

**Parshat Chukat**  
**We Cannot but Be in Process**  
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Parashat Chukat includes one of the Torah's great mysteries: Moshe Rabbenu is told he will not live to lead Bnei Yisrael across the Yarden and into Eretz Yisrael on account of his transgression at the (second) striking of the rock. But what was Moshe's transgression exactly? What could have caused a person as profoundly righteous and prophetic as Moshe to face such a harsh consequence?

To this, I would add a further question. In our parashah, we leap in the internal chronology from the first years of wandering in the wilderness to the last. Those who had come out of slavery in Egypt, the generation of the wilderness, has died out, Rashi tells us, following Midrash Tanchuma. In the text, however, we are sequentially not far from Chet ha-Meraglim, an event that underscores the contingency of our history. Were it not for the transgression of the spies sent to reconnoiter Eretz Yisrael, our original timeline would have held, and the generation of the wilderness would have merited to enter the Land without forty years of wandering. Instead, with the timeline irrevocably altered, that privilege and task was given to their children. Similarly, Moshe could have, indeed was preparing for, bringing Bnei Yisrael across the Yarden after the forty years; but, having transgressed, confers upon himself a new and different course of events, in which he dies outside Eretz Yisrael. We are, for better or worse, architects of our own lives, possessed of powerful agency. What, then, does it mean that Moshe has the ability to alter the timeline so profoundly?

The commentators have divergent, intricate responses to the question of how Moshe transgressed and so changed the course of history. Rashbam, comparing the second striking of a rock to bring forth water from it to the first time, earlier in Refidim (Shemot 17), suggests that Moshe erred in the hitting of the rock. He was never instructed to do so, Rashbam argues, and thus transgressed a commandment. Both Ibn Ezra and Ramban contest this interpretation in comments so lengthy they are really small, masterful essays. Ibn Ezra works through multiple logical possibilities for Moshe's sin, dispensing with each one using his signature panache. Was it that Moshe addressed the people disrespectfully, forgetting that they are the children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov? Can't be, says Ibn Ezra, pointing to multiple places in the Mikra when Bnei Yisrael are acknowledged to be rebellious. Was it that Moshe and Aharon were instructed to speak to the rock and instead mistakenly struck it? Also no, Ibn Ezra says, lucidly showing other examples where the root *d-b-r* means "to damage" rather than "to speak." Finally, Ibn Ezra writes: "The correct interpretation, in my opinion—I will only reveal it by means of hinting. Know that when the Part will know the Whole, it will cleave to the Whole, and be redeemed with all the signs and wonders. The truth is that God said to Moshe and to Aharon: 'And you shall speak,' but they did not speak due to the people's quarrel with Moshe, and this was the Part splitting off. Then he struck the rock, and the water did not come out until he struck it a second time. Therefore they did not sanctify God, and rebelled, and sinned unintentionally." Ibn Ezra's theory is that there was a kind of spiritual division that occurred between the people and their leader, causing a metaphysical shift in the actions of the rock and constituting Moshe's

transgression. Ramban engages many of the same arguments as does Ibn Ezra, giving special attention to Rambam's perspective, in *Shemonah Perakim*, ch. 4, that Moshe was punished because he became angry with the Jewish people, rejecting it in strong terms. Rather, Ramban maintains, "And the truth is: this matter is among the greatest secrets of the hidden matters of the Torah." He suggests that the miraculous nature of bringing forth water from the rock was not sufficiently acknowledged in Moshe and Aharon's actions and that this was their sin.

I, too, think that Moshe's transgression "is among the greatest secrets," that its answer can only be revealed "by means of hinting." I would like to suggest another, complementary way to understand the events at Mei Merivah, drawn from the perspective of Process Thought. Process Thought is identified with the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne; "it is a way of understanding reality that emphasizes the changes in the nature of the universe and that interprets such change as the natural consequences of real and essential freedom, novelty, purpose, and experience," in the words of Dr. Sandra B. Lubrasky, co-editor of *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*. What if Moshe's transgression at the second striking of the rock reflects the processive nature of all human experience? The act of entering Eretz Yisrael is itself a process, a transformation requiring internal change and predicated on the possibility of outcomes being different from what they might have been. Indeed, Sefer Yehoshua, which tells us the story of those who went on to enter Eretz Yisrael, details the many partial conquests, setbacks, and generally the start-and-stop nature of settling the Land. Being human, Moshe's falling short at Mei Merivah was a necessary part of the larger spiritual process of entering Eretz Yisrael, as well as his own process of growing, of leading, of taking his part in the story of Am Yisrael. Yes, things could have been different, for that is the dreadful power of freedom. But the fact that they happened as they did points us to the essential role that mistakes have to play in the process of spiritual growth. We cannot but be in process.



*Born in Israel and raised in the United States, Tamar Marvin holds a Ph.D. in Medieval Jewish Studies and a B.A. in Literature and Journalism. Her writing has been published in academic journals as well as in the broader media. Since receiving her doctorate, she has taught in Jewish Studies programs at universities in New York and Los Angeles, and has served as a faculty member in the Wexner Foundation's Heritage Program. Seeking to take an active part in shaping Jewish tradition, Tamar is honored to join the Core Semikha Program at Yeshivat Maharat. She brings with her a deep fascination with Jewish intellectual culture, especially the ways in which premodern Jews faced challenges of integrating new cultural developments with Masorah. She believes that the Rishonim with whom she loves spending so much of her time, from the philosophers to the Kabbalists, have a great deal to tell us about navigating the Jewish future. As an educator, Tamar is passionate about creating access to classical texts for all who wish to approach them, bringing them to life for her students. Tamar is also an inveterate maker, mostly of handcrafted textile Judaica and home baked challah. She lives with her family in Los Angeles, California.*