

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah interrupts its narrative of the events that befell the Jewish people in the desert with the description of a commandment that admittedly has no rational human understanding in logical terms. Even the great King Solomon, the wisest and most analytical of all humans, was forced to admit that understanding this parsha of the Torah was beyond his most gifted intellect and talents.

If the Torah is meant to instruct us in life and its values, to improve and influence our behavior and lifestyle and to help us achieve our goal of being a holy people then why insert this parsha in the Torah when it can seemingly have no practical impact on our daily life or broaden our understanding of G-d's omnipresence in our lives?

Though there is a section of Mishna devoted to the laws and halachic technicalities of the sacrifice of the "red cow" it does not deal with the underlying motives for the existence of this commandment and it also does not address why this parsha is inserted in the midst of the description of the events that occurred in the desert to the generation of Jews who left Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai.

We have historical record and description in the Mishna and from non-rabbinic sources as to the actual performance of the commandment in Temple times. This comes as a reminder of our necessary obeisance to G-d's commandments even if they are not always subject to actual human understanding. Yet, some glimmer of comprehension is demanded by us to make this parsha meaningful to us.

I think that perhaps the Torah comes to point out the very fact that human life is in fact always irrational and that human behavior many times defies any logic or good sense. How could the generation that left Egypt and witnessed the revelation at Sinai complain about food when there was adequate Heavenly food? How could they prefer Egypt or the desert itself over living in the Land of Israel? And how could Moshe's and Aharon's own tribe and relatives rise against them in defiant and open rebellion?

Are these not basically incoherent and irrational decisions with a terrible downside to them? And yet they occurred and continue to recur constantly in Jewish and general life throughout history. In spite of our best

efforts and our constant delusion that we exist in a rational world, the Torah here comes to inform us that that is a false premise.

If everyday life defies logic and accurate prediction then it is most unfair and in fact illogical to demand of Torah and G-d to provide us with perfect understanding of commandments and laws. The Torah inserts this parsha into the middle of its narrative about the adventures of the Jewish people in the desert to point out that the mysteries of life abound in the spiritual world just as they do in the mundane and seemingly practical world.

One of the great lessons of Judaism is that we are to attempt to behave rationally even if at the very same time, we realize that much in our personal and national lives is simply beyond our understating. © 2013 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There are differing opinions concerning the meaning of "hok" (commonly translated as statute), the type of law discussed at the beginning of this week's portion. (Numbers 19)

Some maintain that "hok" is a law that although not understood today, one day in the future will be understood. The most mainstream approach to the meaning of "hok," is that it is a law that does not and will not ever have a reason besides the fact that it is a decree from G-d. For this reason alone, it must be kept. In the words of the Talmud "It is an enactment from Me, and you are not permitted to criticize it." (Yoma 67b)

The idea that a law must be observed even if it has no rationale, runs contrary to the modern, critical approach to law-that everything must have a reasonable explanation. However, this mainstream approach to hok is at the very core of the Jewish legal process.

That process is based on a belief in Torah mi-Sinai, the law given by G-d at Sinai to which the Jewish people committed itself. Torah mi-Sinai is a form of heteronomous law, a structure of law that operates independent of any individual or group.

Torah mi-Sinai reflects a system of ethics that comes from G-d. Halakha (from the root halakh, "to go,") is not random; it rather guides us, and is the

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mechanism through which individuals and society can reach an ideal ethical plateau. In the words of King Solomon: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." (Proverbs 3:17) One of the challenges of halakha is to understand how this law contributes to the repairing of the world (tikkun olam).

This system of G-d ethics differs from ethical humanism. Ethical humanism is solely based on what human beings consider to be proper conduct. Yet, this can be a dangerous approach to deciding law. Human thinking can be relative. What is unethical to one person is ethical to another. Freud is purported to have said, "When it comes to self deception, human beings are geniuses."

If however, the law at its foundation comes from G-d, it becomes inviolate. No human being can declare it null and void. Heteronomous law assures that one does not succumb to one's subjective notions or tastes when the law does not suit her or him. Therefore the law ought to be kept even when its ethical underpinnings are not understood.

And this in no small measure is why the idea of "hok" is so central. It reminds us of the limits of the human mind. As Rabbi Elie Munk points out: "An essential component of wisdom is the knowledge that man's failure to understand truth does not make it untrue." © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Take the staff... and speak to the rock..." (Numbers 20:8) One of the most important aspects of Jewish life which characterizes our generation is the empowerment of women, in political, social and even religious spheres. Many years ago, in a lengthy private meeting (yehidut), the revered Lubavitcher Rebbe told me that the greatest challenge facing Orthodox Jewry was the position of women in society - and our halachic response to what was then a newly-found acceptance of female "equality" within Western culture.

The question remains whether women's greater involvement in Torah learning and teaching will produce

a different dimension, or at least a different emphasis, to the quality of Torah which is emerging. I believe the answer to this query may be found in this week's portion of Hukat.

I would like to begin this commentary with a different but connected issue in our portion: the sin and punishment of Moses. The children of Israel arrive at the wilderness of Zin, settle in Kadesh, Miriam dies and the people complain bitterly over the lack of water (Numbers 20:1, 2). Rashi immediately notes the connection: so long as Miriam was alive, a special well accompanied the Israelites on their journey. With her death, the well - and its water - was sorely missed. G-d instructs Moses to "take the staff... and speak to the rock."

The staff could symbolize Moses's brand of leadership, it may even have been the staff he used earlier to smite the Egyptian taskmaster. The rock may symbolize the Jewish people, a stiff-necked nation, hard and stubborn as a rock, quick to kvetch and ripe for rebellion (so explains Rabbenu Tzadok in his Pri Tzadik commentary).

Moses, however, strikes the rock, as G-d had bidden him to do in similar circumstances a year before (Exodus 17:1-7). In this instance, however, he is excluded from entering the Land of Israel because he strikes the rock rather than speaking to it (Numbers 20:7-13). Why the distinction, and why such a harsh punishment? The use of a rod, or a scepter, implies regal authority, domination and control. By the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites had suffered 210 years of subjugation at the hands of Pharaoh, a totalitarian tyrant.

What they required was a benevolent and ethical but strong leader. After so many years of slavery, a lack of leadership would send them into the kind of panic which had pushed them into the orgies of the golden calf. Hence, just following the splitting of the Red Sea, G-d instructs Moses to use his leadership staff and strike the rock.

Now, however, after a full year of freedom, G-d would have expected Moses to have rejected the power of the staff to gain the obedience of the Israelites and to have utilized instead the persuasiveness of the word to win their fealty and faithfulness. Hence G-d instructs Moses to speak to the rock - the stubborn Israelites - rather than to strike it.

Moreover, Moses has by now received the second Tablets, which included the Oral Law (Exodus 34: 28), the hermeneutic principles which empowered the people to become G-d's partners in interpreting His words in every generation. Speech invites dialogue. G-d wants Moses to realize that as the Israelites matured, they required a different brand of leadership. Instead of the scepter of authority and control, they required the speech of the Oral Law. Then, the Torah, which is always compared to water, will come forth from them, from that very stubborn "rock" of a nation.

After all, it's that same stubbornness which energizes commitment, enduring commitment, even unto death, the commitment of the Israelites to the Torah in which they have become invested by means of the Oral Law.

This incident of Moses's sin and punishment is sandwiched between Miriam's death and an account of a well this Yonatan Ben-Uziel identifies as the return of the well of Miriam: "And from there [the Israelites traveled] to the well; this is the well regarding which the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather the nation and I shall give them water.' Then all of Israel sang this song; concerning the well, they sang to it" (Numbers 21:16, 17).

I believe the Bible is here presenting an alternative to Moses's brand of "scepter" or "striking" leadership; it is Miriam's brand of "singing" leadership. Words enter the mind of the other and hopefully lead to dialogue and debates; songs enter the heart and soul, leading to spirited and spiritual uplifting.

The Torah, the Oral Law which includes input from Israel, is referred to as a book, but also as a "song" (Deuteronomy 31:19). A book educates the mind; a song inspires the heart. A book speaks to individuals; a song moves the masses.

We met Miriam before at the splitting of the Red Sea.

After Moses sang his song to G-d and the Israelites repeated his words (Exodus 15:1), Miriam took a drum and inspired the other women to also take drums and initiate dancing (ibid 20). Moreover, Miriam rouses them all to sing together.

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains the prophetic verse, "Then [in the Messianic Age] there shall be heard... the sound of the groom and the sound of the bride." The sound of the bride (the woman) shall be the sound of Torah, but it will be different from the men's Torah; it will be a Torah of song, a Torah of heart, and of a Torah which includes everyone. © 2013 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Much has been written to try to explain/understand what Moshe and Aharon did to warrant the severe consequences of not being allowed to enter the Promised Land (20:12). My previous contributions to the discussion can be found at <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5764/chukas.pdf> (page 4), <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/chukas.pdf> (page 2) and <http://rabbidmk.wordpress.com/2010/06/17/parashas-chukas-5770/>; by taking a closer look at how Rashi either understood or built upon what Chazal said, I would like to further the discussion even more.

Rashi is trying to explain not just what Moshe (and Aharon) did wrong, but also why he (apparently speaking for Aharon too) asked the nation "can we

bring forth water from this rock" (20:10) if water had flowed from it constantly before Miriam's death; why Moshe hit the rock (20:11) rather than speaking to it (which is what G-d had commanded; 20:7); and why he hit it twice (20:11). From Rashi's commentary on 20:10 and 20:11, the following picture emerges: G-d commands Moshe to speak to the rock so that it will resume giving forth water, but Moshe couldn't figure out which rock he should speak to (as it was no longer easily distinguishable from other rocks). While searching for the right rock (G-d said to speak to "the rock," i.e. the same one that had previously supplied the nation with water), the nation asked him why it mattered so much which rock Moshe spoke to; since any rock giving forth massive amounts of water would be miraculous, G-d could use any rock to perform His miracle. (In the Midrashim, some accused Moshe of knowing which rocks could naturally give water, saying that he was searching for such a rock, and challenged Moshe to use a different rock.) Moshe responded by calling them "rebels" and telling them (by asking a rhetorical question) that he can only use the rock that G-d had specified. Thinking they found the right rock, Moshe and Aharon spoke to it, but nothing happened. After (further) consultation (between Moshe and Aharon), they thought that perhaps the reason nothing happened was because they had to hit also the rock, just as Moshe had done shortly after they left Egypt (Sh'mos 17:6). When they returned from their consultation, they ended up by the right rock (unknowingly, as had they realized it was a different rock they likely would have tried speaking to it first), and Moshe hit it. Only a few drops of water came out, so Moshe hit it a second time, whereupon much water flowed from it.

Several questions arise from this description of the events. First of all, why did G-d want Moshe to speak to the rock? What can be gained from talking to an inanimate object, and why was it preferable to hitting it (as Moshe had done, appropriately, decades earlier)? As Ramban points out, the miracle is no greater if water comes streaming out of a rock that is spoken to than if it comes from a rock that is hit. Secondly, if the rock was now indistinguishable from other rocks, shouldn't G-d have told Moshe where the right one was? What was the point of having Moshe try to figure out which one it was, thereby opening the door for the tragic consequences that followed? Also, didn't the nation make a valid point? Why did Moshe insist that only the right rock would work? Even if Moshe was correct in insisting that he follow G-d's instructions (which included talking to a specific rock), why did G-d insist that it had to be the same rock that had been the nation's water source until now rather than performing the miracle on a different rock?

Earlier this year (<http://rabbidmk.wordpress.com/2012/10/11/parashas-bereishis-5773/>), I discussed how G-d always, or almost always, works within the

laws of nature, laws that He set up/created. Even "miracles" work within His natural laws, so much so that G-d had to make a stipulation (as it were) with His creation that it would do certain things (such as the sea splitting) which would otherwise be against its nature -- in essence making these "exceptions" part of its "nature" (see Rabbeinu Bachye on Sh'mos 14:27; according to Radak on B'reishis 2:1, there are rare exceptions that do break the laws of nature). One of the ten "miraculous" things that G-d created right before Shabbos during the week of creation (Avos 5:6) was the "mouth of the well," the miraculous water source that followed the nation throughout the desert. Since this "miracle," that this rock would supply enough water for the nation in the desert, was one of the "exceptions" pre-set into creation, obviously Moshe couldn't talk to just "any" rock, it had to be this specific rock.

It is also obvious, if the nation questioned why Moshe was insisting on finding the right rock, that they didn't understand this, and didn't realize that there was little difference between the "hidden miracles," what we call nature, and the "blatant miracles" which seem to break the laws of nature (see Ramban on Sh'mos 13:16). [Those who accused Moshe of knowing which rocks naturally produce water didn't understand this either; that they thought anything could happen "naturally," without G-d, meant that they needed a lesson in how G-d really runs things.] Having lived for decades under the protection of G-d's "clouds of glory," eating the manna that fell from heaven daily, and drinking water that flowed from the miraculous well, the nation became accustomed to "blatant miracles," and needed to be taught that even though life would be very different once they crossed into the Promised Land (see Netziv on Bamidbar 20:8 and 20:12), things would be no less "miraculous." By "hiding" the "miraculous" rock from Moshe and making him search for it, G-d was creating a teachable moment, and a conversation about how miracles work (both the blatant and hidden ones) should have resulted. Moshe and Aharon were supposed to talk "about the rock," using the opportunity G-d had specifically set up for them to explain how G-d "constantly renews His acts of creation" through the hidden miracles that manifest themselves in every aspect of life.

However, rather than calmly "talking about the rock" when the nation asked why Moshe and Aharon were insisting upon using the same rock, Moshe responded out of frustration and anger, telling them "because G-d said so." Even though ultimately that is the reason why he was doing it, the opportunity to "sanctify G-d's name" by explaining why G-d said so, and in the process teaching them that G-d is not just behind the "blatant miracles" but works through life's everyday "hidden miracles," was lost.

Although it would be difficult to suggest that this was Rashi's intent (if for no other reason than that Rashi says Moshe did speak to a rock, albeit the wrong

one, without giving us any indication that Moshe said the wrong thing), it is possible that Moshe thought he was fulfilling G-d's command to "speak about the rock" when he asked the nation if they thought he and Aharon could bring forth water from the wrong rock. The problem was that he didn't explain why he couldn't use the wrong rock, thereby not causing the nation "to believe in [G-d]" (see Rav Saadya Gaon on 20:12), i.e. to fully recognize that G-d is behind everything, even the "hidden miracles."

Had the nation learned this lesson, they would have been far less likely to attribute "natural things" to other deities, even after crossing the Jordan River and transitioning to living "naturally." As a result of failing to "sanctify G-d" by teaching them that G-d is constantly performing the miracles that we call "nature," Moshe and Aharon were punished by not being allowed to enter the Promised Land, where this transition from constant "blatant miracles" to constant "hidden miracles" occurred. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

HARAV AVIGDOR NEBENZAHL

Netiv Aryeh

“**Z**ot chukat HaTorah asher tziva Hashem lemor, daber el Bnei Yisrael veyikchu elecha parah adumah temima" "This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying 'speak to the children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow'" (Bamidbar 19:2). By the expression "THIS is the decree", the Torah is teaching us that parah adumah is THE only mitzvah that can be regarded as a chok (a mitzvah whose purpose cannot be understood). Although Rashi later on does provide us with explanations in the name of R' Moshe HaDarshan, these are not full explanations because they relate only to how the parah adumah atones for the chet haegel, the fact is that this mitzvah had already been given at Marah prior to the chet haegel. There must therefore be explanations beyond those provided by R' Moshe HaDarshan.

Although mitzvot are divided into classifications of mitzvot, mishpatim, edot, and chukim, implying that there are several other chukim in the Torah, this is only because that is the way our feeble minds view them. The fact that we may not understand why we do not eat certain animals does not render it a chok -- it is our minds that are unable to grasp the true meaning. A wise man such as Shlomo Hamelech was able to understand the meanings behind all the mitzvot aside from parah adumah, regarding which he said: "I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me" (Kohelet 7:23). In fact, the Gemara (see Yoma 14a) limits this lack of understanding further, claiming that it applied to only one detail. (R' Akiva and the Sages differ as to precisely which detail of this mitzvah Shlomo was unable to comprehend). A human being, albeit not any human being, does have the ability

to understand other mitzvot and it is because this mitzvah is the only true chok that the Torah introduced this mitzvah with the words: "ZOT chukat haTorah" "THIS is the decree of the Torah".

Why does the Torah tell us "zot chukat HATORAH" "this is the decree OF THE TORAH", rather than "this is the decree of the parah adumah"? Clearly there is a message in the parah adumah that applies to the entire Torah. The entire Torah, in fact, is one large chok -- not only that one particular detail which escaped Shlomo Hamelech's comprehension -- and even that which we think we understand we must realize is only on a particular level. In addition, the Torah is one solid unit that cannot be divided. If even a single detail were to be omitted from the Torah, it would no longer be the Torah of Hashem. If even one mitzvah is not understood than the entire Torah is not understood, even those mitzvot which we think are simple and easy to understand are actually not understood at all.

The Torah is teaching us that even though we may feel that we understand the reasons behind certain mitzvot, we must always be aware that our understanding is not complete. For example, we are commanded to eat matzah on Pesach to remind us of the exodus from Egypt. There must be a deeper explanation because Avraham Avinu ate matzah on Pesach, long before there was even an exile, let alone an exodus.

We are told regarding the Torah: "only G-d understands its way" (Iyov 28:23), a human being cannot fully grasp the Torah's myriad halachot and the reasoning behind them. Just as Hashem is infinite so is His wisdom. We were created with limitations and cannot hope to even approach His level of understanding. Hashem, through His great kindness, gave us the Torah in order to provide us with some insight into His wisdom. Each and every one of us has the ability to reach a degree of understanding in accordance with our own level -- a child in the first grade has a certain perception, while Moshe Rabenu's comprehension was far greater and is even greater today after spending three thousand years learning in Gan Eden. R' Shimon bar Yochai understood the Torah on his level, as did the AR"i on his. None of them, including Moshe Rabenu were able to fully grasp the entire Torah, for "only G-d understands its way". The Torah is the spirit of Hashem which is beyond our grasp. The only reason we have even the slightest ability to comprehend is because we were created betzelem Elokim in the image of G-d. Although Avraham Avinu was able to attain the entire Torah on his own, we must be aware that it is only a small portion of it, the deeper meanings only Hashem can understand.

The Kotzker Rebbe uses the pasuk "the Torah of Hashem is perfect" (Tehillim 19:8) to explain how far beyond our grasp the Torah is. He explains that no matter what level of learning we may have attained, no

matter how many chiddushim we may have come up with, we have not even scratched the surface of the Torah -- it remains as pure and untouched, as perfect as it was before. Man cannot even begin to approach Hashem's wisdom.

"Zot chukat haTorah" therefore comes to teach us that just as even the wisest of all men was unable to understand the meaning behind the parah adumah, we are not able to fully grasp the meaning of any of the mitzvot of the Torah. © 2013 HaRav A. Nebenzahl and Netiv Aryeh

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

“**A**nd Moshe and Aharon gathered the Assembly (the whole of the Jewish people) before the rock and he (Moshe) said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels.' " (Numbers 20:10). Was Moshe correct to call them rebels?

The Midrash tells us that whoever serves as a leader of the Jewish people must be very careful how he addresses them. According to one opinion -- because Moshe said, "Hear now, you rebels," he was told, "Therefore, you shall not bring the assembly into the Land which I have given them" (Bamidbar 20:12).

The prophet Yeshayahu (Isaiah) said to the Almighty, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). For this statement he was severely punished.

The prophet Eliyahu (Elijah) said to the Almighty, "I have been very zealous for the Lord G-d of hosts; for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant" (1Kings 18:10). He was severely punished for his statement.

Rabbi Avuhu and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish were traveling to a certain town. Rabbi Avuhu asked Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, "Why should we go to a place of blasphemers?" Upon hearing this, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish strongly reprimanded Rabbi Avuhu and told him, "G-d does not want us to speak evil about the Jewish people." (Yalkut Shimoni 764) *Based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2013 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Nature dictates that children look somewhat like their parents, fruits look like other similar fruits, and animals act in predictable ways. But if that were always true, then how do the laws of the Red cow, brought in Parshat Chukat, make sense? How could the impure be purified, while the pure become impure? How do these things make sense, if there is to be order in nature and creation?

The Mofet Hador explains that we too were all given opposing forces. We were given the Torah, which tells us of these and other 'contradictions', and we were

given the brain that wonders about all of it. The Parsha starts by helping us deal with these, and other issues. 'This is the law of the Torah'...our laws make sense, even if we don't understand them. We're limited in our wisdom. In fact, King Solomon, who was given all the knowledge, couldn't understand the laws of the Red Cow, and said, "It is far from me". The logic is there, but none can discern it, and that too is part of nature. So when we come to a fork in our lives, and we're deciding whether to do what we know we should or what we think we could, we should remember this lesson: Our minds might be limited in understanding, but the Torah's wisdom is eternal. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is one of the most perplexing, even disturbing, passages in the Torah. Moses the faithful shepherd, who has led the Israelites for forty years, is told that he will not live to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land.

No one has cast a longer shadow over the history of the Jewish people than Moses -- the man who confronted Pharaoh, announced the plagues, brought the people out of Egypt, led them through the sea and desert and suffered their serial ingratitude; who brought the word of G-d to the people, and prayed for the people to G-d. The name Israel means "one who wrestles with G-d and with men and prevails." That, supremely, was Moses, the man whose passion for justice and hyper-receptivity to the voice of G-d made him the greatest leader of all time. Yet he was not destined to enter the land to which he had spent his entire time as a leader travelling toward. Why?

The biblical text at this point is both lucidly clear and deeply obscure. The facts are not in doubt. Almost forty years have passed since the exodus. Most of the generation who remembered Egypt have died. So too had Miriam, Moses' sister. The people have arrived at Kadesh in the Zin desert, and they are now close to their destination. In their new encampment, however, they find themselves without water. They complain. "If only we had perished when our brothers perished in the presence of the Lord. Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die? Why did you take us up from Egypt to bring us to this vile place, where nothing grows, not corn or figs, not vines or pomegranates? There is not even any water to drink." The tone of voice, the petulance, is all too familiar. The Israelites have hardly deviated from it throughout. Yet suddenly we experience not déjà-vu but tragedy: "Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and fell on their faces. The glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'Take the staff, and then with Aaron your brother

assemble all the community and, in front of them all, speak to the rock and it will yield water. You shall bring forth for them water from the rock, for them and their livestock to drink.'"

Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Then he and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock, and said to them, "Listen to me, you rebels. Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?"

Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed forth in abundance, and they all drank, men and beasts.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not lead this assembly into the land which I promised to give them."

What had Moses done wrongly? What was his sin? What offence could warrant so great a punishment as not to be privileged to see the conclusion of the mission he had been set by G-d?

Few passages have generated so much controversy among the commentators. Each offers his own interpretation and challenges the others. So many were the hypotheses that the nineteenth century Italian exegete R. Shmuel David Luzzatto was moved to say, "Moses committed one sin, yet the commentators have accused him of thirteen or more -- each inventing some new iniquity!" One modern scholar (R. Aaron Rother, Shaarei Aharon) lists no less than twenty-five lines of approach, and there are many more. The following are the most significant:

Rashi, offering the simplest and best-known explanation, says that Moses' sin lay in striking the rock rather than speaking to it. Had Moses done as he was commanded, the people would have learned an unforgettable lesson: "If a rock, which neither speaks nor hears nor is in need of sustenance, obeys the word of G-d, how much more so should we."

Rambam (Moses Maimonides) says that Moses' sin lay in his anger -- his intemperate words to the people, "Listen to me, you rebels." To be sure, in anyone else, this would have been considered a minor offence. However, the greater the person, the more exacting are the standards G-d sets. Moses was not only a leader but the supreme role-model of the Israelites. Seeing his behaviour, the people may have concluded that anger is permissible -- or even that G-d was angry with them, which He was not.

Ramban (Nachmanides), following a suggestion of Rabbenu Chananel, says that the sin lay in saying, "Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" -- implying that what was at issue was human ability rather than Divine miracle and grace.

R. Joseph Albo and others (including Ibn Ezra) suggest that the sin lay in the fact that Moses and Aaron fled from the congregation and fell on their faces,

rather than standing their ground, confident that G-d would answer their prayers.

Abarbanel makes the ingenious suggestion that Moses and Aaron were not punished for what they did at this point. Rather, their offences lay in the distant past. Aaron sinned by making the Golden Calf. Moses sinned in sending the spies. Those were the reasons they were not privileged to enter the land. To defend their honour, however, their sins are not made explicit in the biblical text. Their actions at the rock were the proximate rather than underlying cause (a hurricane may be the proximate cause of a bridge collapsing; the underlying cause, however, was a structural weakness in the bridge itself).

More recently, the late Rav Shach zt"l suggested that Moses may have been justified in rebuking the people, but he erred in the sequence of events. First he should have given them water, showing both the power and providence of G-d. Only then, once they had drunk, should he have admonished them.

Difficulties, however, remain. The first is that Moses himself attributed G-d's refusal to let him enter the land to His anger with the people, not just with himself: "At that time, I pleaded with the Lord, 'O Lord G-d, You have begun to show your servant your greatness and your strong hand... Let me cross over and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan, the fine hill country and the Lebanon.' But G-d was angry with me because of you..." Similarly, Psalm 106:32 states, "By the waters of Merivah they angered the Lord and trouble came to Moses because of them."

Second: however we identify Moses' sin, there is still a disproportion between it and its punishment. Because of Moses' prayers, G-d forgave the Israelites. Could he not forgive Moses? To deprive him of seeing the culmination of a lifetime's efforts was surely unduly harsh. According to the Talmud, when the angels witnessed Rabbi Akiva's death, they said, "Is this the Torah, and this its reward?" They might have asked the same question about Moses.

Third is the tantalising fact that, on a previous occasion in similar circumstances, G-d had told Moses to take his staff and strike the rock: precisely the act for which (for Rashi and many others) he was now punished: "The people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses, saying, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?' Then Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord answered Moses, 'Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.'"

It is with the deepest trepidation that one hazards a new explanation of so debated a text, but there may be a way of seeing the entire episode that

ties the others together and makes sense of what otherwise seems like an impenetrable mystery.

The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 5a) contains the following statement of Resh Lakish: "What is the meaning of the verse, 'This is the book of the generations of Adam'? Did Adam have a book? Rather, it teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Adam (in advance), each generation and its interpreters, each generation and its sages, each generation and its leaders."

One of the most striking features of Judaism is that it is not centred on a single figure -- a founder -- who dominates its entire history. To the contrary, each age gave rise to its own leaders, and they were different from one another, not only in personality but in the type of leadership they exercised. First came the age of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Then came Moses and his disciple Joshua. They were followed by a succession of figures known generically as 'judges', though their role was more military than judicial. With Saul, monarchy was born -- though even then, kings were not the only leaders; there were prophets and priests as well. With Ezra a new figure emerges: the 'scribe', the teacher as hero. Then came elders, sages, masters of halakhah and aggadah. During the Mishnaic period the leader of the Jewish people was known as Nasi (and later, in Babylon, as Resh Galutah or Exilarch). Chatam Sofer in one of his Responsa (Orach Chayyim, 12) notes that though the Nasi was a scholar, his role was as much political as educational and spiritual. He was, in fact, a surrogate king. The Middle Ages saw the emergence of yet more new types: commentators, codifiers, philosophers and poets, alongside a richly varied range of leadership structures, some lay, some rabbinic, others a combination of both.

Leadership is a function of time. There is a famous dispute about Noah, whom the Torah describes as 'perfect in his generations'. According to one view, had Noah lived in a more righteous age, he would have been greater still. According to another, he would have been merely one of many. The fact is that each generation yields the leadership appropriate to it. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) says that Ezra was worthy of bringing the Torah to Israel, had Moses not preceded him. In another passage (Menachot 29b) it says that Moses himself asked G-d to give the Torah through Rabbi Akiva rather than himself. One can speculate endlessly about the might-have-beens of history, but we are each cast into the world at a time not of our choosing, and we have no choice but to live within its particular challenges and constraints. For that reason, we do not compare leaders -- for there are no timeless standards by which to judge them. "Jerubaal in his generation was like Moses in his generation; Bedan in his generation was like Aaron in his generation; Jephthah in his generation was like Samuel in his generation."

Each age produces its leaders, and each leader is a function of an age. There may be -- indeed there

are -- certain timeless truths about leadership. A leader must have courage and integrity. He must be able, say the sages, to relate to each individual according to his or her distinctive needs. Above all, a leader must constantly learn (a king must study the Torah "all the days of his life"). But these are necessary, not sufficient, conditions. A leader must be sensitive to the call of the hour -- this hour, this generation, this chapter in the long story of a people. And because he or she is of a specific generation, even the greatest leader cannot meet the challenges of a different generation. That is not a failing. It is the existential condition of humanity.

The remarkable fact about Moses and the rock is the way he observes precedent. Almost forty years earlier, in similar circumstances, G-d had told him to take his staff and strike the rock. Now too, G-d told him to take his staff. Evidently Moses inferred that he was being told to act this time as he had before, which is what he does. He strikes the rock. What he failed to understand was that time had changed in one essential detail. He was facing a new generation. The people he confronted the first time were those who had spent much of their lives as slaves in Egypt. Those he now faced were born in freedom in the wilderness.

There is one critical difference between slaves and free human beings. Slaves respond to orders. Free people do not. They must be educated, informed, instructed, taught -- for if not, they will not learn to take responsibility. Slaves understand that a stick is used for striking. That is how slave-masters compel obedience. Indeed that was Moses' first encounter with his people, when he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. But free human beings must not be struck. They respond, not to power but persuasion. They need to be spoken to. What Moses failed to hear -- indeed to understand -- was that the difference between G-d's command then and now ("strike the rock" and "speak to the rock") was of the essence. The symbolism in each case was precisely calibrated to the mentalities of two different generations. You strike a slave, but speak to a free person.

Moses' inability to hear this distinction was not a failing, still less was it a sin. It was an inescapable consequence of the fact that he was mortal. A figure capable of leading slaves to freedom is not the same as one able to lead free human beings from a nomadic existence in the wilderness to the conquest and settlement of a land. These are different challenges, and they need different types of leadership. Indeed the whole biblical story of how a short journey took forty years teaches us just this truth. Great change does not take place overnight. It takes more than one generation -- and therefore more than one type of leader. Moses could not become a Joshua, just as Joshua could not be another Moses. The fact that at a moment of crisis Moses reverted to an act that had been appropriate forty years before showed that time had come for the leadership to be handed on to a new generation. It is a

sign of his greatness that Moses, too, recognised this fact and took the initiative in asking G-d (in Bemidbar ch. 27) to appoint a successor.

If this interpretation is correct, then Moses did not sin, nor was he punished. To be sure, the Torah uses language expressive of sin ("You did not believe in Me", "You rebelled against Me", "You trespassed against Me", "You did not sanctify Me"). But these phrases may refer, as several commentators suggest (see the tenth interpretation cited by Abarbanel, and the commentary of Luzzatto) not to Moses and Aaron but to the people and the incident as a whole. That would explain why Moses said that "G-d was angry with me because of you".

The fact that Moses was not destined to enter the promised land was not a punishment but the very condition of his (and our) mortality. It is also clear why this episode occurs in the sedra of Chukkat, which begins with the rite of the Red Heifer and purification from contact with death. We also understand why it follows on the death of Miriam, Moses and Aaron's sister. Law and narrative are here intricately interwoven in a set of variations on the inevitability of death and the continuity of life. For each of us, there is a Jordan we will not cross, however long we live, however far we travel. "It is not for you to complete the task," said Rabbi Tarfon, "but neither are you free to disengage from it." But this is not inherently tragic. What we begin, others will complete -- if we have taught them how.

Moses was a great leader, the greatest of all time. But he was also the supreme teacher. The difference is that his leadership lasted for forty years, while his teachings have endured for more than three thousand years (that, incidentally, is why we call him Mosheh Rabbenu, "Moses our teacher", not "Moses our leader"). This is not to devalue leadership: to the contrary. Had Moses only taught, not led, the Israelites would not have left Egypt. The message of the rock is not that leadership does not matter: it is that leadership must be of its time. A teacher may live in the world of ancient texts and distant hopes, but a leader must hear the music of the age and address the needs and possibilities of now.

The great leaders are those who, knowledgeable of a people's past and dedicated to its ideal future, are able to bring their contemporaries with them on the long journey from exile to redemption, neither longing for an age that was, nor rushing precipitously into an age that cannot yet be. And, as Moses understood more deeply than any other human being, the great leaders are also teachers, empowering those who come after them to continue what they have begun. © 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and toras.org