

“AND MOSES STRUCK THE ROCK”: Numbers 20 and the Leadership of Moses

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The failure of Moses to lead the Jewish people into the promised land constitutes a central tragedy of the second half of the book of Numbers and the book of Deuteronomy. The ambiguous circumstances surrounding both his loss of the reins of leadership and his disqualification from entry into the land add to the reader's sense of frustration and wonder. Truly, the standard accounts of Numbers 20, the story of *Mei Meriva* (the Waters of Strife), raise more difficult questions than satisfying answers. Foremost among them: What exactly was Moses' sin and why was he punished so severely?

We need not list exhaustively the numerous attempts to resolve these problems; they have troubled and perplexed classical, medieval and modern Jewish commentators. Such a survey would inevitably lead to the conclusion expressed by R. Yitzhak Arama almost five centuries ago: none of the explanations is satisfactory. Particularly troubling is the lack of any specific correlation between the various "sins" suggested and the subsequent punishment. This essay is a modest effort to contribute to the search for a resolution in the spirit of Rashi and Rashbam's quest for "*hapeshatim hamithadshim bekol Yom.*" My attempt will be based on a close reading of both chapter 20 and the parallel section in Exodus. This will be done in light of Netsiv's (R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin) thesis about the nature of the book of Numbers.

A comparison of Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 reveals three major distinctions: (1) In Exodus, the narrative describes the Jewish people reaching Refidim, unable to find water: "and there was no water for the people to drink" (verse 1). In verse 2, the Jews argue with Moses, demanding water, a request Moses summarily dismisses: "Why do you strive with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?" The Bible records that the Jewish people still "thirsted

there for water" and cried out to Moses, "Why did you take us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle by thirst?" (verse 4). Notably, the text twice emphasizes the term "thirst" in the nation's demand. At this point Moses cries out to God for direction: "What shall I do to this people?" (verse 4), and God responds:

Pass before the people, and take with you of the elders of Israel; and your rod with which you smote the river, take in your hand and go. Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock in Horev; and you shall smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel (verses 5-6).

Numbers 20, by contrast, does not depict a gradual development of the people's qualms and murmurings. Straightaway, they question the purpose of the journey and mission: "Would that we had died as our brethren did.... And why have you taken us out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place" (verses 3-5). It is striking that the term "thirst" does not appear in any form in the Numbers passage. Moreover, the absence of water is first referred to at the end of their complaint: "nor is there any water to drink" (verse 5). One would have expected water to be their central demand, as in Exodus. This contrast suggests that water is the least of the concerns of the Israelites in Numbers.

(2) The text in Numbers does not indicate that Moses turned to God for help in dealing with this crisis, as he did in Exodus. Rather it was God who initiated the response to the demands of the people. The plain sense of the text "And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the Tent of Meeting and they fell upon their faces and the glory of the Lord appeared to them" (verse 6), indicates a retreat of some sort by Moses and Aaron. "Falling on their face" echoes the text in chapter 14, where, responding to the report of the spies, the people declare "Let us appoint a chief and return to Egypt" (verse 4), whereupon "Moses and Aaron fell upon their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of Israel" (verse 5). Chapter 14 continues with Joshua and Caleb's response to the people's rebellion; they offer counter-

arguments and words of hope while Moses and Aaron remain silent. Thus in chapter 14, Moses and Aaron have retreated from confronting the people, leaving that for others to do. R. Ovadya Seforno explicitly points this out: "They fell upon their faces as they saw that they could not rectify the situation, like the Sanhedrin who hid their faces in the ground when they did not know what to do out of fear of Yannai the King (*Sanhedrin 19b*)." The parallel between chapters 14 and 20 is highlighted by the fact that in both situations God's presence immediately appears in the midst of the camp:

“And the glory of the Lord appeared in the Tent of Meeting” (14: 10).

“And the glory of the Lord appeared to them” (20:6).

(3) The audience for the water-miracle is different in each narrative. In Exodus, the hitting of the rock takes place "in the sight of the elders of Israel," on the mountaintop, away from the camp. In Numbers, the text emphasizes that the rock is to be approached "in the sight of the children of Israel." The miracle would occur in the midst of the camp. Additionally, the phrase "in the sight of the children of Israel" is later repeated in the Almighty's rebuke to Moses in verse 12: "Because you did not trust in me to sanctify me in the sight of the children of Israel." It appears once again in Numbers 27, where Moses fails to enter the land: "For you rebelled against my word in the desert of Zin during the struggle with the people by not sanctifying me through the water in their sight" (verse 14). The passage in Deuteronomy 32 which recounts the error of Moses uses a similar phrase: "Because you did not sanctify me in the midst of the children of Israel" (verse 51).

The three differences pointed out reflect divergent thrusts in the two water-episodes. This discrepancy is rooted in the fact that the two events occur at different points in the desert history of the Jewish people. The water-episode in Exodus 17 takes place immediately following the conclusion of the Exodus, a liberation which had culminated in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The Jewish people have begun their trek through the wilderness and have

already witnessed the force and grandeur of divine intervention in their destiny. Though at this juncture their faith in God is fairly strong, they may occasionally complain and test him. In the beginning of the passage in Exodus the Jewish people ask for water because they are thirsty. Thus the initial demand is simply a request for satisfaction of a basic human need—"Give us water that we may drink" (verse 2). It is only after their original murmurs go unanswered and their thirst intensifies that they sharpen their attack and question the entire journey through the desert. The lack of water, however, remains the focus of their complaint: "Why is it that you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our cattle by thirst?" (verse 3).

The water-episode in Exodus is thus exactly what it seems to be—a technical crisis in providing for the needs of a large group of people faced with difficult desert conditions. God teaches Moses to resolve such a challenge as a leader. He is commanded to take with him the elders of the Jewish people (i.e., the rest of the leadership), and together witness how the staff brings forth water from the rocks of the desert. All this activity takes place in the presence of a select group of individuals who are called upon to lead the people. This leadership training or orientation in problem solving does not require the presence of the entire nation. For this reason the text emphasizes that it takes place away from the camp; the elders ascend the mountain of Horev, the site of the rock, to witness Moses carrying out the Divine directive. In Exodus, Moses is called upon to act as a crisis manager dealing with the very local and limited problems that face any large group of people traversing a vast desert.

Indeed, this episode strikingly complements the overall thrust of the previous chapters, the bitter water episode at Mara and the request for food which resulted in the gift of the *manna*. At Mara, the Israelites have a purely technical problem. They "murmured against Moses, saying: What shall we drink?" (verse 24). Here too Moses takes the initiative and cries out to God. The Almighty shows him how to resolve this crisis via a miraculous piece of wood. Our episode at Meriva concludes with the prayer of Moses and the use

of a miraculous rock, just as the episode at Mara came to its conclusion with the intercession of Moses and the use of the miraculous wood. The *manna* narrative fits in to this pattern as well. The Israelites recall the abundance of food in Egypt and complain: "For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death" (verse 3). Here too the focus is on the needs of the moment, and, to this extent, the term "starve," the companion phrase to "thirst" is significantly employed. Once again the crisis is resolved by God providing food from the heavens while directing Moses to inform the people of the rules and regulations regarding the manna. This divine shower of food becomes a daily occurrence during their entire stay in the desert and is thus an integral part of the general means that are provided by God to care for the nation throughout their long journey. The context in Numbers, however, is very different. The water-story in Numbers is the first episode recorded after the generation of the Exodus has passed from the scene; it is the first narrative of the new generation.

Netsiv's approach to the Book of Numbers sheds light on the entire topic. Netsiv, in both his introduction to the book of Numbers and through out the commentary, points out that Numbers is a book of transition. It characterizes the movement of the Jewish people from a generation of the desert to a generation capable of entering the Land of Israel. The nation moves from a condition in which the divine plays an active role in their everyday life to one which the divine presence becomes more muted. They move from a miraculous existence to one that is more mundane and earthly. Netsiv further argues that *Parshat Hukat* marks the transition with our chapter at the epicenter of that shift. Chapters 11-17 (the sections of *Beha'alotekha*, *Shelah* and *Korah*) depict the unravelling of the generation that left Egypt, their transgressions and eventual downfall, in that fateful second year after Exodus. By chapter 20 (*Hukat*), we are already standing on the edge of a new world, thirty eight long years after the mistakes of those who died in the desert, the *Meytei Midbar*, as Rashi, following the Midrash, terms them.

A new generation of Israelites stands before us, most of whom did not witness the miracles of the Exodus nor the awesome experience of revelation at Sinai. The first episode the Torah records regarding this generation is another crisis of water. But the divine intention is entirely different from the previous occasion. The people are not simply thirsty for water—as we noted above, the term for thirst does not appear in our narrative at all! Instead, the people immediately begin to question the whole purpose of the mission; the water-complaint comes almost as an afterthought. This crisis brings to the surface a fundamental deficiency in their faith. At this stage, the Almighty steps in and initiates a course of action that attempts to transform the technical problem of lack of water into a vehicle for solidifying the faith and commitment of this new generation. It seems to be a golden opportunity to drive home an object lesson tailored to the specific needs of this generation, most of whom did not experience first hand the Exodus or the revelation at Sinai.

Throughout the section the Torah emphasizes that the entire congregation must witness the event. Moreover, the phrase "take the rod and gather the assembly together" (verse 7) clearly echoes the experience at Sinai which is termed "the day of assembly" throughout the Book of Deuteronomy (e.g. 9:10). It also reminds us of the gathering that is to occur once in seven years where the Torah uses similar terminology "hakhel et tha'Am . . ." (Deut. 31:12). Hakhel itself is patterned after the revelation experience at Sinai, whose goal was to imbue the community with *yir'at shamayim*, faith and commitment to the covenant. Throughout this narrative, Moses is instructed to accomplish his task "*le eineihem* (in the sight of the entire people)" (verse 8) in the midst of the camp. Interestingly, this point is emphasized again in God's rebuke of Moses: "Because you did not trust in me to sanctify me— "*le eineihem*" (verse 12), and repeated in Numbers 26:14: "For you rebelled against my commandment in the desert of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify me at the waters— "*le eineihem.*" This idea is repeated once again, in a slightly different form but with the same effect in

Deuteronomy 32:51: "Because you did not sanctify, me in the midst of the children of Israel." Moses and Aaron squandered an opportunity to sanctify God's name in the presence of the entire nation at a time when they needed desperately.

In light of this textual analysis, one can now understand the punishment of Moses and why, as a result of this particular mistake, he lost the leadership of the people. Disobeying the directive of God to speak rather than strike, as serious as it might be, is not the essential point. His error was not merely a failure to obey God's command, it also was a failure of leadership. Moses, by hitting rather than speaking, responds to this current crisis in precisely the same fashion as he had responded to the problems of the generation that had left Egypt thirty-eight years before. It was not the sin and its severity that caused Moses to lose the privilege of leadership. Moses' "desert response" to this second water-crisis revealed that he was not a leader who could address the concerns and crises of a new generation, one which would enter the Land of Israel. It was clear that he was still tied to methods and perspectives of leadership which, though proper for the needs and concerns of the generation that left Egypt, were ineffective and inappropriate in the new situation. Moses stood before a *Kaha*- a nation, and not simply the old Morim—rebels he had dealt with throughout the middle of the book of Numbers. In contrast to Numbers 11 and 14, where God responds with anger to the complaints and murmurs of the people, our section depicts no similar divine response. The previous episodes relate to the generation that left Egypt, who constantly tested God. However, our story presents the first crisis of faith experienced by the new nation, and God responds with restraint and understanding. This distinction, however, is not taken up by Moses as he withdraws and falls upon his face. Moses thus expresses a sense of despair; he had seen many episodes of murmurings and travails and now perceived the cycle to be renewing itself. In truth, Moses was faced with a new reality that required of him a wholly different reaction.

Moses' inability to respond to that challenge was, to use a halakhic idiom, a *gilui milta*—a revealing symptom or litmus test that the time had come to pave the way for a new leadership that would continue the mission of the people and its education. God's decree was not, therefore, a punishment in the classical sense of the term, but a direct response to reality, an example of direct cause and effect. This solution explains why Moses is stripped of his leadership as a result of this specific action. It was not the action per se, but rather what it represented or indicated as a test case of Moses' continued leadership of the new generation. Moses, Moshe Rabbenu, the master of all prophets and the leader of all leaders, was halted on the doorstep of the promised land and a new world, a place he could gaze at from afar but could not enter- “*Ki mineged tireh et ha'arets veshama lo tavo*” (Deut. 32:52).

NOTES

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1. Rashi explains that Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it. This explanation, taken superficially, leaves too many unresolved problems in the plain sense of the text. First if the error was hitting instead of speaking, why doesn't the text accuse him directly of this sin? Instead, in verse 12 (as well as Num. 27:14 and Deut. 32:52), God accuses Moses failing to sanctify His name: “Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel. Additionally one can raise the question posed by Rambam. Causing water to flow out of a rock is also a great miracle so why was he punished harshly? Secondly, how does this situation differ from Exodus 17 where the Almighty Himself commanded Moses to strike the rock? If striking the stone is not the right way to perform the miracle, why, in Exodus, did the Almighty himself command to do that very act?
2. For a survey of the opinions of traditional Jewish exegetes see the study sheets of Prof. Nehama Leibowitz to *Parshat Hukat* as well as the summary in N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1980) pp. 236-247. Modern Bible scholars have also written extensively on this topic from the perspective of the critical school and its assumptions about the nature of repetitions and contradictions as well as presentations of Biblical heroes in the text. Examples of this maybe found in George Buchanan Gray, *Numbers-International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh,

1913), pp 260-264; Jacob Milgrom, the *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia / New York, Excursus 50, pp. 448-456.

3. See *Akedat Yitzhak, Parashat Hukkat*, ch. 80. Jewish and non- Jewish exegetes continue to express similar sentiments in our day as well. See for example Eugene Arden, “*How Moses Failed God*” *JBL*, 76, Winter 1957, p.50: “At the moment in perhaps the most enigmatic incident of the Pentateuch, the deliverer Moses and his “prophet” Aaron ... were categorically denied the privilege of entering Canaan,” as well as Yehuday Nashoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parasha* (New York, 1989), Vol. 4, p. 1076: “This is one of the most veiled sections of the Torah. It may well be that when the Torah said ‘No one knew his burial place’ (Deut. 32:24), the secret of *Mei Meriva* was included as well.”
4. See Rashbam’s introduction to his commentary on Genesis 37 as well as his introduction to Genesis 1. This latter passage along with material on the first 36 chapters was not published in the standard editions and the new *Torat Hayyim* edition of *Mikraot Gedolot* published by Mossad HaRav Kook.
5. See for example a similar usage in Genesis 7:9; Isaiah 2: 19-21. This is the explicit view of *Midrash Yalmeidenu*, Ibn Ezra, *Kli Yakar* and many others including R. Samson Raphael Hirsch who writes: “They made no answer, they fled for refuge to the Tent of Appointed meeting as always when there was a question whether their mission was really given and directed by God” (Commentary to verse 6).
6. See, however, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor and Rabbenu Bahye among others who understand the falling on the face in Ch. 5 as an act of prayer.
7. Ramban already noted this difference in his commentary to verse 13. However, he is addressing an entirely different problem and he does not build upon this nuance to explain the sin of Moses.
8. This is the plain sense of verse 3 which introduces the verb *tsama* for the first time in our story although the people had requested water once before in verse 2. This interpretation is adopted explicitly by Ibn Ezra, *Ketav veHaKabbala*, Netsiv and many of the modern commentators.
9. It is interesting to note the phrase, “there he made for them a statute and an ordinance”- *sham sam lo hok u’ mishpat*-which concludes the verse in which God directed Moses to the tree which sweetened the waters. Ramban understood this phrase as referring to general principles of organizing and leading a people throughout a trek in the desert. These principles were taught by God to Moses, at that moment, in the aftermath of the bitter water incident. In short, then, Moses was instructed in the appropriate methods of dealing with the technical aspects of running the nation and keeping it whole during this experience in the wilderness.
10. See for example *Ha’amek Davar* to Numbers 20:1 and 21:2.
11. See his comment to Numbers 20: “ ‘the entire congregation’-the complete congregation as all the people destined to die in the desert had expired, and these were left for life.” To the best of my knowledge the assumption that Ch. 20 occurs in the last year of the sojourn in the desert is accepted

by almost all classical and modern Jewish exegetes (See for example Ibn Ezra, Hizkuni and Shadal on this verse). The Exception of course is Bekhor Shor and his radical view that the passages in Numbers and Exodus refer to the same historical event. In his view, Exodus and Numbers are complimentary, with the Torah fleshing out some of the details here which were generally alluded to in the original presentation in Exodus.

12. See in particular the comments of *Meshekh Hokman* to Numbers 20:11.
13. See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Shiurim leZecher Abba Mori*, Vol. 2 pp. 208-211; N. Helfgot, "Semikhut Parshiot beSidrat vaYelekh uMashmahan" *Alon Shvut*, 118, pp.61-70, reprinted with minor corrections in *Rinat Yitzhak*, 1, pp. 118-120.
14. Thus we return to Rashi's explanation of hitting versus speaking as the key to unraveling the section!
15. The question is often raised why Moses was not permitted to enter the land at least as a private citizen. It seems clear that for the Torah and Hazal, Moses had no status as a private person. The essence of his life was as the leader of the Israelites, par excellence. When he could no longer fulfill that role, his time had come to an end.