YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT CHUKAT

Hitting Rock-Bottom

by Asher Altshul

In the book of Bemidbar, we read of the tragic turn of events that befell the Children of Israel. The Children of Israel were initially supposed to venture on an eleven-day journey and enter the land of Israel. The series of events leading up to, and eventually climaxing with, the sin of the spies, seals the people's fate. The generation that experienced the Exodus would not pioneer the promised land. Forty years later, after the first generation has died in the wilderness, their children will inherit the land.

We now stand at the end of those forty years. As the Children of Israel begin their preparations to enter the land, Moses commits a seemingly minor offense and finds his fate with the first generation: doomed to an unmarked grave in the wilderness. The triumphant leader of the Exodus will never step foot on the soil of the promised land.

What was the cause of this tragedy? What was Moses' sin? What sin could warrant such drastic punishment? In this week's shiur we will examine a few of the explanations given by the biblical commentators.

Before we begin with the individual explanations, we must appreciate what is written in the Torah:

The Children of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Tzin. They had no water. The masses swarmed Moses and Aaron. They began to complain to Moses. Why did you take us out of Egypt? To bring us to this horrible place? Did you bring us here to die? There is nothing here, not even water! Moses and Aaron fled from the masses; they came to the Tent of Meeting and fell on their faces before God.

God told Moses to take the staff, take Aaron, to congregate the people. He told him to speak to the rock and as the nation watches, the rock will give water.

Moses took the staff and congregated the people. He called out: "Hear now, you rebels, from this stone we will bring you water." Moses then hit the rock twice. Water flowed from the rock.

Immediately following this episode, God admonishes Moses and Aaron. He exhorts them for not sanctifying Him before the eyes of the people. For this, they will not bring the people in the land.

It is not clear what the sin was. Moses deviated slightly from God's word, but would such a slight deviation warrant such a severe punishment?

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, France, 1040-1105) maintains that Moses' sin was in hitting the rock. Moses and Aaron were told to speak to the rock. If they were to speak to the rock, and the rock would have given water, an important lesson would have been learned: if an inanimate object listens to the words of God, how much more so should they. By hitting the rock, Moses not only deviated from God's command, he allowed an opportunity to sanctify God before the people to slip by.

The Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Spain, 1194-1274) points out a few difficulties with Rashi's explanation. Why was Moses commanded to take his staff, if not to hit the rock? Furthermore, in Shemot (17:6) when Moses extracts water from the rock at Choreb, he does so by hitting it. The Ramban finds it hard to distinguish between the miracle of a rock that gives water after being spoken to, and a rock that gives water after being hit. Both should have the same miraculous impact on the Children of Israel.

The Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Egypt, 1138-1204), in his Introduction to Ethics of our Fathers, interprets Moses' sin in a different light. He explains that, as a prophet, Moses had to represent God in every possible way. In both his actions and in his words, God's will must be demonstrated. A prophet must also be a perfect personality. He must be unimpaired both physically and spiritually. For the Rambam, ultimate perfection is attained by balance. A prophet must contain no extreme qualities; rather, he should follow the "golden path" of a happy medium. Any deviation from this balance denies the prophet the ability to communicate with God.

When Moses reacted to the people the way he did, especially by calling to the people "Listen, you rebellious ones," he erred in both areas. He misrepresented God's will, for God was not angry, and he upset his personal equilibrium. Anger and fury are extreme attributes and a perfect personality must not express anger.

The Ramban devotes much attention to the Rambam's opinion. He finds fault with a number of points:

1. Moses' calling to the masses "listen you rebellious ones" was not an out-burst of anger but was rather an appropriate rebuke.

2. God admonished Aaron too, but Aaron never got angry.

3. God accused them of a lack of faith: "Lo he'emantem bi" (20:12). This does not relate to an outburst of anger.

The Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham ben Ezra, Spain, 1092-1167) alludes to another interpretation of Moses' and Aaron's sin. It is elaborated upon by R. Shmuel David Luzzato (Italy, 1800-1865). Fault can be found with Moses and Aaron, not with what they did do, but rather with what they did not do. When the masses began to complain about not having water, they should have reacted immediately. They should have taken initiative. They should have rebuked the people for complaining the way they did and instructed them that the correct way to get water was through prayer to God.

Moses and Aaron were stunned, they were speechless. They fled the people and ran to the Tent of Meeting. There, they fell to their faces and waited to hear the word of God. They had lost the initiative that was so dominant in previous situations. This is strikingly contrasted to Moses' reaction to the people when they last complained for water (Shemot 17:2).

This explanation seems to shed light on another question that arises from the episode. Were such seemingly insignificant acts, as hitting the rock, or having an outburst of anger, enough reason to deny Moses and Aaron the opportunity to enter the land of Israel? Did the punishment fit the crime? A classical explanation is that God is more particular with great people. A minute flaw in a great person is magnified in the eyes of God.

According to the Ibn Ezra's understanding, however, it wasn't a punishment for a small misdeed; it was actually a consequence of their reaction. By not taking the initiative, Moses and Aaron demonstrated that they now lacked the qualities necessary to bring the Children of Israel into Canaan. Consequently, they forfeited their right to enter the promised land.

R. Mordechai Breuer, in his book "Pirkei Mo'adot," adopts a different approach. He shows that the Torah's narrative is more complex than meets the eye. There is not one story retold in the Torah, but rather two stories. The two stories are intertwined and intended that the reader understand a complex message. In the case at hand, he demonstrates that there are two stories being told. One is about Moses and Aaron and their joint leadership of the "Eida," the congregation. The story's theme is the pair as messengers of God, to God's nation. The second story is of the nation and their sole representative, Moses.

In Devarim (chapter 1), Moses retells the story of the spies. As the second generation prepares to enter the land of Canaan, Moses explains the sins of their parents and what befell them as result. In verse 1:37, Moses, after completing the story of the spies, says to the people, "The Lord also was angered with me due to you saying, 'you too, shall not enter there [the land].'" The simple interpretation of this verse is that Moses lost the right to enter the land, due to the sin of the spies. If this is true, why was Moses given this punishment only in the fortieth year, if it had already been decreed in the second year?

R. Breuer explains that these accounts do not contradict. Moses as the leader of the people had a mission. His mission was to take the people out of Egypt and bring them into the land of Canaan. Following the sin of the spies, God decided that the nation that Moses took out of Egypt would not enter the land. The nation as a whole lost its right to enter the land. Consequently, Moses as a representative of the nation had no right to enter the land. Only on his own personal merit would Moses be able to enter the land. By hitting the rock, Moses lost this merit too - and his fate was sealed.

Moses and Aaron were supposed to speak to the rock. The miracle of speaking to the rock would have achieved its purpose on the level of Moses and Aaron as messengers of God. Hitting the rock was a miracle on the Moses-Nation level with Moses representing the people - his sole aim being to produce water for them. God wanted Moses to speak to the rock, not to hit it. God wanted the nation to realize that He is the source of the water, not Moses - thus demonstrating that the Moses-Aaron-Messenger relationship is dominant. When Moses hit the rock once, nothing happened. It was not supposed to give water that way. However, Moses, by hitting the rock, demonstrated that he was not going to use the method of speaking as a messenger of God. Although when he hit the rock a second time, water did come flowing out, by doing so, he re-emphasized that he was acting only on behalf of the nation. Accordingly, the nation's lot became his too - doomed to perish in the wilderness.

Moses and Aaron as leaders of the nation would not enter the land of Canaan due to the sin of the spies in the second year. As individuals, they lost their ability to enter the land of Canaan due to the sin of the rock in the fortieth year.

This week, we have attempted to summarize some of the main lines of interpretation of Moses' and Aaron's sin. We examined a few classic interpretations and the problems with them. We also introduced briefly a novel approach in interpreting this passage.

We will conclude with the words of R. Shmuel David Luzzato, who expressed the dilemma he faced when learning this portion of the Torah:

"Moses transgressed one sin. They [the commentators] have piled on thirteen and more! Each one envisioned a new sin. Therefore, I have refrained from studying this (chapter) intensively, lest I myself find a new interpretation and come to add fault to Moses our teacher."

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