

Parshat Chukat 5779

In this week's parsha we encounter the incident of Moshe hitting the rock instead of speaking to it, to give water to the people. It is their 40th year in the midbar and Miriam has just died. The people find themselves without water as a well followed them throughout their journey in the midbar in her merit. They complain to Moshe who brings their complaint to Hashem. Hashem instructs Moshe to take his staff (which he used to perform miracles in Egypt to hit the rock almost 40 years earlier to provide water), and for both Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock and water will be provided.

Immediately after Moshe hits the rock, both Moshe and Aharon were told they would be punished by being forbidden to enter Israel. There are many views brought to explain the source of their sin that resulted in such a seemingly harsh punishment. The majority of these direct their focus on Moshe, but what was the sin of Aharon?

Rabbi Mordechai Miller addresses this question bringing together some of the key approaches to explain what sin had been transgressed. He summarises four of the main responses: Rashi responds that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Rambam suggests Moshe was angry with the people calling them rebels. Rabbeinu Chananel identifies Moshe's emphasis when saying 'Shall **we** bring out water?', suggesting some role he played in the miracle. For the Ramban it was linked to Moshe hitting the rock twice. (*The Sabbath Shiur volume 3*).

Rabbi Miller also brings Sforno's explanation, which brings together the explanations above, and explains Aharon's involvement.

The nature of miracles is that they are generally divided into two types: those which are hidden, appearing to us as seemingly within the natural order (nes nistar), and revealed miracles (nes nigla), which are what we would perceive as miraculous e.g. getting water from a rock.

However, in the Sforno's view there are three types of miracle, not two. For the hidden miracles, he cites examples of rainfall or being healed from illness. This sort of miracle can be attained through the prayers of the righteous. He then divides the concept of revealed miracles into two categories.

He distinguishes between those that are delivered through an action, and those most exceptional miracles which happen just through a declaration or request.

Although all miracles come from Hashem, in the first type it is more obviously through a messenger. It is preceded by a certain action such as Moshe hitting the rock. The second kind is the most elevated and revealing of Hashem's direct power in this world, as it is achieved through no physical action, just a request. This is demonstrated in last week's parsha with the story of Korach when Moshe prays for the ground to open up to punish him and his followers.

Sforno goes on to explain that Hashem had determined that the Bnei Yisrael should witness a miracle of this most elevated kind. This would demonstrate beyond doubt the power and goodness that comes directly from Him, possibly as a response to the events of last week's parsha. The response to the complaints of Bnei Yisrael that they had no water, was to show them His direct involvement and care for them. So He asks Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock.

The Sforno continues explaining that due to the way they complained, Moshe and Aharon decided that Bnei Yisrael were not at the right spiritual level to be worthy of such an elevated miracle. Consequently, they 'down-graded' it as it were, to the lower level of revealed miracle. This diminished the impact of the miracle in the people's eyes, and with it, the intended message. Hence it warranted the direct accusation by Hashem in the next pasuk to both of them, that *'You did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me amongst the children of Israel.'*

Rabbi Miller explains how the Sforno's approach can bring together the four approaches outlined above, supporting his overarching narrative to the sin. Rashi's view, that Moshe hit the rock, is now linked to him changing the nature of the miracle, because of Moshe and Aharon's decision that the people did not merit the higher level of miracle. The Rambam's reason of berating the people is directed linked to this. Rabbeinu Chananel's insight of the wording Moshe used, could hint at the miracle now needing a more active human trigger, because it was now not at the level where words alone would be enough. The Ramban's view of hitting the rock twice emphasises the role of the messenger, as previously Moshe had to only strike it once, so reducing the extent of the miracle even more.

Bnei Yisrael were sustained by revealed miracles on their journey through the midbar and their conquest of the land of Israel. We continue to be sustained by all the miracles that have occurred throughout Jewish history, even if we do not currently merit being able to see the revealed hand of Hashem protecting us all.

[my apologies for my mistake in last week's parsha sheet. The decree referred to there, for that generation to die in the midbar, was in respect of those aged 20 to 60].