

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Chukat

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Barry Dolinger, Congregation Beth Sholom, Providence, RI

One of the central events in the entire Torah, the punishment of Moshe and Aharon, occurs in this week's reading. Moshe is commanded to take his staff, and Moshe and Aharon are commanded, "speak to the rock," (Numbers 20:8) in an effort to bring forth water and provide faith to an increasingly impatient and unsatisfied people. As we all know, things didn't go as planned, and Moshe and Aharon are condemned to an early death before reaching the Promised Land.

There are many different explanations of this seemingly harsh punishment provided in the *rishonim* and later commentaries. Rashi explains that the Moshe's sin and the resulting punishment are the result of his striking the rock; God's command was to speak to the rock, and "striking" was mentioned on this occasion. Others explain that the primary error was Moshe's statement, "[h]ear now you rebels, shall **we** fetch you water out of this rock?" The use of the word "we" implied that Moshe and Aharon were performing the miracle of their own volition, robbing God of the credit he was due. Other alternative explanations abound.

In his excellent series *Amittah shel Torah*, Rabbi Yitzhak Twersky convincingly argues that there were many related elements to the sin. A better understanding of the whole picture puts the sin and resulting punishment in the proper perspective. The people of Israel had consistently made the mistake of denying the divinity of their mission,

instead assuming that Moshe and Aharon were at the lead. During the incident of the golden calf, the people referred to Moshe as "the man" who had brought them out of Egypt. In fact, it was this initial characterization which necessitated a replacement for Moshe upon his supposed loss on the mountaintop in the first place. Afterwards, it was Korach and his companions who questioned Moshe's inability to lead the people to the land of Canaan. "Is it a small thing that **thou** hast brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, and dost **thou** also make thyself a prince over us? Moreover, **thou** hast not brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of the fields and vineyards: wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up" (Numbers 16: 13-14). Here, Korach is criticizing Moshe for his failures, willfully ignorant of the fact that is indeed God's mission, with Moshe merely acting as messenger.

In this week's reading, the trend continues. Explicitly identifying themselves as sympathizers with Korach's complaint, the people proclaim, "[w]ould that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! And why have **you** brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there? And why have **you** made us come up out of Mitzrayim, to bring us into this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates, nor is there any water to drink" (Numbers 20: 3-5). The people express their regret at not having joined Korach's

rebellion, and then echo his complaints almost verbatim.

It is in this context that a teachable moment presented itself. Miriam had just passed away, and God wanted to reinforce the message that no mortal had taken the people out of Egypt, tasking them with a special historical mission and a land all their own. The death of one of the members of the family of Moshe and Aharon was the perfect time to reinforce the notion of the mortality of the leadership and the pre-eminence of God in history. This was especially necessary given the fevered pitch of the community's complaints. Therefore, God commanded Moshe to speak to the rock, as the miracle would be more obviously from God, and clearly not the product of Moshe's own action. It is in this context that Moshe's use of the term "we," combined with the more natural of the rock completely undermined God's plan and served to reinforce the people's erroneous beliefs. Moshe's staff was to be used as an agent of instruction, pointing to God as the author of miracles; instead, it suggested the opposite.

With this understanding, the "harsh punishment" meted out to Moshe and Aharon no longer seems as arbitrary, but rather a cogent response to the situation that was. To enter the land of Israel, the people would need to clearly understand that it was God who had sent them on a divine mission, and that the observance of his commandments and fulfillment of his ideals was their *raison d'être*. Having Moshe and Aharon die without entering the land was now necessary as the ultimate reinforcement of this point. This would be the only way to demonstrate to the people that Moshe and Aharon had not decided

individually to leave Egypt and enter Canaan, and that they possessed no special supernatural powers. God was the driving force behind it all.

In our current religious climate, there is a fundamentally disturbing trend that is growing by the day. Reverence for leadership has grown into something dangerous, and what started out as an upright respect for those who chose piety and study has become perverted at the core. In the modern day, the trend to idolize Rabbis to an excessive degree has grown, and has even contaminated more moderate streams of Orthodox observance that would seem naturally averse to such pressures. People regularly engage in conversations focused entirely on the merits of individual leaders, and leaders themselves often focus on their own "kavod" in ways that seem self-serving and disingenuous. As religious leaders in positions of power, it is incumbent upon us to take to heart the central lesson of this week's reading. Our job is to point to God and explain why honor is His. Idolizing a particular individual necessarily detracts from the honor due to God; the time is long past to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction. To the extent that respect for the teachers of God's law detracts from our focus on the divine, then respect has gone too far and its purpose entirely uprooted. May we continue to advance a style of leadership that doesn't disproportionately focus on the honor due ourselves, and remember that our primary mission is not to promote our own leadership but to promote the leadership of our Father in heaven. Shabbat Shalom!

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