

D'var Torah Parshat Chukkat – July 13, 2024

By Josh Korn

“If the Lord Almighty came down and said ‘How, get out of the race’, I'd get out of the race. The Lord Almighty's not coming down.”

Well, in this week's parsha He did. And He said, “Moshe, get out of the race.”. So, in a bit of an echo or continuation to what Yair spoke about last week, what I'd like to talk about in this week's dvar is leadership. What makes a good leader? Is it static, or does it change over time? What can we learn from Chukat about that?

There's no shortage of things to talk about in the parsha – and I think if you look closely they all go back to leadership. In no particular order, we have:

The indecipherable meaning behind the red cow and how and why it purifies and contaminates.

Miriam's death.

Ahron's death.

Travel and battle, including Edom refusing passage, and a victorious war against the giants Sichon and Og.

The nachash nechoshet - precursor of the staff of Asclepius symbol used today to symbolize medicine.

B'nei yisrael complaining (in two separate incidents) about a lack of water – one of which led to the story Moshe hitting the rock instead of speaking to it and the announcement that Moshe and Ahron would not get to enter Eretz Yisrael. It is that I'd like to delve into.

If you were following along closely, you'll have noted that Moshe struck the rock pa-amayim - twice. Strike one. Strike two...and he's out. Were the rules of baseball different back then? Or did Moshe in fact get three strikes? Well, I would contend that maybe he did. When I agreed to do the d'var torah for this week's parsha, it was 6 months ago, parshat shemot, when we first met Moshe, and I was working with Orli on her bat mitzvah d'var torah. I thought there was a parallel there, between when we first meet Moshe as a man (at the beginning of Exodus), and here (in the middle of Numbers) when we learn that his days are... numbered. The similarity between this beginning and end struck me. Struck me, you might say, like a staff strikes a rock. For those who were there in January, you may remember that Orli spoke about Moshe striking the Egyptian taskmaster and killing him, and questioning whether or not that strike was just. What if Moshe had spoken to the taskmaster instead of killing him? He was in a position of power; could he not have interceded in a different way? We know that the heroes of the tanach are flawed heroes, and we learn not only from their greatness but their mistakes. What if the moral of that story was not to praise Moshe for acting decisively and honorably, which actually led to the first of many times that Jews spoke out against him and his leadership and led to his exile from Mitzrayim, but that measured speech was required instead? Moshe always shies away from being a mouthpiece – from those beginnings when he strikes the Egyptian taskmaster, to decades later (but still in Shemot) at the burning bush when he refuses to be Hashem's mouthpiece, through a couple of parshiyot ago when he insisted on having other prophets and was happy that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp.

He was a great leader. A humble leader. Someone with a strong moral compass. Someone who pulled in others to lead beside him when needed. The leader that was needed for Exodus, for the giving of the Torah, and for 40 years in the desert as bnei Israel transitioned from an enslaved people to a free people. But.. speechifying was not good thing. Instead, he leans on miracles as his crutch. And also leans on his crutch, or staff, to do miracles. Time and again, miracles over speech. Is lack of speech the cause of Moshe's problem here as well?

Commentators disagree, as commentators will. Rashi says it was disobeying God's command to speak to the rock. Rambam says it was displaying anger, calling the kahal “rebels” and hitting the rock in anger. Ramban disagrees, pointing out that Moshe was told to take his staff with him, and has gotten angry before, and instead attributes Moshe's punishment to the fact that he seemed to be taking credit for the water rather than attributing it to God. All of these options do in fact reference speech, or lack thereof, as the underlying sin. And in that, I agree. But I think we can add to that as well.

Last week, Yair told us about Korach. Of how to deal with insurgency, and of how to deal with grumblings of the whole people. The insurgency is dealt with head on - Moshe chastising Korach for the insubordination, and eventually there are miracles that end in death. As for the people, Yair told us that maybe Moshe and Ahron dealt with the people correctly. Ignore the grumbling – protect them from Hashem’s anger when He performs another plague, save their lives, but don’t address it head on. No offense to Yair, but...I think it didn’t work. The people have been complaining for parsha after parsha, and Moshe speaks to God about it – but does he lead the people? Maybe they need a rally. A pat on the back. Something and someone verbal, who can bring them out of their 40 year funk.

As Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot points out in an essay I found online and thus cannot properly attribute better than that, it is worthwhile contrasting between this time that Moshe struck the rock to bring forth water with the first time 38 years earlier. In doing so, he finds numerous differences:

- In the first instance, thirst is the first thing mentioned that leads to escalating complaints; in this instance, b’nei yisrael questions the whole purpose of their wanderings and water is only mentioned as an afterthought.
 - In the first instance, Moshe first address the complainers, and then goes to Hashem and asks for help, but here Moshe and Ahron just leave the kahal and fall on their faces and it is God that addresses them unspoken
 - In the first instance, the miracle is done in front of the elders, while here it is front of the entire nation.
- These differences all highlight that there is a new generation, and one that Hashem realizes requires a new leadership style - that the time for fire and brimstone is passed. But Moshe cannot relate to this new generation, and in essence, he just gives up. Gives in. To old ways. And strikes the rock. Worse, Moshe wasn’t in fact just silent here. Before Moshe struck the rock, he did say something. But while God told him to speak to the rock, Moshe instead addresses the kahal. “Sheemu na hamorim - hamin hasela hazeh notzi lachem mayim?” “Listen now, rebels - shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” This - is not a rally. The entire kahal is assembled, but he addresses all of them as rebels, rather than recruiting those who were not rebellious to his cause. This is not inspiring leadership. But perhaps, in fact, this is Moshe giving up, realizing he is no longer up to the task of defending b’nei yisrael to God. With Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp, Moshe is happy about it, happy to uplift others and not speak down to them. But perhaps the happenings in last week’s parsha have weakened his resolve. His faith, not only in God, but in himself too. He comes to realize he doesn’t know how to inspire this new generation that was never slaves. A generation for whom signs and miracles aren’t enough, and who require confident and uplifting speech.

Words. Rallies. Speaking to the people and getting them excited about something. Moshe, I think, realizes he is no longer the leader that is needed – and perhaps, no longer wants to be that leader. His entire generation (and children’s generation, and probably grandchildren’s generation) has died out. His sister has just passed. Despite that, he doesn’t step aside and quit - even after numerous failed debates with the people that we’ve been seen in the last few parshiyot. And the Lord Almighty came down after Moshe’s horrible performance, and said “Moshe, get out of the race.” New leadership is needed.

I want to add just 1 more minute to leave with a question to ponder over kiddush or on your own time. Every I just told you was about Moshe. But why were Ahron and Miriam denied entry to Eretz Yisrael? With Ahron, we maybe have some explanation. He is implicated here with Moshe. Moshe struck the rock twice; was Ahron’s sin not stopping him after the first time? He is known as a peacemaker... But perhaps his sin is in not recognizing that he needs to intervene and be confrontational sometimes. And this was in fact his third strike in that regard – he did not intercede in the episode of the golden calf, but instead tried to keep everyone happy. He did not intercede when Miriam spoke against Moshe in parshat bahalotcha. And he did not intercede now. So again, perhaps it’s a leadership issue. But what about Miriam? Was she given three chances? Why did she die? There is no explanation given in the text, and so the question I’ll leave you with is: was Miriam a good leader? What did the new generation need from her? Were there three strikes?

List of times Moshe strikes something:

Done as a Miracle:

1. Exodus 7:20: Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood.
2. Exodus 8:13: Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff and struck the dust of the ground, and gnats came upon men and animals.
3. Exodus 17:6: Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.

4. Exodus 14:16: Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go through the sea on dry ground.

Done in Anger or Otherwise:

5. Exodus 2:12: Moses looked all around, and when he saw that there was no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

6. Numbers 20:11: Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. (It should be noted that this was supposed to be a miraculous event, but because Moses struck the rock in anger instead of speaking to it as commanded by God, it resulted in his punishment of not entering the promised land).

Rashi adheres to the view that Miriam, Moses, and Aaron were punished for the waters of Meribah incident (Numbers 20:1-13). Although Miriam was already dead when this happened, Rashi often groups Miriam's fate with her two brothers. He implies that all three siblings shared communal responsibility in leading the Israelites and thus shared the punishment for Moses' mistake of hitting the rock instead of speaking to it.

Ramban (Nahmanides) also looks at the waters of Meribah, but he focuses more on the entire generation's sin, including the leaders, suggesting the collective responsibility the leadership held for the people's lack of faith.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th-century commentator, suggests that Miriam, like her brothers Moses and Aaron, didn't enter the land not so much as a result of a divine punishment but as a natural consequence of their roles as leaders of the generation that left Egypt – a generation destined to pass away in the wilderness.

Sforno, the 15th-century commentator, suggests that Miriam's punishment could be linked to the incident of 'Miriam and Aaron Speaking Against Moses' about his Cushite wife (Numbers 12:1-15). Although her punishment in the narrative was leprosy, Sforno extrapolates that her eventual fate of not entering the Promised Land could have been part of that punishment.