

Waters of Strife: The Price of Leadership

By: Rabbi Yanky Tauber

One of the most puzzling passages in the Torah is the story of the Waters of Strife, in the wake of which G-d decreed that Moses would die in the desert and would not enter the Land of Israel.

A hundred generations of Torah scholars, beginning with Moses himself and continuing with the sages of the Midrash, the biblical commentaries and the Chassidic masters, struggle with this enigmatic chapter. As we speak, someone is writing a "Parshah piece" that searches for some explanation of the event, or at least a lesson to be derived from it.

But first the facts (as related in Numbers 20:1-13):

After traveling for forty years in the wilderness, the people of Israel arrive in Kadesh in the Zin Desert, on the border of the Holy Land. There is no water, the people are thirsty, and as they are wont to do in such and similar circumstances, they complain to Moses. It is not a pretty sight. "If only we had died," they rage, "when our brethren died before G-d! Why have you brought the congregation of G-d to this desert, to die there, us and our cattle? Why have you taken us out of Egypt -- to bring us to this evil place...?"

Moses calls on G-d, who instructs him to "take the staff, and gather the people, you and Aaron your brother. And you shall speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will give its water." When all are assembled before "the rock," Moses addresses the people: "Listen, rebellious ones! Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Moses raises his hand and strikes the rock twice with his staff. Water gushes forth, and the people and their cattle drink.

Whereupon G-d says to Moses and Aaron: "Because you did not believe in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel; therefore, you will not bring this congregation into the land I have given them."

What did Moses do wrong? What was the sin that warranted such a devastating punishment?

The commentaries search the text for clues. **Rashi** (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105) points out that G-d instructed Moses to *speak* to the rock, whilst Moses *struck* it. Thus he failed to "sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel" (extracting water by speaking would have been a greater miracle).

Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 1135-1204) has a different explanation: Moses' failing was that he got angry and spoke harshly to the people (his "Listen, you troublemakers!" speech).

18 June | 7 Tammuz

Parashat Chukat

Shabbat Begins: 9:07 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:27 pm

(The Chassidic master **Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Barditchev** (1740-1810) has an interesting insight here: Rashi's and Maimonides' explanations, says the Barditchever, are two sides of the same coin. A *tzaddik* is not only a leader of his people but also the master of his environment. These two roles are intertwined, the latter deriving from the former. If a leader's relationship with his people is loving and harmonious, then the physical world, too, willingly yields its resources to the furtherance of their goals. But if his influence is achieved through harsh words of rebuke, then he will find it necessary to do battle with nature at every turn and forcefully impose his will on the physical world.)

Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270) finds difficulty with both explanations. If Moses wasn't supposed to strike the rock, he argues, why did G-d tell him to take along his staff? The Torah repeats this fact, further emphasizing that "Moses took along the staff from the presence of G-d, as He had commanded him." In light of G-d's instructions to Moses on a previous occasion to extract water from a rock by striking it (see Exodus 17:6), was it not reasonable for Moses to assume that the staff was to serve a similar function in this case? (Unless G-d was setting him up for this -- but more on that later.) As for Maimonides' explanation, there were other instances in which the Torah tells us (more explicitly than in this case) that Moses got angry, and for apparently less justification. If no punishment was decreed in those cases, why now?

Nachmanides offers his explanation: Moses erred in saying to the people, "Shall we then bring forth water for you from this rock?" -- words that can be seen to imply that extracting water from a rock is something that Moses does, rather than G-d. The moment a leader assumes an identity of his own and his accomplishments are attributed to him personally -- the moment he comes to embody anything other than his people's collective identity and their relationship with G-d -- he has failed in his role. (Nachmanides finds support for his explanation in G-d's opening words to Moses, "Because you did not believe in Me..." -- implying that this was a failure of faith rather than a lapse of obedience or a surrender to anger.)

But there is one common denominator in these and the numerous other explanations offered by the commentaries: the implication that whatever the problem was, it wasn't really the problem. Basically, G-d is getting Moses on a technicality. In his arguments with G-d Moses senses this, in effect saying to G-d: "You set me up!"

The text supports his complaint. Forty years earlier there occurred the incident of the Spies, in which the generation that came out of Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai revealed themselves to be unwilling and unable to progress to the next stage of G-d's plan -- to enter and take possession of the Holy Land. At that time, the Torah recounts, G-d decreed that the entire generation (all males above the age of 20) would die out in the desert. With the sole exception of two men. "Except for Caleb the son of Yefuneh and Joshua the son of Nun" (the two spies who resisted the plot of their ten colleagues -- Numbers 14:30).

18 June | 7 Tammuz

Parashat Chukat

Shabbat Begins: 9:07 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:27 pm

Moses, who craved to enter the Holy Land with every fiber of his being, was not guilty of the sin of the Spies, so some other pretext had to be found. Since "with the righteous, G-d is exacting as a hairsbreadth," it wasn't impossible to find a pretext. But G-d had already determined 40 years earlier that the entire generation -- Moses and Aaron included -- would not enter the Land. "This is a plot that you contrived against me," the Midrash quotes Moses saying to the Almighty.

Indeed, why? If Moses was innocent of his generation's sin, why was it decreed that he share their fate? There is a poignant Midrash that offers the following parable:

A shepherd was given the king's flock to feed and care for, and the flock was lost. When the shepherd sought to enter the royal palace, the king refused him entry. "When the flock that was entrusted to you is recovered, you, too, will be admitted."

The original plan was that the 600,000 whom Moses took out of Egypt should enter the Land. But that generation remained in the desert. You are their leader, said G-d to Moses. Their fate is your fate.

This message is implicit in G-d's words to Moses immediately following his striking of the rock: "... therefore, you will not bring this congregation into the land I have given them." From this the Midrash derives: "*This* congregation" you will not bring in; *that* congregation you will. "This congregation" -- the generation whom Moses confronted at the rock -- was not Moses' generation. His generation were buried in the desert.

When *they* will enter the Land, G-d is saying to Moses -- and they will, when the Final Redemption will redeem all generations of history -- you will lead them in.

The content in this page is produced and copyrighted by www.chabad.org

18 June | 7 Tammuz

Parashat Chukat

Shabbat Begins: 9:07 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:27 pm