha-aretz asher natati hahem*"). So in looking at this scene, we should be focusing on the prerequisites of leadership.

The explanation I want to share with you is that of **Rabbi Judah Loew, the famous Maharal of Prague (1520s - 1609)**. He was a true Jewish Renaissance person, in at least two ways. Great scholar, community leader and writer, his influence was huge. But he also lived at the time of the Renaissance in Europe, so his inspiration and his influence actually extended far beyond the Jewish community.¹

¹ The commentary of the Maharal on the story of Moses hitting the rock was brought to my attention by Yaakov Mascetti, "Talking to Stones or Hitting Stones:

The Maharal draws on the different explanations we have reviewed, and he weaves them together in a way that is, to me, artful and insightful.

The Maharal points out that it is indeed the hitting of the rock that demonstrates Moses' abandonment of his faith. He focuses on the fact that Moses hit the rock not once but twice. Why? For hitting the rock twice is an action performed with anger. (Remember, previously, right after leaving Egypt, Moses had hit a rock, but only once. This time it's different.)

It wasn't striking the rock *per se*; it seems to be **what led to** the striking and **what characterized** the striking, and that is **anger**. Impatience. Not righteous indignation upon seeing a fellow Israelite mistreated, but personal indignation. Frustration. A sense that he's had it. Anger!

The Maharal, picking up on the discussion of anger in the Talmud and in Maimonides, reminds us: **expressing anger implies a lack of faith in God.**

That's powerful. Some people -- even (or maybe particularly) religious people -- have the sense that they're always right, that their indignation is by definition righteous. The Maharal takes a different approach, particularly when it comes to entering the new Land. It *isn't good* -- especially for a leader, especially one leading the people into a new, civilized land -- to express frustration and anger in this way. Patience and understanding are preferable. Looking at a problem sensibly; not hysterically. Looking at facts, and not overreacting.

I'm reminded of a scene in a movie that came out about forty years ago.

In the film, "Network," the protagonist, a TV news anchor says, "I'm mad as Hell, and I am not going to take this anymore!" Shockingly, people respond to it. They start echoing his words, shouting them out of their windows.

A Lesson for the People of Israel," Shabbat Shalom, Oz veShalom, Parshat Hukkat, Issue 1015, 5777, which has greatly informed my thinking.

Sometimes it seems as though this kind of outburst is becoming the norm in our country. And some people feel good about that. That is a problem.

Anger is an emotional expression that can lead us in terrible directions. It can distort our thinking. It can lead us to do unproductive or counterproductive things.

I once recall an educator, a colleague of mine, share a perplexing, audacious insight: “Never hit a child except in anger.” Wow! How could you ever think that it’s OK to decide to hit a child at a moment of anger? What she meant by that, of course, is that you should never hit a child, *period*.

Maimonides makes it clear that, of all the emotions, anger is the most dangerous. Whereas with respect to most traits, we’re supposed to look for the middle way, when it comes to anger we’re to look toward the extreme, and eschew anger completely.

As the people are about to enter the Land, the Maharal is saying, anger is not an appropriate emotion for a leader to exhibit. Should a leader be able to recognize that change is necessary, and what should be done? Yes. But should he be yelling and screaming? No.

By the way, this reminds me: What about Aaron?

I am not aware that the Maharal comments on this, but it seems to me clear: Just as an hysterical, over-the-top reaction is inappropriate to a leader, so too is silence in the face of that. Aaron, the enabler par excellence, is also not qualified to lead the people into the new Land. He was complicit in the building of the Golden Calf, and he is complicit when Moses reacts the way he does here. He’s too passive. Through his silence, he assumes some responsibility for what Moses did.

Moreover, and this is really lovely: Following Rashi, the Maharal argues that talking to the rock was meant to bring the Israelites to contemplate the power of **the word**, the Divine word, and to understand that **if words have that kind of power over rocks, then all the more so might they have such power over**

human beings. What a beautiful message for the people about to enter the Promised Land!

“Had Moses spoken to the rock it would have brought the Israelites to accept Divine authority out of their own will, and not because they were forced by some smiting rod or an angry leader.” (Mascetti)

As the people are about to enter the new land, they need respect for the word, they need respect for the power of words -- especially divine words.

In particular, they have to recognize that to follow God must be “the direct consequence of free choice, which comes with space, the absence of force, and a verbal interaction out of which the individual is allowed to be who and what he is, and to choose, out of faith and freedom, the way and moment to comply with Divine orders.” (Mascetti)

And that’s why Moses and Aaron are prevented from leading the people into the Land. There can be no place in the relationship between the People and the Land for “smiting rods, anger, or the forced resolutions of crises” -- or those who allow those to take place.

To quote John Milton, who lived at the same time as the Maharal,

“Truth is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick’n into a muddy pool of confomity and tradition.”

The simple message for the generation about to enter the Land, and to all of us: Paraphrasing Yaakov Mascetti: We should talk and not hit. We should allow divine words to flow and not remain stagnant. We should give space to, rather than enforce, what we consider to be Divine authority (but which may really be only our interpretation of the Divine word). And we should be wary of anger -- our own and that of others.

Shabbat shalom!