MOSES AT THE WATERS OF MERIBAH

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> *And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron, your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water, and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock, so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink.' And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels, are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?' And Moses lifted up his hand and smote the rock with his rod twice and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank and their cattle. And the Lord said unto Moses and Aaron, 'Because you believed not in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.' These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with Lord, and He was sanctified by them* (Num. 20:7-13).

The above passage is full of surprises. It states that Moses was unexpectedly found wanting. He had angered God, who declared; *'Because you have not sanctified Me . . . you shall not enter there, into the land'* (Deut 32:51-52). For all his devotion, labor and leadership, it was now decreed that Moses would not bring the people into the Promised Land, something for which he had yearned and prayed throughout the long years of wandering. This passage does not explicitly state however, where Moses exactly failed in sanctifying God. Nor is it clear how the violation deserved such a severe judgment. Justice surely demands that the punishment must match the offence; it must be commensurate with the transgression.

The commentators have struggled with this problem, and have suggested a variety of explanations. Thus Maimonides, in the fourth chapter of his introduction to Pirkei Avot, faults Moses for calling the people *ha-morim*, rebels, thus losing his temper, something a leader of his stature should avoid. Rashi (Num. 20:12) sees Moses striking the rock as a missed opportunity to

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convey a lesson in obedience. Ramban (Num. 20:1) explains that Moses is charged with arrogance and presumption when he exclaimed, *shall we bring forth water for you,* attributing to himself the ability to wrest water from the rock. There are other attempts to explain God's wrath, but none convincingly clarifies how Moses' failing was deserving of his reproach and rejection as the one who will lead the people into the land.

A comparison with an earlier similar confrontation that occurred right after the Exodus might shed light on the passage under discussion. We read:

> *And the Lord said to Moses, 'Pass on before the people, and take with you of the elders of Israel, and your rod wherewith you smote the river, take in your hand and go. Behold I will stand before you these upon the rock in Horeb, 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. And the name of the place was called Massah and Meribah, because of the striving of the children of Israel and because they tried the Lord saying: 'Is the Lord among us or not?'* (Ex. 17:5-7).

As can be seen, the two episodes are closely similar. Both tell us that God had intervened when the people argued vehemently and complained that they were taken out of Egypt, the land of plenty. The two places are called Meribah, strife, so that their quarrel is remembered. Moses' staff is prominent in both accounts. In all these regards the incidents are alike, except for three important differences. Forty years had separated the two incidents. The earlier occurred soon after the people had left Egypt; while at the time of the latter, the generation that had lived through the agony of slavery was no longer around. There is, of course, no mention in the first account of any reprimand to Moses. Most importantly, God's instruction to Moses differed. In the first episode God directed Moses to strike the rock, which Moses faithfully did, while in the later one, God ordered him to speak to the rock, which Moses however disregarded, and instead struck the rock twice.

God's different instructions are surely not accidental, and one wishes to know why He directed Moses in the first episode to strike the rock, when speaking to it would have been more wondrous. A possible answer may lie in the respective different experiences and disposition of the two generations. At the earlier time, the instructions to strike the rock reflected the habitual

brutal treatment to which the people had been accustomed. Such was the treatment the Egyptians meted out to the people. It was a gesture with which they were familiar. At that time the people were still under the impact of the cruelty and subjugation of experienced slavery. Psychologically, they were so conditioned that only by means of compulsion was obedience evoked. In their experience every order was accompanied by force. Obedience was affected through brutality; compliance was a function of control and power. The staff raised in Moses' hands fitted their disposition. Moses' performance was thus in tune with the people's mentality and expectations. To the assembled crowd it was clear that Moses by his power and mastery would bring forth the vital water from the stubborn rock.

But now, forty years later, a new generation had arisen that had not known Pharaoh, a people that had been spared the afflictions and cruelties of the taskmasters. They had not been subject to an order that cherished the idea of force and dictation. It was a generation that had been raised in an atmosphere of freedom from physical coercion and brute power. To strike the rock must have seemed barbaric and abusive, something that confounded their minds. Thus, by striking the rock before the assembled crowd, Moses somehow misjudged the perception of the people and the sensitivity of their feelings. To them he expressed anger and impatience, and they felt that they were being treated like desensitized slaves. He ignored God's directive of speaking to the rock apparently under the impression that he was dealing with an uncultured, unrefined, oppressed crowd.

Additionally, Rashbam (Num. 20:8) points out that the staff was not Moses' but Aaron's, the staff that sprouted almonds after the rebellion of Korah. This further demonstrates that Moses misunderstood the purpose of the staff here, taking it mistakenly as a means for striking the rock rather than what is was meant to symbolize in this setting, a token of authority.

Seen in this way, the meaning of the text becomes more readily understood. God had reason to become angry, and charged Moses with faulty leadership. Moses had misjudged the mentality and development of the people, and underestimated their sensibilities, failing to assess their true nature. He did not appreciate that a new generation with a new vision and expectations stood before him, who, though wont to complain and criticize, were not former apathetic, driven slaves. By so underestimating the mood of the people, Mos-

es had disqualified himself and could no longer lead them to their destination. This was all the more unfortunate, as this misjudgment would reflect on God Himself. He had, after all, chosen Moses and charged him this mission. Thus, rather than resulting in a sanctification, God's Name and cause were not hallowed to the degree required.

It is surely lamentable and incomprehensible that Moses, who so faithfully followed his mission to guide his people for so many years, should be denied his life's hope. But such is the judgment of God, as the Rabbis tell us, "The Holy One blessed be He, deals strictly with those who are near Him, even to a hair's breadth" (T.B. Yevamot 121b).

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