

Parshat Chukat 5782

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 now the fortieth year in the midbar, Miriam has just died, and 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 (used to perform miracles in Egypt, and also to hit the rock 40 years before 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 provides an approach to address this question, while at the same time bringing together some of the key approaches taken to the question of what exactly the sin was. He summarises four of the main responses: Rashi responds that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. The Rambam suggests Moshe got angry with the people calling them rebels. Rabbeinu Chananel identifies Moshe's response of saying 'Shall **we** bring out water?', suggesting some role he played in the miracle, and for the Ramban it was linked to Moshe hitting the rock twice. ('The Sabbath Shiur volume 3'). Rabbi Miller then brings Sforno's explanation, shows how it brings together the explanations above, and explains Aharon's involvement. The nature of miracles is that they are generally divided up 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, like getting water from a rock.

However in the Sforno's view there are in fact 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 when Moshe hits the rock. The second kind is then the most elevated, and revealing of Hashem's direct power in this world, as it is achieved by no physical action, just by 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 then continues 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 then explains how this approach by the Sforno can be used to 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. As for the Ramban's view of hitting the rock twice, this emphasises even more the part of the messenger as previously Moshe had to only strike it once, and 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 miracles throughout Jewish history, even if we do not currently merit to be able to see the revealed hand of Hashem protecting us all.