

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Chukas

Water, Action and Vision

The Meshech Chochmah's discussion of the episode of *Mei Meriva* is comprised of three separate parts.

PART I: TWO TYPES OF BLESSING

When Bnei Yisrael arrive at Kadesh and find themselves without water, Hashem instructs Moshe:¹

וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מֵיִם מִן הַסֶּלֶעַ וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאֶת בְּעִירָם

You shall take out for them water from the rock and give drink to the assembly and to their animals.

In the event, the Torah² describes the water coming out in the following way:

וַיֵּצְאוּ מֵיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשָּׂא הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם

Abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank.

These two pesukim seem largely similar. In fact, however, they are qualitatively different:

The highest form of blessing from Hashem does not take the form of abundant produce, but rather of greater blessing *within* the produce. This elevated form of blessing is referred to in the beginning of Parshas Bechukosai,³ which describes the blessings that will accrue to Bnei Yisrael if they are faithful to the Torah: “וְאָכַלְתֶּם לֶחֶמְכֶם לְשִׂבְעַ – *You will eat your bread to satiety,*” which Rashi explains to mean “אוכל קמעא ומתברך במעיו – *One eats [but] a little and receives blessing in his insides.*”

It was in this elevated way that Bnei Yisrael were meant to have received the water on this occasion. As such, their experience while drinking would have been very different

1 Bamidbar 20:8.

2 Pasuk 10.

3 Vayikra 25:5

from that of their animals; for it would be a reflection of their spiritual level and indeed, a spiritual experience in itself. Therefore, when commanding Moshe to take water from the rock, Hashem did not mention “abundant water,” just “water,” for the blessing at that stage was not to have been one of quantity, but of quality. Moreover, the pasuk concludes “וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֶדְהָ וְאֶת בְּעִירָם.” The Hebrew word “את” is not easily translated, but it has a meaning and function – it designates the object that follows it. Therefore, Hashem’s command to Moshe mentions the word “את” twice – one for the assembly and another for their animals – indicating a separate designation for each, for these were indeed meant to be two different types of drinking.

However, when the bringing forth of water failed to attain the spiritual level intended for it, the blessing within the water assumed the lower, quantitative form. Therefore, when describing the water as it came out, the pasuk says, “abundant water came out,” indicating a shift in the blessing from quality to quantity. Moreover, the pasuk concludes with the words “וַתִּשְׁתְּ הָעֶדְהָ וּבְעִירָם” – *the assembly and their animals drank.* This phrase does not contain any words that might denote a distinction between the drinking of the people and that of the animals, for at that stage, there was none.

PART II: CAUSE FOR ACTION

R’ Yosef Albo in his *Sefer Ikarim*⁴ has a most fascinating approach to understanding the criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu at *Mei Meriva*. According to Rav Albo, when Bnei Yisrael came to Moshe complaining that there was no water, Moshe should have responded by demanding that Hashem produce water from somewhere – even without being commanded to do so! Had he done this, Moshe would have caused a public sanctification of Hashem’s name by demonstrating that a righteous person can exert control over nature, for Hashem fulfills the will of those who fear Him.

Numerous commentators raise a basic question on this approach. There had been many previous occasions similar to this one where Bnei Yisrael were in need of either food, water or salvation, yet Moshe did not act of his own accord but rather waited for directions from Hashem. Examples of this are: the splitting of the Red Sea, the earlier episode of drawing from a rock,⁵ manna falling from Heaven and many more. According to Rav Albo’s approach, why was Moshe never punished on those occasions? Why was *Mei Meriva* different?

The Meshech Chochmah prefaces his answer to this question by pondering the above idea itself. *Why* would Moshe never act of his own accord in a time of need for Bnei Yisrael? We find that other prophets would actively bring miracles about, including Moshe’s own disciple, Yehoshua, who famously demanded that the sun and moon stand still in order to allow for the Jewish People to conclude their battle.⁶ Similarly, Shmuel demanded that rain begin to pour in the middle of summer as part of his rebuke of the Jewish People and Eliyahu prayed that a fire descend from Heaven in order to refute the priests of Baal.⁷

The answer lies specifically in the superiority of Moshe’s level of prophecy over that of all other prophets. As a rule, when a prophet receives prophecy, his entire body is

4 Maamar 4, perek 22.

5 See Shemos 17:5.

6 See Yehoshua perek 10.

7 Melachim I perek 18.

overcome and loses its strength. As such, it is clear that the prophet himself was not the source of any Divine power, but rather, has received it from Hashem. Moshe's prophecy, however, was unique in that it took place while he was in full possession of his faculties, as the pasuk⁸ states that Hashem spoke to Moshe "as one would speak to his fellow". This being the case, there was a concern that if Moshe would bring about a miracle of his own accord, it could be ascribed to some independent source of divine power granted him by Hashem. For this reason, Moshe was careful never to allow an opening for such a misunderstanding to occur and hence he never initiated a miracle but rather waited for instructions from On High.

The one exception to this rule was the episode of Korach and his men, where Moshe asked that the ground open up and swallow the instigators in order to prove that he was indeed an emissary of Hashem. Why did Moshe allow himself to ask for a miracle on this occasion? The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, is that in that episode, Korach was specifically claiming that Moshe was no better than them, "for the entire congregation is holy," and that he was not even faithfully representing Hashem's wishes, Heaven forbid. Under such conditions, there was certainly no worry that people would mistake Moshe as a deity and hence there was nothing preventing Moshe from asking for a miracle, as did the other prophets.

However, once Moshe had asked for a miracle during the revolt of Korach, he opened himself up to criticism for not subsequently doing likewise at the *Mei Meriva*, even though things had "returned to normal" in terms of the people's complete acceptance of him as Hashem's emissary. For now, if he would fail to initiate a miracle, people would say, "he called in a miracle for his own honor but not for our wellbeing!" constituting a desecration of Hashem's Name. This is notwithstanding the exceptional circumstance that pertained during Korach's time. This, says the Meshech Chochmah, is the answer to the question raised on Rav Albo's approach, namely, why although Moshe had never been criticized or punished for not initiating a miracle to help the Jewish People prior to this point, he was nevertheless punished for it on this occasion.

PART III: BETWEEN SEEING AND HEARING

It is clear from a simple reading of the pesukim describing this episode that the goal was for Moshe to bring forth water from the rock specifically through speaking to it, and not by other means, such as hitting it. Why was this so important?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The experience of the Jewish People when receiving the Torah at Har Sinai is described with the words,⁹ "וְכָל הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת" – *And the entire people saw the sounds,* which Chazal¹⁰ explain to mean, "שהיו רואים את הנשמע" – *They saw that which is [normally only] heard.*" Part of Hashem's plan at *Mei Meriva* was not only to provide water for the people, but also to replicate the level of "seeing that which is heard" which they experienced at Sinai! The reason is that Moshe was shortly thereafter to re-establish the covenant between Hashem and the Bnei Yisrael.¹¹ Hence,

8 Shemos 33:11.

9 Shemos 20:15.

10 Mechilta ibid.

11 As presented in Devarim perek 28.

the goal was for them to experience the elevated level of connection with Hashem's Word that they had attained at Sinai upon which the covenant was originally established. Additionally, it was especially important for Bnei Yisrael to "see" Hashem's voice and the way that the rock responded to it, in order to take to heart that they should likewise heed His Word.

Chazal state¹² that Moshe's level was such that "שכינה מדברת מתוך גרונו – *The Divine Presence spoke from within his throat.*" Therefore, by speaking to the rock on Hashem's behalf, Moshe would give Bnei Yisrael an opportunity to see Hashem's Word. This is the meaning of Hashem's instruction to Moshe:¹³

וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֶּלֶעַ לְעֵינֵיהֶם

Speak to the rock before their eyes.

In other words, the people were meant not only to see Moshe speaking to the rock, but also to see the words that he said to it! However, in the same way that the vision experienced at Sinai required the people to prepare themselves for it, here, too, Moshe was meant to instruct the people to prepare for such a vision, for without the necessary preparation, they would not witness it.

In the event, however, Moshe reacted to the people's contentious complaining and judged that they were not worthy of this lofty experience. Therefore, he only addressed their faculty of hearing: "שְׁמַעוּ נָא הַמְרִים – *Listen now, you rebels.*"¹⁴ The result was that Bnei Yisrael did not succeed here in seeing Hashem's word, as they had done at Sinai. Moreover, with this element absent, Hashem's word did not have the effect of bringing water from the rock and hence, Moshe was forced to hit it. This was Moshe's mistake on that occasion, which the Meshech Chochmah emphasizes was only considered a mistake on the spiritual level of Moshe, but would not have been so considered for anyone else.

This is the meaning of Hashem's rebuke to Moshe and Aharon subsequent to this episode:¹⁵ "יֵעָן לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי." These words are not to be translated as "Because you did not *believe* in Me," but rather, "Because you did not *cause others to believe* in Me." Had Moshe instructed the people to prepare to see Hashem's Word, the effect of that experience would have strengthened their faith in Hashem and in Moshe as His emissary.¹⁶

12 Zohar Parshas Pinchas.

13 Bamidbar 20:8.

14 Pasuk 10.

15 Pasuk 12.

16 In light of the Meshech Chochmah's explanation, perhaps we can understand why Moshe's punishment for this mishap was that he could not enter Eretz Yisrael. Numerous mefarshim explain that the question of Moshe entering the land was dependent on the expectation that the people would be able to stay there permanently. Thus, we find references to Moshe being barred from entering the land as early on as the episode of the meraglim, which also weakened the connection of the people to the land (See Seforno and Ohr HaChaim to Devarim 1:37). In our instance, too, perhaps had the people's faith been strengthened through the experience of seeing Hashem's Word and all that that represented, they would have entered the land with a higher level of faith which could have assured them of success in staying there permanently. Without this boost, the level upon which they entered the land was not one which could assure permanence and hence, Moshe could not enter under those conditions.