YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT CHUKAT**

**The Sin of Moshe and Aharon**

Many different interpretations have been offered for the episode of *Mei Meriva*, each attempting to address two central issues. First: the similarity between the narrative in our *parasha* and the episode of Masa u-Meriva in *Parashat* *Beshalach* is self-evident, and highlights the question of what the problem was in *Parashat Chukat*. Some commentators propose that Moshe’s sin lay in striking the rock (as he had in *Parashat Beshalach*) instead of speaking to it (as instructed in *Parashat Chukat*). But why is it that in the earlier instance, Moshe was commanded to strike the rock, while in our *parasha*, he is commanded to speak to it? Secondly, even if we accept this as the explanation of Moshe’s sin, why is he punished so harshly for such a seemingly trivial misdeed?

Although a vast body of exegesis has already been devoted to these questions, I will try to illuminate a new angle of this troubling story. First, let us consider another question: Why is Aharon punished? The Torah states explicitly that the staff was in Moshe’s hand, that it was he who spoke to the people, and he who struck the rock. Why, then, is Aharon punished along with him? Moreover, it seems that the punishment meted out to Aharon is even worse, since he dies at the beginning of the journey towards Eretz Yisrael and is deprived of any experience of it, while Moshe lives to conquer the lands of Sichon and Og, which later become part of Eretz Yisrael.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Why did Moshe and Aharon not enter Eretz Yisrael?**

In *Parashat* *Devarim*, Moshe points to the sin of Bnei Yisrael in the episode of the spies as the reason he is not permitted to enter the land:

The Lord was angry with me, too, for your sakes, saying, “You too shall not go there.” (*Devarim* 1:37)

Indeed, a review of the story of the spies reveals that when Bnei Yisrael express their rejection of Eretz Yisrael, only Kalev and (later) Yehoshua stand up to them and try to persuade them that they can and should continue to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe and Aharon do not intervene in any way; instead, they “fall upon their faces”:

And they said to each other, “Let us appoint a head, and let us return to Egypt.” Then Moshe and Aharon fell upon their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of Bnei Yisrael. And Yehoshua, son of Nun, and Kalev, son of Yefuneh, of those who had spied out the land, rent their clothes. And they said to all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael, saying: “The land which we passed through, to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land.” (*Bamidbar* 14:4-7)

It is clear that Moshe and Aharon, like Kalev and Yehoshua, do not agree with the spies’ fearmongering. We can understand their lack of authoritative response in light of the fact that they have not toured the land themselves, and so even if they were to protest that the land is good, it would not convince the people. Still, their lack of response to such brazen rebellion is a stain on their leadership and may be a factor in their exclusion from entry into the land. God’s words in our *parasha* – “Why did you not believe in Me, to sanctify Me among Bnei Yisrael?” – may be understood as a reference to the episode of the spies as well, and not just to what has happened at Mei Meriva, as we shall see below.

**Mei Meriva in the chronology of stops in the wilderness**

The chain of events described in our *parasha*, from Mei Meriva onwards, parallels the events that have happened to Bnei Yisrael since the Exodus, but in inverse order.

The crisis of Mei Meriva parallels Korach’s rebellion in several respects. First, Am Yisrael themselves connect these two events when complaining of the lack of water: “If only we had perished when our brethren perished before the Lord” – clearly referring to those who died in the plague recorded in *Parashat Korach*. Second, Bnei Yisrael claim that Moshe and Aharon have brought them to a place that is “not a place of seed and figs and grapes and pomegranates” (20:5), paralleling the words of Datan and Aviram: “nor have you brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey” (16:14). In both episodes, Moshe uses the staff to show the people that they are wrong: in our *parasha*, we read that Moshe takes the staff “from before the Lord” (20:9) – apparently indicating that this is the same staff belonging to Aharon which had been set down “before God” in *Parashat* *Korach*, and which had sprouted buds, blossoms, and almonds (17:21-26).

In chapter 21, following the episode of Mei Meriva, the Torah records a battle against the Canaanites – paralleling the battle against the Canaanites waged by the *ma’apilim* after the sin of the spies. This is followed by the arrival of the fiery serpents, which recall the story of Kivrot ha-Ta’ava, “thegraves of desire” (chapter 11), since Bnei Yisrael complained in both instances without justification: “and our soul loathes this light bread” (21:5). Thereafter the *parasha* records some of their journeys (paralleling the journeys at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*), and then they arrive at the well and sing its praises,[[2]](#footnote-2) recalling the Song of the Sea.

The above might be summarized in the following clearly chiastic structure:

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| **Starting from the Exodus** **(in chronological order):** | **Starting from Mei Meriva** **(in reverse chronological order)**  |
| Song of the Sea (*Shemot* 15) | Song of the Well (*Bamidbar* 21:17-18) |
| Journeys of Bnei Yisrael (beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*) | Journeys of Bnei Yisrael (21:10-20) |
| Kivrot ha-Ta’ava (*Bamidbar* 11) | Fiery serpents (21:4-9) |
| *Ma’apilim* – war with Canaanites (14:40-45) | War with Canaanites (21:1-3) |
| Korach (*Bamidbar* 16-17) | Mei Meriva (20:2-13) |

However, there is a clear difference between these two sequences. Bnei Yisrael’s responses to the events in the first sequence are negative: when the quails arrive, Bnei Yisrael gather them and die in a plague; after the sin of the spies, they try to continue the journey without authorization, and fall at the hands of the people of Canaan; after Korach’s rebellion, they rail against Moshe and Aharon, and they continue to attack Moshe even after the plague – “Are we all to die?!” (17:28). In the second sequence, they respond positively: in the wake of the fiery serpents, they recognize that they have sinned and ask Moshe to pray on their behalf; during the war against the Canaanites, they turn to God on their own initiative and make a vow to which God accedes; and the Song of the Well emphasizes the people – “then Israel sang this song,” in contrast to, “then Moshe and Bnei Yisrael sang” at the Song of the Sea.

It seems, then, that the episode of Mei Meriva signifies a fundamental change in the attitude of Bnei Yisrael. They do not acknowledge their sin at Mei Meriva, but following the fiery serpents they admit that they have sinned, and they repent:

And the people came to Moshe and said: We have sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He remove the serpents from upon us… (*Bamidbar* 21:7)

This is in fact the first time that Bnei Yisrael acknowledge wrongdoing. Until now they have mainly argued and complained, withdrawing only after being punished and without admitting that they sinned.

**The copper serpent**

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Make yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and it shall be that whoever is bitten – he shall see it, and live.” (*Bamidbar* 21:8)

Why does God command Moshe to fashion a copper serpent? Until now, when Moshe has prayed on behalf of the people, God has not required any further action. Following the sin of the spies, Moshe prays and God forgives the people. When Miriam is struck with *tzara’at*, Moshe prays for her and she is healed. We see the same process after the murmuring of Bnei Yisrael following Korach’s rebellion, and even after the sin of the golden calf.[[3]](#footnote-3) But here, God commands Moshe to make a copper serpent that will heal the people.

It seems that God wants to show the people they do not need Moshe’s intervention in order to be healed. Once they understand that they must repent and acknowledge their sin before God will forgive them, God seeks to teach them something else: the plague does not begin or end because of Moshe’s prayers, just as it is not Moshe’s hands that make war. It is up to the people themselves. It is clear to them that it is not the serpent that kills or heals; rather, the act of directing their own hearts towards God is what brings salvation.

The copper serpent represents the first time that God sets Moshe aside as intermediary between Himself and the people, proposing that they turn to Him directly.

Following this turnaround, we see that in the events that follow in the *parasha*, Bnei Yisrael are active themselves. In the war against the kingdom of Sichon, the Torah describes the conquest in a way that attributes it to Bnei Yisrael, since it is they who send messengers to Sichon (21:21). This represents a step forward in comparison with the war against Edom (which precedes the copper serpent): there, it is Moshe who dispatches the messengers (20:14), and only after his request is refused does Bnei Yisrael send additional messengers (v. 19).[[4]](#footnote-4) In the war against Sichon, there is no mention of Moshe himself sending messengers, and as the war progresses, Moshe functions not as God’s representative but as a regular leader: he sends spies, and does not make use of miracles.[[5]](#footnote-5) Like the initiative of the *ma’apilim*, Bnei Yisrael act without Moshe’s assistance in the war against Sichon – but obviously in contrast to the *ma’apilim*, here their initiative is viewed in a positive light.

**The change in Moshe’s leadership**

Why is the absence of Moshe’s intermediary role emphasized in the accounts of the copper serpent and the war against Sichon? We might understand this as the result of the sin at Mei Meriva: since Moshe will not enter the land, Am Yisrael needs to learn to manage without him. However, we can also propose a different explanation: it may be that the lack of an active role for Moshe arises from a deficiency in his leadership.

Starting from Kivrot ha-Ta’ava, Moshe’s leadership undergoes a continuous decline. He transfers some of his authority to the elders at his own initiative; Miriam and Aharon undermine his leadership; in the story of the spies, the conquest of the land is entrusted (at least symbolically) to the representatives of the people, and even when these representatives act improperly, Moshe does not react as he should. Korach’s challenge to Moshe’s leadership arises in the wake of this decline, and because of Moshe’s inaction. We may therefore conclude that what God is emphasizing in the story of Mei Meriva is that Moshe’s leadership has come to an end.

Indeed, there is a conspicuous difference between the story of Masa u-Meriva and the account of Mei Meriva in our *parasha*. In the former, Moshe is commanded to take the staff with which he previously struck the Nile – in other words, his own staff.[[6]](#footnote-6) At Mei Meriva, however, Moshe takes the staff “from before the Lord” – indicating, as mentioned, that he is to take Aharon’s staff, which had been laid before God and had blossomed. Moshe is commanded to take that staff specifically in order to symbolize that the miracle here is not happening because of Moshe, but rather by virtue of God’s representatives – the tribe of Levi, which is headed by Aharon.[[7]](#footnote-7) For this reason, God addresses Moshe and Aharon jointly, rather than speaking only to Moshe as He did at Masa u-Meriva.

**Moshe’s sin**

Now we can try to understand what constituted Moshe’s sin.

What was Moshe supposed to say to the rock? Clearly, the idea was not that he politely ask the rock to produce water. If the intention were to show that the rock split thanks to God and not thanks to Moshe, it would have made more sense for God to reveal Himself directly and cause the water to gush forth without Moshe’s agency. Perhaps, then, Moshe was meant to “bring on” this revelation – by declaring the Thirteen Attributes, by calling to God, or the like.

Once Moshe struck the rock, the revelation to Israel was thwarted, since Moshe had now acted as an intermediary. As a result, Bnei Yisrael were not able to respond directly, of their own initiative, to the event (as they did in the incident of the copper snake, and during the war against Sichon). The striking of the rock demonstrated that Moshe was not capable of standing aside without intervening. Until now, we might have thought that Moshe could enter the land as a regular individual, and not as the leader and intermediary between Bnei Yisrael and God. Since he has shown that he cannot enter the land without leading the nation, it is decreed that he will die in the wilderness.

This also explains why Aharon is punished. Since the aim here was to minimize Moshe’s role, the fact that Aharon remained passive is held against him. His intervention could have been of great significance.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**The entire congregation – all are holy**

In the previous *parasha*, Korach had argued that “the entire congregation – all are holy, and God is in their midst.” In principle, this argument is true, and its message is important to internalize. Am Yisrael’s ability to act is dependent on their recognition that they are God’s nation. Indeed, the people acknowledge this, declaring, “Why have you brought *God’s congregation* to this wilderness” (*Bamidbar* 20:4). This sort of self-awareness has found almost no expression prior to our *parasha*, and one of its ramifications is that the nation is able to communicate directly with God, without Moshe’s mediation. In contrast to the revelation at Sinai, where the people feared that direct communication with God would kill them, in our *parasha* God seeks to teach them that they can lift their eyes heavenward without fear, and be saved.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. This fact is bound up with the confrontation between Moshe and the tribes of Reuven and Gad, which I hope to address in its proper place. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It may be that this well is the one we encountered at Masa u-Meriva, as suggested by the chiastic structure proposed here. Were it not for this parallel, it would be difficult to understand how Bnei Yisrael could praise Moshe for providing them with water by means of his staff, after God punishes him for precisely that action. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moshe does take action in response to the sin of the golden calf, undertaking a process somewhat reminiscent of the procedure prescribed for a *sota*: he grinds the golden calf into powder, mixes it with water, and causes the sinners to drink it. However, that was at his own initiative. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It makes no difference whether it was Moshe who actually dispatched the messengers the second time, or whether it was the people who sent them. What matters is that the Torah chooses to present the events in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The circumvention of Edom, too, is described in a way that is the inverse of what we see at the beginning of *Parashat Beshalach*: there, Bnei Yisrael journey via the Sea of Reeds in order not to arrive too quickly; in our *parasha*, the route via the Sea of Reeds makes the people impatient, as they are eager to enter the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We have discussed in the past how the plague of blood was in fact a dual action: Moshe struck the Nile while Aharon stretched out his hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As explained in last week’s *shiur*, the blossoming of Aharon’s staff signifies the selection of the tribe of Levi, and not necessarily Aharon and Moshe themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is also possible that Aharon is punished because of the golden calf. God had already declared there: “and on the day that I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sin” (*Shemot* 32:34) – such that Aharon may be punished here for that sin as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)