



Parashat Chukat - #286

Ask Rav Aviner: toratravaviner@yahoo.com

Prepared by Rabbi Mordechai Tzion

Visit our blog: www.ravaviner.com

On the Parashah... The Sin of Mei Merivah

Our Parashah begins with the Mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, one of the Torah's "Chukim" - enigmatic Mitzvot. It continues with an account of Moshe Rabbenu striking the rock at Mei Merivah to bring forth water for the thirsty congregation. This "sin", like the Mitzvah of the Parah Adumah, is also shrouded in mystery.

"Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the Nation of Israel - therefore you [Moshe and Aharon] shall not lead this congregation into the Land which I have given to them" (Bemidbar 20:12). Hashem's command is crystal clear: it first describes what Moshe Rabbenu and Aharon did and said, and then maps out their punishment. But there is one thing that's far from explicit: the sin! What exactly is the sin for which they were punished so severely? To this question there are almost as many answers as there are commentaries on the Torah.

Rashi's commentary follows the opinion found in the Zohar (Bereshit 20) and the Midrash (Yalkut Reuveni 70). He explained that "Hashem did not command them to strike the rock, but rather to speak to it. Had they spoken to the rock and produced water it would have been a tremendous sanctification of the Divine Name. If a deaf and dumb rock, which is not dependent upon G-d's mercy, does G-d's bidding when spoken to, how much more so must human beings fulfill the Divine commands" (Bemidbar 20:8-12 with Rashi). The Ramban disagreed with this explanation, noting that Moshe Rabbenu was commanded to take his staff (ibid. v. 8), which implies that he was supposed to use it. Furthermore, he asks why it is any less miraculous to draw water from a rock by knocking it with a staff than by speaking to it? Our Rabbi, Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook sharpened the question by noting that hitting an inanimate object seems more "natural" and appropriate than talking to it. As the Nation of Israel came closer and closer to Eretz Israel, they gradually assumed a more natural, less

overtly miraculous way of life. The clouds disappeared upon Aharon's death, the well no longer followed them when Miriam died. Later, when they actually entered Eretz Israel, the Manna no longer fell. It would therefore seem more appropriate for Moshe Rabbenu to strike the rock at this point (see Sichot Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah, Chukat 1). But why, in any case, do the commentators put such an emphasis on the difference between speaking to a rock and striking it?

Man is defined as a "speaking animal." His ability to perceive abstract ideas and moral imperatives and to express them in words is what sets him above the rest of the animal world. On the verse, "And man became a living soul" (Bereshit 2:7), the Targum Onkelos translates "a speaking soul," and Rashi explained that it means the ability to think and to speak. Through Man's verbal ability, he communicates with and influences society and is able to translate thought into action. This requires proper use of the power of speech. There are times to be silent and times to speak. Our Sages ask, "What is man's special skill in this world?" They answer, "To act as if he were mute" (Chulin 89a).

Does this mean he shouldn't discuss Torah and Mitzvot either? No, the Torah teaches: "You shall speak righteously" (ibid.). It takes great skill to differentiate between speech that is beneficial and a Mitzvah, and that which is damaging and prohibited. Since speech expresses man's very being, it is essential that the Nation be led by persuasion and not by coercion. The Aramaic word for "leader" is "Dabar" - speaker.

When Hashem wished to appoint Moshe Rabbenu to lead the Nation of Israel out of Egypt, Moshe Rabbenu protested: "I am heavy of mouth and of tongue" (Shemot 4:6). He felt himself unable to communicate with the people. Hashem then pronounced "Aharon, your brother, shall speak" in your place (ibid. v. 14-16). Eventually, though, Moshe Rabbenu acquired the power of leadership through speech. The phrase "And Moshe spoke" appears innumerable times in the Torah, and the whole book of Devarim is one long speech given by Moshe Rabbenu before his death (see beginning of Midrash Devarim Rabbah). Important as speech may be in leading the Nation, however, there is obviously a need for coercion as well. We don't depend on the power to persuasion to convince a thief to compensate for his theft: we grab him by the neck and bring him to judgment. There is a need for courts and police. But these coercive tools are secondary forces. The primary force must be verbal.

Our Rabbi, Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah, explained that Moshe Rabbenu had such a great personality that even when he tried to act silently – striking the rock without speaking – the intensity of his presence was overpowering. But the Nation of Israel at this point, preparing to settle Eretz Israel, was in need of a leader who would not overpower them. Thus, his punishment was appropriate: "Moshe would die and Yehoshua would bring them into Eretz Israel" (Sanhedrin 17a). Moshe is compared to the sun (Baba Batra 75a). Sunshine may sometimes be overpowering. Its light is so strong that the stars cannot be discerned during the day, even though they are always present. The light of the sun, of Moshe Rabbenu, overpowered and concealed other lights. Yehoshua however "is like the light of the moon" (Baba Batra ibid.). The light of the moon allows other lights to be seen too. When we entered Eretz

Israel, there was no room for coercion. The Nation must be led by words and not by force. Moshe Rabbenu was therefore punished by not being allowed to continue to lead the people by force into the Promised Land. He would die, and a different type of leadership would take over. The Rambam's commentary is in a similar vein. He explained Moshe Rabbenu's sin as one of anger (Shemoneh Perakim, chapters 4 and 7) because he called the Nation "rebellious," even though their demand for water was not considered a sin. Although the Torah does not state that they were punished for speaking angrily, the Maharal explained that angry speech is a sign of a lack of faith. Anger is an expression of attempting to force things to be what you want, while soft speech implies the belief that others can be influenced by reason. The power of speech is man's greatest strength, and we must believe in its power to change not only people's hearts, but even inanimate objects (see Sefer Ha-Ikarim 4:22). As Yeshayahu said, [Hashem] fulfills His servant's word" (44:26). Yehoshua prayed, "Sun - stand still in Gibeon and moon in the valley of Ayalon" (Yehoshua 10:12), Moshe Rabbenu commanded the earth to swallow up Korach (Bamidbar 16:30) and Eliyahu Ha-Navi imposed a drought upon all of Eretz Israel (Melachim 1 17:1). The sin of Mei Merivah and Moshe Rabbenu's punishment teach us, once and for all, that force is not the way to educate.

Rav Aviner on... Halachic Opportunism

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Korach 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Halachic opportunism is a phrase that contains within it an internal contradiction. What, after all, is "opportunism"? It means checking out what works, what is pleasing and popular. Halachah, by contrast, is divine, eternal, absolute, firmly entrenched. Every individual has goals and ideals. Yet what can he do when they are smashed up on the boulder of reality? Opportunism suggests: Very simple, make maximum use of opportunities, while foregoing or changing your initial goals in favor of what is easily attainable. Change your loyalties in accordance with the shifting likelihood of success.

According to this, when there is a contradiction between Halachah and reality, halachic opportunism will say: Reality wins. Halachah has to be adapted to it.

There are therefore sophisticated methods for officially continuing to tow the line. In fact, the heretics in the universities claim that that's what the Sages of the Mishnah did. For example, those heretics claim, the sages of the Mishnah considered the law of the rebellious son (in which the son must be killed in anticipation of the hideousness of his future acts, Devarim 21:18) to be inhumane, old fashioned, and in need of change, so they invented new conditions: in order for this law to be applicable, for example, the parents of the child must be identical in appearance and height – something which is obviously impossible. By such means, they elegantly neutralized that law. Those same heretics hold that the Sages of the Talmud did the same thing to the laws of the Mishnah, and so forth – G-d have mercy on them.

In just that way, halachic opportunism changes one's loyalty to the laws of the Torah according to their shifting chances of success. In other words, according to the level

of popular support. That's how it works: changing one's positions in accordance with one's relative strength and in accordance with public opinion polls.

This is somewhat reminiscent of the incident involving Rachamim Kalanter (Kalanterism), a member of the religious "Mizrachi Workers' Party" which, in 5713, sought to depose Jerusalem's mayor because of his support of establishing a Reform synagogue. Kalanter changed his allegiance and supported the mayor in exchange for an appointment as Vice Mayor in charge of religious affairs. In order to prevent such Kalanterism, a law was passed that a Knesset member must leave the Knesset before being chosen to a new party.

Here is an example of religious opportunism: Many dwellers of Zion do not love conversions that demand undertaking Mitzvah observance. They want to change the definition of conversion to mean, "belonging to the Jewish People". For them, "Your people are my people" (Ruth 1,16) suffices, without "your G-d is my G-d" (ibid.). This constitutes not just a change in the definition of conversion, but in the definition of the Jewish People.

Another example: It is a fact that many girls enlist in the army against the rulings of the Chief Rabbinate. The simple solution? A new ruling that says that this is all right.

A third example: There is a lot of filth in modern culture, but the public loves it with all its warts. Hence we must rule that all is permissible, perhaps with a few minor changes as a sort of fig leaf. Any interesting film or book is permissible, because, when all is said and done, it's just "culture". Even if it's got a bit of heresy, a bit of forbidden gossip, a bit of pornography...all in all, those things are lost in the permissible majority. No big deal.

As for us, however, the disciples of Moshe, when there is a contradiction between Halachah and reality, we say: "Let G-d decide!" And why is that? Because G-d also determines the divine nature of the soul.

And what exists in Halachah in black letters exists deep within us, in the letters of our soul. Israel and the Torah are one. Indeed, that is a spiritual concept. Whoever does not delve deeply into issues of faith, risks falling prey to halachic opportunism. I am not writing this for the halachic opportunist. He will not understand. He will think he is sanctifying the name of G-d. I am writing this for us, so that we do not get confused.

Maran Ha-Rav Kook quotes the words of the Zohar: "The Devil begins by bringing people together, but ultimately creates divisiveness. Holiness begins divisively but ultimately brings people together" (Orot Ha-Kodesh 2:440-441, and 1:15). Opposites cannot be attached together.

We do not go "whichever way the wind [Ruach] blows". Rather, we set sail in the direction of "My spirit [Ruach] which shall be set upon you and My words which I have put in your mouth" (Yeshayahu 59:20).

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Har Ha-Bayit - Temple Mount

Building Temple

Q: Ha-Rav wrote that the building of the Temple is still in the distance. What is the source?

A: The Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 1:1-2, says that we must first establish the Kingship of Israel, then eliminate Amalek, and only afterwards build the Temple. And this is what our Rabbi, Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah, taught us (After the Six-Day War, Rabbenu Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah resumed his class for his leading students, who were great Torah scholars. In his humility, he asked: What should we learn now? Ha-Rav Chanan Porat suggested: Perhaps Hilchot Beit Ha-Bechirah (Laws of the Beit Ha-Mikdash from the Rambam). Rabbenu warmly held his hand and said: Chanan, we first have to learn the Laws of Kings and their Wars for a long time).

Laws of Sacrifices and the Temple

Q: Should Cohanim start learning the Laws of Sacrifices and the Temple?

A: There are other subjects which take precedence (Li-Netivot Yisrael 1, 23).

Special thank you to Orly Tzion for editing the Ateret Yerushalayim Parashah Sheet



Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim P.O.B. 1076 Jerusalem 91009 Tel.02-6284101 Fax.02-6261528

www.ateret.org.il To subscribe, send e-mail to: mororly@bezeqint.net

