

Parshat Chukat 5781

The episode of **מי מריבה** is troubling and perplexing, while being pregnant with multiple levels of meaning, the scope of which provides us with interpretative traditions that cast far more light on Moshe Rabbeinu than if the pesukim were conversely more explicit as to the nature of his transgression. We also may marvel at how the **חומשי התורה** present our prominent father-figures without sparing the grit, disappointment, and personal struggle of real life. We must be grateful that just as Sefer Shemot reveals Moshe's faltering and reluctant steps towards leadership, Sefer Bamidbar also details the moments of disappointment and frustration that lead to the bitter curtailment of his national redemptive mission to bring the nation into its promised land.

The Ramban states that “the sin of Moshe and Aharon in **מי מריבה** is not publicised (אינו מתפרסם) in the text”. There are various familiar explanations though. Rashi quotes the Midrash that there would have been a greater **קידוש ה'** if Moshe had spoken to the rock rather than striking it. However Rashi comments that the purpose of these verses was to show that Moshe and Aharon had their own reasons not to be admitted to Eretz Yisrael in order to show that the collective judgement on the **דור המדבר** did not apply to them. If indeed an example was being made of Moshe and Aharon for other greater reasons, Rashi does not state what they might be.

There are other explanations as to what Moshe did wrong which nonetheless do not seem to justify the severity of the punishment. Rabbeinu Chananel suggests that the culpable flaw was in saying **יוציא ה' לכם** and **הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים**. The significance of Moshe striking the rock not once but twice is also widely discussed. In Shemonah Perakim, the Rambam accuses Moshe of transgressing by lapsing into anger, calling to Israel **שמעו נא המורים** (rebels) – the Rambam explains that anger is the only trait that must be totally suppressed and not merely counterbalanced. However, the Ramban and others do not accept the Rambam's position, as Moshe could have been delivering justifiable rebuke to the people. Another issue is what Aharon's guilt by association in all this was.

It is thus instructive to glance at some of the other commentators whose explanations. One inevitably reaches the perspective that **מי מריבה** indicates a growing defect in the ongoing suitability of Moshe and Aharon's leadership that

originated elsewhere. The Abravanel argues that the real cause of Aharon not reaching Eretz Yisrael is **הטא העגל** and Moshe's is **שילוח המרגלים**.

The Baal Meshech Chochmah explains that the decree on Moshe was not due to any single specific sin, but rather, if Moshe were to have brought Am Yisrael to the land, the populace would have considered Moshe to be quasi-divine, and the resulting hero-worship would have caused an irreparable flaw in their belief in G-d. Moshe thus had to die in the desert in order to demonstrate that he was a mortal like them, and the redemption would come exclusively from G-d. (Theological positions are rarely stated so bluntly in Parshanut on the Torah, and it is no surprise that the Meshech Chochmah resonates so strongly with the 20th Century scholar and radical monotheist Yeshayahu Leibowitz).

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein asks what was different between **מי מריבה** and the other episodes of complaint in the Wilderness. Following the people's challenges in Sefer Shemot, Moshe would turn to G-d in prayer or despair, but would avoid direct confrontation against Am Yisrael. The relationship between Moshe and Am Yisrael seems to change through Sefer Bamidbar. Rav Mosheh quotes his grandfather Rav Soloveitchik who would explain that Moshe was prepared to treat the generation that left Egypt with far greater tolerance than the generation of the Midbar. The anxieties and infidelities of the first generation were somehow more forgivable given their trauma of oppression and spiritual deprivation from their servitude in Egypt. Moshe held higher standards for the second generation on whom he might have believed to have been able to make a greater nurturing imprint. While anxiety of running short of water in the desert is always justifiable, the complaints of the people would invariably involve an element of doubt in G-d.

The relationship between Moshe and the people breaks down in other places besides **מי מריבה**. The battle with Midian, the heresy of Baal Peor and the episode of Gad and Reuven reveal conflict between Moshe and the people and a failure of them to live up to his expectations. A vicious circle of Moshe's apparent frustration with his people and a compounding frustration with his perceived inability to lead them away from their failures drew towards the inevitability that the people would need a new leader to take them into Eretz Yisrael. This might be speculation too far, but what would the Torah be without Moshe's great valedictory speeches in Sefer Devarim in knowledge that he would not enter the land. These speeches would lack their unbearable gravitas were they not energised by the real-life spiritual struggles that a religious and national leader must endure.