



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Chukat

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Anger Management

By Sara Berger

For me, *Parshat Chukat* details one of the most challenging passages in the Torah. *Moshe*, who had been *Hashem's* faithful servant and had led *B'nei Yisrael* for forty years, was told that he would not live to enter *Eretz Yisrael*. I recall first learning about this as a child and thinking *Hashem's* punishment didn't fit *Moshe's* crime, though the more I learned about it and studied commentaries on it, I gained a better understanding.

After years of journeying through the desert, *B'nei Yisrael* arrived in *Zin* and settled in *Kadesh*. The people of Israel were thirsty for water, so they began fighting with *Moshe*, asking him why he brought them into the wilderness to die in a place with no food or drink. *Hashem* appeared to *Moshe* and *Aaron*; He told *Moshe* to take his staff, assemble the community, and speak to the rock in front of *B'nei Yisrael* so that water would spill out. *Moshe* and *Aaron* gathered *B'nei Yisrael*, but instead of speaking to the rock, *Moshe* struck it twice with his staff, and an abundance of water came out, from which the people and their animals drank.

I recall first learning about this as a child and thinking Hashem's punishment didn't fit Moshe's crime, though the more I learned about it and studied commentaries on it, I gained a better understanding.

Hashem then said to *Moshe* and *Aaron* (*Bamidbar* 20:12),

יַעַן לֹא־הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם

Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the sons of Israel, you shall not bring this community into the land I have given them.

Moshe was arguably the greatest Jewish leader of all time. He confronted *Pharaoh*, announced the plagues, brought *B'nei Yisrael* out of Egypt, and led them through the desert; he brought *Hashem's* word to the people and prayed to Him on their behalf. Even so, *Moshe* was not destined to enter the land of Israel, the land he led *B'nei Yisrael* toward -- how could this be?! Was *Moshe's* sin of striking the rock instead of speaking to it so bad that he received such a grave punishment?

The *Rambam* helps explain *Moshe's* punishment; Maimonides believed that we must strike the right balance and achieve the middle ground between too much and too little of most character traits, except for pride and anger. He argued that any amount of pride or anger is wrong. The *Rambam* believed that anger is such a damaging trait that one should try to rid himself of it entirely. He observed that, *Moshe* lost his temper with *B'nei Yisrael* and displayed his anger when he said,

שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הַמְּרִים הַמִּן-הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם מִיָּדַי, *Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?* (*Bamidbar 20:10*) That is why he was punished.

Furthermore, the *Rambam* suggests that *Moshe's* sin was exacerbated because *B'nei Yisrael* saw him as an emissary of *Hashem*, so *Moshe's* anger with *B'nei Yisrael* could be misinterpreted as *Hashem's* anger, even though He was not angry with His people. By misrepresenting *Hashem's* anger, *Moshe* ultimately profaned God's name, leading to severe punishment.

However, just like *Moshe* represented *Hashem* to *B'nei Yisrael*, so too do parents represent *Hashem* to their children. Therefore, it is even more important for us to control our anger and try to teach our children through a lens of love and compassion rather than anger.

Moshe was an extraordinary leader; he led *B'nei Yisrael* through incredibly challenging times. Therefore, perhaps when *Hashem* saw him lose his temper and act in an angry fashion, He determined that *Moshe* was no longer best suited to lead His people into *Eretz Yisrael*. The man who would lead His nation into the promised land would be one who could control his emotions.

We can all learn a great deal from *Hashem* through His punishing of *Moshe* because of his anger. We often find ourselves feeling angry. I, for instance, have experienced anger toward my children for not listening to me. Therefore, I can understand how *Moshe* was feeling frustrated and burned out, so he responded to *B'nei Yisrael's* negativity with the negativity of his own, manifested through anger. However, just like *Moshe* represented *Hashem* to *B'nei Yisrael*, so too do parents represent *Hashem* to their children. Therefore, it is even more important for us to control our anger and try to teach our children through a lens of love and compassion rather than anger.

In today's times, we are often exposed to anger. We see it when driving (#roadrage), watching the news and disagreeing with others. Anger causes us to be divisive and focus on our differences rather than our similarities. The Torah has so much to teach us, even in today's times. From *Moshe's* punishment, we should learn to best channel our anger, and focus on what draws us together with people rather than apart. Even within our community, at the Young Israel of Scarsdale, neighbors and friends may not always agree with one another. Still, one of my favorite things about our community is the love that we show for one another and the way that we treat each other with care and respect, rather than anger. This was one of *Hashem's* lessons to *Moshe* and to us throughout *Parshat Chukat*.

Sara and Danny Berger moved to Scarsdale in 2008. They have 3 children, Dylan (rising junior at SAR HS), Caroline (rising freshman at SAR HS), and Alexander (rising 6th grader at WDS). They are active members of the YIS community, and feel blessed to be part of such a warm community with such amazing leadership.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

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