

## Parshat Chukat: The Staff of Supernaturalism

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*Parshat Chukat* contains one of the most dramatic and consequential events in the life of Moshe, the hitting of the rock at *Mei Merivah*. In the aftermath of Miriam's death, when the well that accompanied the people in her honor (according to the midrash) dried up, the children of Israel grew thirsty, anxious, and testy.

1 The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. 2 The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, "If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord...6 Moses and Aaron moved away from the assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell on their faces. [Then] the glory of the Lord appeared to them. (Numbers 20:1-3,6)

א וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צִן בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן וַיָּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם: ב וְלֹא־הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה וַיִּקְהֲלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן: ג וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר יְלֹוּ גֹעַזֵנוּ בְּגֹעַז אַחֲיוֹנוּ לִפְנֵי ה': ... וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מִפְּנֵי הַקָּהֶל אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ כְבוֹד־ה' אֲלֵיהֶם: (במדבר כ:א-ג,ו)

Echoing last week's *parsha*, Korach--which also began with an overwhelming "assembly" ("וַיִּקְהֲלוּ") that caused Moshe to "fall on [his] face" ("וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פְּנָיו") (see Numbers 16:3-4)--this one announces an even more widespread complaint. The *entire* congregation rises up against Moshe and Aharon, demanding water and answers for their unfortunate fate.

Unlike Korach's claims which are summarily rejected, these are deemed legitimate and invite God's sympathies.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 8 "Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and speak to the rock in their presence so that it will give forth its water. You shall bring forth water for them from the rock and give the congregation and their livestock to drink." (Numbers 20:7-8)

ז וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ח קַח אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה וְהִקְהַל אֶת־הָעֵדָה אֹתָהּ וְאַהֲרֹן אַחֲיֶיךָ וְדַבְּרֶתֶם אֶל־הַסֶּלֶעַל עֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִמֵּיו וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם מִן־הַסֶּלֶעַל וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת־הָעֵדָה וְאֶת־בְּעִירָם: (במדבר כ:ז-ח)

The thirst of the people ought to be quenched. And the answer to their mouth's desires should come through the mouths of their leaders. Moshe and Aharon are to talk to the rock to release its waters.

But they do not.

9 Moses took the staff from before the Lord as He had commanded him. 10 Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock, and he said to them, "Now listen, you rebels, can we draw water for you from this rock?" 11 Moses raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, when an abundance of water gushed forth, and the congregation and their livestock drank. (Numbers 20:9-11)

ט וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה מִלִּפְנֵי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: י וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־הַקָּהֶל אֶל־פְּנֵי הַסֶּלֶעַל וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּ־נָא הַמְרִים הַמִּן־הַסֶּלֶעַל הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם: יא וַיִּרְאוּ מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יְדָוּוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַסֶּלֶעַל בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעַמַיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתַּה הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם: (במדבר כ:ט-יא)

Contrary to God's command, Moshe and Aharon use words to mock their people, not to address the rock, and then Moshe hits it instead. The consequences for this disobedience are immediate and devastating.

12 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly [*kahal*] to the Land which I have given them. (Numbers 20:12)

יב וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא-הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת-הַקֶּהֶל הַזֶּה אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתִּי לָהֶם: (במדבר כ"ב)

On account of this act of faithlessness, Moshe (together with Aharon) is punished gravely. He will not accompany his *kahal* to Israel, his community of complainers who assembled against him ("*vayikhalu*") but with whom he has travelled for so long. He will die with them on the far side of the Jordan River.

The tradition has wrestled with this episode for time immemorial, trying to make sense of how the punishment could fit the crime. What exactly was the error? And what about it made it so very costly?

Let us begin with an intriguing insight offered by the *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aharon Luntschitz (1550-1619). When read closely, our story involves an important prop, a *mateh*, or staff. God tells Moshe, in verse 8, to take it in hand, but not to use it at all in generating the waters. Moshe indeed takes this staff (v. 9), but then, as if in slow motion, raises it up and whacks the rock with it not once but twice. The *Kli Yakar* comments:

"Take the staff" [Num. 20:8]: "*The* staff" designated with the identifying letter *heh* [meaning 'the'] refers to the staff of Aaron that was guarded in the Tabernacle. "And speak to the rock" [*Ibid.*]: Tell the rock that just as the desiccated staff flowered and blossomed, so too the dried out rock will give forth water. (*Kli Yakar* on Num. 10:8)

קח את המטה. המטה בה' הידיעה מטה אהרן שהיה במשמרת במשכן. ודברתם אל הסלע. תאמרו לסלע שכשם שהמטה היבש פרח והציץ ציץ כך גם הסלע היבש יתן מים. (כלי יקר, במדבר כ"ח)

The prop in Moshe's hands, ideally present but not in play, was the very stick that was used just a few chapters prior to respond to the crisis of Korach. In order to demonstrate the election of Aharon, against Korach's claim of full equality, God instructed Moshe to lay out one stick per head of tribe before the Ark. The one that grew flowers overnight would signal to all God's election of its owner. Numbers 17:23 states,

The next day Moses entered the tent and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.

וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אֱהֲרָהֵל הָעֵדוּת וַהֲנִיחָהּ פָּרַח מִטֶּה-אֱהֲרֹן לְבֵית לְוִי וַיֵּצֵא פֶרֶח וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים:

Through this miraculous means, Aharon's leadership was gloriously confirmed.

The *Kli Yakar* demonstrates that the story of *Mei Merivah*, which was introduced with language that paralleled the Korach story, is even more bound up with it, making use of one of its most symbolic objects. And yet the place of the famed staff in our story--an object imported in order to *not* be used--magnifies its mystery and, arguably, its importance in figuring out what went so wrong with it.

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), argues in his introduction to the book of Numbers that the Israelite journey toward the Land of Israel was a journey away from supernatural existence. God's relationship to the Jewish people through the Exodus from Egypt and into the desert was marked by miraculous interventions. From the plagues to the splitting of the Red Sea; from the sky that rained down manna to the clouds that formed protective shields and the earth that consumed rebels (Korach), nature was bent toward the Israelites during this period time and again. Yet, on the other side of this existence, in Israel, lay a far more natural life, one characterized not by wild miracles, but by the din

of everyday living, with nature charged by God but not trampled by God. The years in the desert were a slow education in how to move from a supernatural form of existence to a natural one.

Moshe's grave error, on this read, was his inability to bring his people along this spiritual journey. After the grand display of divine power exhibited in the Korach story, after Miriam's supernatural well dried up, God indicated that the time has come to begin moving toward the next stage of development. Training toward a more natural existence, not absent of miracle entirely, but less reliant on it, must begin. So God told Moshe: Bring the staff of supernaturalism, but don't use it. Let the high drama of recent events echo, but let those expectations for drama begin to wane. Water will flow from a rock, in a still unnatural way, but let the mechanism be something more tame, more quiet, more prayerful than powerful: your mouth. For that will be all you and your people will have in the future to entreat God and to move nature. Words.

This move, from magic to mouth, was not possible for Moshe though. Maybe he himself had grown too comfortable with the supernatural. Maybe he felt his people's thirst for it was still too great. Either way, he struck the rock with passion twice, announcing that the staff of the supernatural was not yet ready for retirement (inside of the Ark, where it would come to reside in perpetuity). The God of big miracles must remain in the camp.

The Netziv explains:

"Therefore, you shall not lead" [Num. 20:12]: ...The decree was "measure for measure." Because they did not illustrate to the people of Israel the way to behave in the Land of Israel during a time of drought and the like, therefore "You shall not lead"...Here we are to understand that Moshe performed a miracle and altered the laws of nature when it was not God's wish to do so. (*HaEmek Davar*, Num. 20:12)

לכן לא תביאו וגו'...:הגזירה היה מדה במדה. שבשביל שלא הראו לישראל הדרך להתנהג בארץ ישראל בעת עצירת גשמים וכדומה, על כן "לא תביאו" וגו'...והכונה כאן שעשה משה נס ושינוי בהליכות הטבע בעת שלא היה הרצון בכך. (העמק דבר, במדבר כ"ב)

The great curse of Moshe, that he would never enter the Land of Israel, was perhaps heavy punishment for his very public failure to educate his people. Or it was a recognition that a leader can only effectively lead a people and a world that he or she understands. Moshe was denied entrance to the land because he could not really live there and so he could not really guide there. A man so steeped in the supernatural just does not belong in a world in which nature reigns.

"יַעַן לֹא־הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי," says God accusingly at the end of this episode. "You didn't have faith in Me"--the kind of faith, that is, that can sustain a diminution of drama, that can hold the "*mateh*" on the margins as a relic of a religion that dreams of miracles but no longer needs them to quench their thirst.



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