

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Chukas

A Missed Opportunity – The Tragedy of Mei Meriva

קח את המטה והקהל את העדה ואתה ואהרן אחיך ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם ונתן מימיו
והוצאת להם מים מן הסלע והשקית את העדה ואת בעירם

Take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes and it shall give forth its water; and you shall draw out for them water from the rock and give drink to the congregation and to their animals (20:8)

BACKGROUND AND SOME QUESTIONS

A completely new layer of understanding regarding the episode of the Mei Meriva and its ramifications is found in the writings of R' Dovid Tevel of Minsk.¹ Taking the approach that the mistake in this incident was that Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, as instructed, we still need to ponder:

- ▷ Why that was hitting the rock considered such a tragic error, given that, ultimately, both are obvious miracles?
- ▷ Additionally, if hitting the rock was the last thing Moshe was to do, why was the first thing he was told in our verse was *to take his staff*?
- ▷ In the event, verse 11 states that he hit the rock twice. How are we to understand that Moshe not only veered from Hashem's instructions by hitting the rock, but also then *repeated* the exact same act?

VERSE EIGHT – AND SOME MORE QUESTIONS

Before answering these important questions, we need to consider some more, which will come from taking a careful look at verse 8:

1. There seems to be a double reference to the water coming out of the rock: First the verse says “וְנָתַן מִיָּמָיו – and it shall give forth its waters,” and then it says “וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם – and you shall draw out water.” How can Moshe draw water out of the rock if it has already given its water?
2. In the first phrase, the reference is to “מִיָּמָיו – its water,” while in the second phrase it simply says “מַיִם – water.” What is the difference between these two terms?
3. What is significance of Moshe being told “וְהִשְׁקִיתָ – and you will give drink to them”? Once the water has emerged, presumably the people can drink for themselves. Indeed, verse 11

¹ One of the primary disciples of R' Chaim of Volozhin, Derashos Nachlas David drush 4.

- which describes the event simply says “וַתִּשֶׁתּ הָעֵדָה – *the congregation drank*”!
4. Verse 8 refers to the congregation and their animals with the phrase “אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאֶת בְּעִיֲרֵם”, whereas verse 11 which describes these two groups drinking refers to them as “הָעֵדָה וּבְעִיֲרֵם”. What is the difference in connotation between these two groups accompanied by the word “את” or without it?

Important questions on this crucial verse!

MOSHE’S WORDS TO THE ROCK

The verse where Moshe is instructed to speak to the rock does not specify exactly what it was he was meant to say. However, in the Midrash,² we find the following:

אמר לו: שנה עליו פרק אחד או הלכה אחת והוא מוציא מים מן הסלע

Hashem said to Moshe: recite a perek (chapter) or halachah in its proximity and that will draw out water from the rock.

This is a most unusual situation. Moshe is told that the means through which he is to extract water from the rock is not by instructing it to do so in Hashem’s name, but rather by speaking words of Torah next to it! What is the meaning behind this specific method? Additionally, we note that the words of Torah Moshe is to recite on this occasion are “*a perek or a halachah.*” Both of those terms denote a section of *Torah Sheba’al Peh* – the Oral law; the terms used for *Torah Shebichtav* – the Written Law – are “*parsha and pasuk*” (chapter and verse). Why is the area of Torah through which Moshe will draw out water specifically *Torah Sheba’al Peh*?

TORAH, BREAD AND WATER

R’ Tevel prefaces his explanation in the following way. We find that the Torah is compared both the bread and to water. The Alshich explains that these two metaphors relate to the two areas of *Torah Shebichtav* and *Torah Sheba’al Peh*, respectively:

- ▷ Bread corresponds to *Torah Shebichtav*, for like bread, which is the staple food for the body, the words of the Torah themselves provide sustenance for the soul.
- ▷ Water corresponds to *Torah Sheba’al Peh*, whose laws accompany the written Torah like water accompanies bread. Additionally, in the same way that water is not only ingested in the form of a drink accompanying the bread, but it is also mixed in to the bread itself, rendering it fit for consumption. Likewise, in addition to laws that are pure Oral tradition, the *Torah Sheba’al Peh* also gives definition and clarification to the words of the written Torah, allowing them to be digested.

However, the matter goes deeper than that. For the connection between these entities and the respective areas of Torah is not merely one of *correspondence*, but one of *derivation*.

The full understanding of the idea, mentioned in the Zohar,³ that “Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world,” is that the Torah is not just the blueprint *based off which* Hashem created the world — it is also the energy *with which* He did so! As Rav Chaim of Volozhin explains,⁴ creation exists on many levels, from the loftiest and most spiritual to the lowest and most mundane. All levels of Creation are connected to each other as a chain, with the higher spiritual level serving in the role of the “soul” or life-force animating the lower level, and so on.

2 Yalkut Shimoni Parshas Chukkas sec. 763.

3 Parshas Terumah 161a.

4 Nefesh HaChaim 4:10.

The first and loftiest entity to emanate from Hashem was the Torah, which then became the Divinely-charged life force for all lower levels of Creation. In other words, the creation of the physical world was *the conversion of Torah energy into physical matter*. In the words of the Zohar: “The Torah is the light of all worlds — and their life, sustenance, and root.”

In terms of our discussion, therefore, we will appreciate that bread is a manifestation of *Torah Shebichtav*, while water is a manifestation of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*.

Of course, after having undergone so many transitions through innumerable descents through the realms of existence, it is not an easy matter to perceive the Torah within the bread that derives from it. However, there was a period when this was indeed possible.

MOSHE AND THE MANNA

The Gemara⁵ informs us that the manna fell in the wilderness in the merit of Moshe, while the water was provided in the merit of Miriam. Although these are both outstanding merits, nevertheless, there is a significant difference between them. As we know the manna had lofty spiritual properties, for example, it was absorbed entirely within the body, producing no waste. The reason for this is that the person who functioned as the conduit through whom the manna descended was Moshe Rabbeinu. Since Moshe's own physical existence was elevated to the point where it attained an exalted spiritual quality, allowing him to achieve an unparalleled level of prophecy and connection to the Divine, so, too, the food that he was instrumental in bringing down had similar properties. This is the reason the manna was able to taste like whatever the person wanted it to. In the same way that the totality of existence all derives from the One Creator, so too, the closer something is to the root of existence, the more variety is contained within one entity.

The implications of this idea go further. Since Moshe was able to allow bread to come into the world at a level where it was closer to its root existence, the Torah which forms that root was more discernable within the bread. This means that in addition to nourishing the people of Israel spiritually, it also enabled them to ingest and embed the concepts of Torah into their systems! This will give us a completely new understanding of the statement in the midrash which says:

לא ניתנה תורה אלא לאוכלי המן

The Torah could only be given to those who ate the manna.

The ability for the people to connect intimately and essentially with the Torah was provided by consuming bread whose Torah component was still present in a highly recognizable way.

MOSHE AND MIRIAM

However, as we have noted, bread relates specifically to the area of *Torah Shebichtav*, so that the manna which fell in Moshe's merit was able to forge a connection between the people and that area of Torah. The water that they drank, on the other hand, which relates to *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, was provided through the merit of Miriam.⁶ Seeing as she did not partake of the unique spiritual level of Moshe, the well for which she was a conduit likewise produced water of a much more physical nature. Since it was significantly more detached from its Torah source, we find that the people found it more difficult to absorb and connect with the Oral law as they did with the Written law.

5 Taanis 9a.

6 Taanis ibid.

All of this brings us to our parsha. When Miriam died, the water ceased, and it then fell upon Moshe to bring it back. Based on our discussion, we will realize that this was a historic opportunity. For what was now able to happen was not only that the people would receive water once again, but seeing that Moshe was the one in whose merit it would be returning, there was an opportunity to provide water for them *on a level equivalent to that in which he had provided bread for them*. If this happened, it would fundamentally shift their relationship with *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, allowing them to absorb it as fully as they already did with *Torah Shebichtav*!

With this in mind, let us return to Hashem's instructions to Moshe, as related in verse 8.

WATER FROM SPEECH AND FROM ACTION

We will now appreciate the significance of Moshe drawing out the water via the medium of speech as opposed to that of action. Since the water he is looking to access is that which is discernably close to its source in the Oral Torah, this is something that will require the spoken word to bring it about. Additionally, it is not just the spoken word generally that will be required, but a very specific type of words. This is why the Midrash says that Moshe was to "recite a *perek* or *halachah* in its proximity." In order to draw out the water close to its source which is rooted in the area of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, the words he recited had to be from that area of Torah, specifically!

At the same time, it is also true that it is not only the people who require water; it is necessary for their livestock also, as stated in the verse. Now, we will appreciate that the animals had no need of drinking water with a dominant *Torah Sheba'al Peh* element – normal water would do just fine. It thus emerges that, on this occasion, Moshe was to draw out *two different forms of water* from the rock:

- ▷ Elevated *Torah Sheba'al Peh* water for the people.
- ▷ Normal drinking water for the animals.

For this reason, the idea of water coming forth from the rock is mentioned twice in the verse: "וַתֵּן מִיָּמֶיךָ וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם – *it will give forth its water and you shall draw out water,*" reflecting these two different types of water. Moreover, the water for the animals is referred to as "מִיָּמֶיךָ – *its [the rock's] water,*" for it represents a miraculous profusion of the type of moisture that naturally resides in a rock in trace form, i.e. normal water. Relative to this, however, the pure "מַיִם – *water*" mentioned in the second phrase refers to water in its purer form that is closer to its spiritual source, in a way that only Moshe could extract it. Indeed, for this reason, Moshe's role as the one who would "*give them to drink (וְהִשְׁקִיתָ)*" is emphasized, as his role was critical in accessing water on that level.

Moreover, we can further understand why the two groups that are to drink are separated through the word "*es*" – "אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאֶת בְּעִירָם," as they constitute two categorically different types of drinking what are effectively two different levels of water.

Additionally, whereas the water for the people had to be drawn forth specifically by means of Torah speech, the water for the animals could be accessed via the more "standard" trigger-action of striking the rock. *That* is why Moshe was commanded to take the staff, for although he was not to use it for the first type of water, he would need it for the second!

This then, was the plan, and it was indeed a historic opportunity to concretize the Jewish people's relationship with *Torah Sheba'al Peh*. What remains for us to try and understand is, in light of all this, why Moshe decided not to speak to the rock, thereby forfeiting this opportunity.

MOSHE'S WORDS TO THE PEOPLE

When Moshe assembles the people in front of the rock, he says to them:

שִׁמְעוּ נָא הַמְרִים הַמֶּן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצִיא לָכֶם מַיִם

Listen now, ye rebels, shall we draw forth water for you from this rock?

What is the meaning of this question, and how does it form the background to Moshe proceeding to hit the rock?

Moshe understood that in order for the people to attain an *enhanced appreciation* of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, they needed to have a *basic orientation* towards receiving his words. In their present state, however, Moshe found them to be fundamentally incompatible with receiving any message from him. Thus, he challenges them on this point, calling them "מְרִים" which is commonly translated as "rebels", but more literally translates as "teachers". By addressing them in this way, Moshe was noting that in their current state they were more inclined to teach than to learn. As such, he judged that to draw out the higher form of water would be a waste, and perhaps even a negative, gesture.

Therefore, Moshe did not speak to the rock, but rather hit it, in order to bring forth normal water for everyone. Moreover, we now understand why he hit the rock *twice*, for in addition to the regular water which he was to draw out for the animals through hitting the rock, he then hit it again to draw out more water for the people. The result of these two acts of hitting was "וַיֵּצְאוּ מֵיִם רַבִּים" – *an abundance of water came out*," but it was all the same type of water. This meant that when the people and their animals proceeded to drink, it was the same type of drinking. Hence, the verse describes this by saying, "וַתִּשְׁתְּ הָעֶדָה וּבְעִירָם" – *the people and their livestock drank*," without any dividing term between them.

CONCLUDING WORDS

It turns out that with Moshe's decision to hit the rock, an opportunity was lost to connect the Jewish people with *Torah Sheba'al Peh* which could have altered the course of their very history. In this context, Moshe's mistake was that he judged the people too harshly, taking their contentious demeanor as an indication of a fundamental incompatibility with *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, making any enhancement of that connection impossible.

It is worthwhile noting in conclusion, however, that while the focus of the discussion regarding this episode tends to be on Moshe's error, in whatever way we understand it, the final words of this section serve to restore some perspective:

הֵמָּה מֵי מְרִיבָה אֲשֶׁר רָבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת ה'

They are the Waters of Contention, where the Bnei Yisrael contended with Hashem.⁷

With these words, the Torah is reminding us that although on some level Moshe did indeed make a mistake, for which he paid dearly, that mistake did not exist in a vacuum. It was provoked by the contentious way the Bnei Yisrael approached him. As such, we will only do full justice to this incident by taking to heart, not only Moshe's mistake, but also that of the people. This is especially true when we consider that, in our own experience, we are significantly more likely to find ourselves in situations where we will need to avoid repeating their mistake than repeating Moshe's.

7 Verse 13.