

Between a Rock and a Hard Stick

PARSHA INSIGHTS - CHUKAS (5758)

WERE MOSHE AND AHARON ACTUALLY TOLD TO “SPEAK TO THE ROCK”?

There are numerous interpretations for today's *pasuk* [verse], which says that Moshe and his brother were directed to bring forth water from a rock. Here is the background. Once Miriam died on *Nissan* 10, 2487 (*Targum Yonasan* on 20:1, see *Gemara Ta'anis* 9A), the famous rock which produced water stopped providing for the Jews. Recall that this stone, called the *b'air* [source of living water] was really a piece of Sinai (*Beshalach* 17:6; *Ramban* *ibid.* 17:5). It “moved about” after *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] as they traveled through the desert (*Chizkuni's* description on 20:8). It gushed water in the merit of the righteous Miriam, as stated in the *Gemara Ta'anis* 9A. The *Gemara* explains that once Miriam passed away, the *b'air* gave no water. That is the reason for today's *psukim* [verses] (20:1-2) - Miriam died, and suddenly there was nothing to drink. *Chazal* [our Sages] in this *Gemara* tell us that the wellspring did return in the combined merit of Moshe and Aharon. *Rashi* points out the basis: Since it says in 20:8 that “you (plural) must speak to the rock”, and this was addressed to the two brothers, we see that water would only be restored in their joint *zechus* [merit].

This is the *pasuk* we will examine carefully. Were Moshe and Aharon truly commanded to speak to a rock? As noted earlier, there are several ways to interpret this directive. Today we will delve deeply into only one of them. For your own knowledge, you will find differing approaches in the commentators. For example, the *Midrash Yilamdainu* brought in the *Oznaim L'Torah* 20:8 interprets that Moshe and Aharon were to SPEAK words of Torah TO the Jewish people BY the rock. There was no requirement to TELL the rock to bring forth water, according to this. *Oznaim L'Torah* develops this theme quite beautifully; we will perhaps go into it on a later date. That *Midrashic* explanation means that in the merit of learning Torah at the rock, water would return for *Bnai Yisroel*.

Our task will be to explore the holy words of Rabainu Asher, the *Rosh's* commentary on *Chumash* [the Five Books of the Torah]. He first looks at the *pshat* [explanation] of *Rashi* on 20:12. Hashem reprimanded Moshe and Aharon for not creating a big enough sanctification of His name with their actions. *Rashi* explains: “If you had spoken to the rock, and it would have put out water, I (Hashem) would have been sanctified in the eyes of the assembly. They would have said: ‘If this stone, which does not speak, hear, or need a livelihood still fulfills the STATEMENT (*dibur* [speaking]) of Hashem, all the more so we (must fulfill His will)!” In other words, *Rashi* understands that the indictment of Moshe and Aharon was that they struck the rock instead of verbally commanding it to gush water. *Bnai Yisroel* would have learned a practical lesson, comparing themselves to the rock, only if the rock had obeyed a VERBAL command, similar to what people are supposed to heed. Now that it provided water only after being hit, they did not gain the desired inspiration. Thus, the *kiddush* Hashem [sanctification of G-d's Name] could have been greater.

We see, says the *Rosh*, that *Rashi* assumes the sin was that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it. The *Rosh* cites a totally different approach from Rav Dan Ashkenazi. In fact, Moshe and Aharon WERE TOLD TO HIT THE ROCK. But does it not say “*vidibartem*” - you must **speak** (20:8)? No, says Rav Ashkenazi. The word “*vidibartem*” can also mean “you must **strike**”. Moshe and Aharon did not sin by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. They were never told to say anything to it! If so, their sin must have been in some other area. This will be explained later.

First we have to prove that forms of the verb “*dibur*” can actually mean hitting or striking. This will show that Hashem was truly commanding them to hit, not speak to, the rock. One example of this is in *Divrai Hayamim Bais*, 22:10. It says that the woman named Atalya rose and smote the royal descendants of the house of Dovid. The word for smote is “*vatidaber*”. The *Rosh* points out that this verb, containing within it a root that generally denotes speaking, means striking or conquering in this context. So too, our *pasuk* records that Moshe and Aharon were being instructed to hit the stone, JUST AS THEY HAD BEEN TOLD IN PARSHAS [the Torah portion of] *BESHALACH* (17:6). Remember that this rock began its career at Sinai, as stated above. At that point, the prescribed course of action was to strike it to bring out water. This approach of Rav Dan Ashkenazi suggests that Hashem was being consistent in His directions. BOTH times - when it first gushed water, and when it began to

provide water after it had stopped as a result of Miriam's death - there was a need to hit the rock. There was never a requirement to speak to it, based on this interpretation that "*vidibartem*" indicates hitting.

If so, says the Rosh, one major mystery remains. What did Moshe and Aharon do wrong? Why did their behavior cost them their entry into *Eretz Yisroel* [the Land of Israel], as stated clearly in 20:12? The transgression of Moshe and Aharon was not in their actions. Rather, it was a statement they made. "Listen now, disobedient ones, will we bring out for you water from this rock?" (20:10). (Even though the word "*vayomer*" [and he said] indicates that Moshe alone made this remark, it was phrased in the plural - "will WE bring out water?") The Rosh focuses on the verb form used. The statement was, "will WE" cause water to gush forth? This makes it sound like the water supply would be attributed to the efforts of Moshe and Aharon. It should have been expressed differently: "Will HE - Hashem - in fact bring out water for you?" The emphasis was placed a little too strongly on the ability of these two human leaders to tend to the needs of *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people]. The honor should have been ascribed more to Hashem.

We see that the error of Moshe and Aharon was the way they worded their rhetorical question to the Jewish people. They committed no sin with their actions. They were, indeed, supposed to hit the rock, according to the analysis of Rav Dan Ashkenazi, cited by the Rosh.

This explanation is supported by a Midrash quoted by the Rosh himself in *Parshas Beha'aloscha* 12:3. When the Torah points out that Moshe took no offense when his sister criticized his separation from his wife, Moshe is described as "*anav me'od*" [exceedingly humble]. The word עֲנַיִ "anav", humble, is spelled without the letter "yud" which it usually has. What is the significance of the misspelling? We have discussed this before, but you will now discover a totally new interpretation.

☞ Copies of the essay are available by clicking the following link, or online at TorahMax.com under: "Sefer Bamidbar", "Parshas Beha'alos'cha", "[Torah Typo = Numerical Secret](#)" - R. Moshe Heigh.

A letter *yud* is deleted from Moshe's adjective, "*anav*", the word that describes his humility, because he himself omitted a *yud* when he was supposed to include it. Where did this happen? The Rosh shows that it occurred right here in *Parshas Chukas*, when Moshe said "will WE bring water out?" The Hebrew word for this phrase is נֹצִיֵׁ "notzie". He should have said יֹצִיֵׁ "yotzie" - will HE - G-d - bring out water? The word "notzie" has a letter ך *nun* instead of the ך *yud*. Thus, Moshe was excluding a necessary *yud*, which would have given the credit to Hashem for supplying *Bnai Yisroel* with new water. As a result, when Hashem Himself described Moshe, he demanded that a letter *yud* be left out of the word "*anav*", humble. It makes sense, since he diminished his humility, ever so slightly, by this infraction. That is why the word which depicts this character trait was incomplete.

☞ Although the incident of the waters of Meriva (our *parsha* - hitting the rock) happened much after the episode where the word עֲנַיִ "anav" was written incomplete, there is no problem. Hashem arranged that Moshe write the *sefer Torah* [Torah scroll] down this way, without the letter *yud* in the word "*anav*", at the very end of Moshe's life. This actual writing was after BOTH matters had transpired.

We have discovered that according to some, Moshe and Aharon's sin was in the way they expressed themselves verbally, not that they hit the rock instead of speaking to it. We must remember to give credit to Hashem, not to ourselves, for our sustenance and success. Using the *pshat* of Rav Dan Ashkenazi, today's *parsha* is an incredible reminder for us to do so.

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