

## What Did Moses Do Wrong?

### Introduction: A strange occurrence

In this week's Torah portion, *Chukat*, the people complain that they have no water to drink. So God gives them water in the following manner:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes speak to the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”

Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him.

Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, “Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?”

And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of Israel, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.” [Num. 20:7-12]

So: Moses strikes the rock instead of talking to it! His punishment is that he won't be allowed to go into the Promised Land! Seems a bit out of proportion, doesn't it?

### The mystery deepens

Even more puzzling: Forty years earlier, God had indeed told Moses to strike a rock to bring water!

[God said:] I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. [Ex. 17:6]

Even earlier, God gave Moses a different instruction to bring water:

[Israel] traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” So he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a

piece of wood. He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. [Ex. 15:22-25]

## So what was Moses' sin?

Plenty of speculation from commentators.

### **-His failure to teach the importance of following commandments.**

[God was telling Moses:] If you had spoken to the rock and it had brought forth water, I would have been sanctified in the eyes of the community. They would have said: "Now if this rock, which can neither speak nor hear, and does not require sustenance, fulfills the word of the Omnipresent, how much more should we do so." [Rashi]

So Moses missed teaching the lesson: If even a rock obeys God, how much more should they.

Note: God had said "before their very eyes" – He *wanted* the people to witness the miracle. The miracle is much more apparent if the rock yields water after being spoken to, rather than after being struck.

In Moses' defense, God said to him: "Take the rod ... and speak to the rock." He wondered: "What is the rod for? I must have misunderstood. God meant "strike the rock with the rod", like last time.

**-His failure to follow instructions** to the letter, no matter how seemingly trivial. God didn't like improvisations at that time. For example, God killed Nadav and Avihu because they offered "strange fire" before the Lord, which He did not command them. [Leviticus 10:1-2]

My personal view on such punishments is this. God is saying, in effect, "OK, this is the beginning of Judaism and I must set the tone *now*. You must perform commandments *exactly* as ordered, or else. No variation whatsoever is allowed. Because if I allow variations, before too long you will be sacrificing your children to me to show me your great devotion, torture animals to death to offer me their pain, and other such nonsense, and I don't want any of that."

**-His anger.** He angrily tells the people, "Listen to me, you rebels." He gives a bad example. The people might conclude that anger is permissible, or that God was angry with them. (He was not.) Standards must be higher for more important people. [Rambam, Shemonah Perakim 4]

**-The fact that he took credit.** He said, “Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?”, implying that it was he and Aaron, not God, who were bringing water from the rock. [Ramban on Numbers 20:8]

**-His exaggerated insult to the congregation.** He called them “rebels”, lumping them with the direct followers of Korach who had already been punished. The Ran:

Our Sages of blessed memory [directed leaders to be in] awe of the congregation, to the point of their saying: “Let the fear of the congregation be always upon you.” [Sotah 40a] And we find the chief prophet himself [Moses] to have been punished in this regard, having said: “Listen, now, you rebels,” [Numbers 20:10] as if each one of them as an individual merited the rebuke. [Darashot HaRan 1:4, 14th-century Catalonia]

**-The fact that he did not appreciate that his audience had changed.** A good leader must tailor his words and actions to his audience. Forty years earlier, when talking to former slaves, hitting the rock is what they understood must be done to get results. But for their children, born free, gentle persuasion (speaking) must be tried first. Moses just assumed he should do the same as before -- strike the rock. So God concluded from that that a new generation of leaders was needed at this point, as they were about to enter the Land.

**-An earlier sin.** God does not say it was the matter of the rock that caused the punishment. It was because of previous offenses: Aaron made the Golden Calf and Moses sent the spies. [Abravanel]

Or: It was for the matter of the rock, but that was simply the last straw, and, by itself, would not have justified the punishment.

Or: God wanted to protect their honor, so He pretended that the rock was the reason for their punishment, not the heavier sins.

Or: God had already decided that Moses was not the right leader for the task ahead, and used the rock as an excuse.

Possible justification: Why else would Aaron be punished also? He didn't strike the rock.

## **Other views**

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-Perhaps Moses was getting old and forgetful: He forgot God just told him to “speak”, but remembered that 40 years ago God told him to “strike”? The old are better at remembering events of long ago than recent ones.

-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that Miriam, Moses' older sister, had just died [Num. 20:1] and he was very close to her. Also, the Talmud gives her credit for the water:

The well was given to the Jewish people in the merit of Miriam... When Miriam died the well disappeared... “And there was no water for the congregation” [Numbers 20:2]. [Taanit 9a]

Perhaps, in his bereavement, Moses could no longer cope with crises and had to yield leadership?

-Perhaps it wasn't Moses' fault, but the people's fault. In Deuteronomy, Moses says:

[I told God:] “Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.” But the Lord was angry with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, “Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!” [Deuteronomy 3:25-26]

Likewise, Psalm 106 states:

They caused [God's] anger by the waters of Merivah and Moses suffered because of them. [Psalm 106:32]

-Perhaps God wanted a direct connection with the people as they were about to enter the land, without the intermediaries Moses, Aaron and Miriam. [Tikkunei haZohar]

## Conclusion

A bit of a mystery. Have *you* ever done something that you didn't think was particularly significant or wrong, but suffered very bad consequences for it? Something that you may even have done before without any adverse consequences, or any consequences at all?

*Teku: Let it rest.*

Shabbat shalom.