



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles-Venutra**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

**תשפ"ד Parshat Chukat**

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*Hello, Welcome!*

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

*Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.*

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

This week's portion, Chukat, relates the incident for which Moshe and Aharon were punished and not permitted to enter the promised land, Israel.

Just as they were about to enter the Land of Israel, the Jewish people's water supply ran out. But by then, they had been in the desert for 40 years! What had they been drinking until now?

Forty years earlier, soon after leaving Egypt, the Jewish people complained to Moshe that they had no water to drink, whereupon Hashem told Moshe (Exodus 17:5,6):

ה) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדוֹד אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶתְךָ מִזְקֵנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטֶּדֶף אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ  
בו אֶת הַיָּאֵר קַח בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ :  
ו) הִנְנִי עֹמֵד לְפָנֶיךָ שָׁם עַל הַצּוּר בְּחֶרֶב וְהִכִּיתָ בַּצּוּר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם וְשָׁתָה הָעָם  
וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל :

*“Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and in your hand take your staff with which you struck the river, and go. Behold! I'll stand before you at the rock in Horeb; you shall strike the rock, and water will come forth from it and the people will drink.” Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.*

This rock from which the water flowed rolled along with the Jewish people throughout their travels in the wilderness and continuously provided water for them and their cattle. The rock, the Midrash tells us, had perforations, and wherever the people camped, the rock turned into a well and enough water flowed from it to satisfy all their water needs.

This rock was called בארה של מרים - *“Miriam's Well”* because in her merit Hashem provided this miraculous well to the people. When Moshe's mother put him in a basket and placed him in the river, Miriam, his sister, accompanied him to see how Hashem's salvation would unfold. Because she waited by the water, she became the

source of water for the Jewish people as they journeyed from Egypt to Israel.

With Miriam's death (in this week's portion), the rock stopped giving forth water, suddenly leaving the Jewish people without any.

The agitated people approached Moshe and Aharon and, faulting Moshe for bringing them to such a desolate and difficult place, bitterly complained that they were thirsting for water, putting them in danger of dying of thirst.

Moshe and Aharon immediately went to the *אהל מועד*, the *Tent of Meeting*, and fell on their faces in prayer to Hashem, for water. Hashem's presence appeared to them, and this is what Hashem told them (Numbers 20:8-11):

ח) קח את המטה והקהל את העדה אֶתְּךָ וְאֶתְּךָ אֶתְּךָ וְדַבְּרָתָם אֶל הַסֵּלַע לְעִינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִיָּמֶיךָ וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מִיָּם מִן הַסֵּלַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ אֶת הָעֵדָה וְאֶת בְּעִירָם  
ט) וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמֶּטֶה מִלִּפְנֵי יְדֹד כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ  
י) וַיִּקְהֲלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת הַקְּהָל אֶל פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שְׁמְעוּ נָא הַמְּרִים הַמֶּן הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם  
יא) וַיִּגְרַם מֹשֶׁה אֶת יְדֹד וַיִּדֹּךְ אֶת הַסֵּלַע בְּמִטְהוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיִּצְאוּ מִיָּם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתֶּה הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם

*“Take the staff and gather the assembly, you and Aaron your brother, and **speak to the rock** before their eyes that it shall give forth its waters. You shall bring for them water from the rock, and give drink to the assembly and to their animals.” Moses took the staff from before Hashem as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation before the rock and said to them, “Listen now, rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff; abundant water came forth and the assembly and their animals drank.*

Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains the sequence of events as follows:

*The rock to which they were supposed to speak had settled itself among the other rocks, and, unable to identify it, Moshe and Aharon spoke to a different rock, the wrong rock, instead. When nothing happened, the Jewish people said to them, “What difference does it make which rock you bring the water from?” To this Moshe answered, “You wayward ones, can we bring water from a rock about which we were not commanded?”*

***Moshe hit the rock twice:*** *Why twice? Because the first time that Moshe struck the rock it brought forth only a few drops. Why? Because the Omnipresent did not order Moses to strike it but rather said, “speak to the rock.” But he mistakenly spoke to a different rock, which could not bring forth any water. They then said, “Maybe it is necessary to strike the rock as we did at the first such incident, (back in the Book of Exodus) as it said, ‘You shall strike the rock’.” They then chanced upon the correct rock, the one to which Moshe should have spoken, and struck it.*

As a result of this episode Hashem told Moshe and Aharon (12,13):

יב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדְךָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן יַעֲן לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
לְכֹן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקֶּהֶל הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם

*“Because you did not believe in me to sanctify me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore, you will not bring this congregation to the land that I have given them.”*

This is the entire event. Six verses in the Torah, yet so impactful. What exactly happened? What was the sin that both Moshe and

Aharon committed, and why was it so grievous that they suffered such a severe punishment?

And what did Hashem mean when He said, *“Because you did not believe in me?”* Is it conceivable that Moshe and Aharon did not believe in Hashem? Moshe spoke to Hashem whenever he wanted to, and Hashem Himself testified about Moshe, *“In my entire house he is the trusted one”* (Numbers 12:7).

Because the Torah does not clearly explain what exactly the sin was, the commentaries and Sages struggle mightily to determine exactly what sin they committed. The commentaries have many different and opposing opinions as to what exactly they did wrong.

Per Rashi, their sin was their striking the rock twice rather than speaking to it. This constitutes a sin because a miracle done with a physical act to activate constitutes a lower level miracle than one done with speech alone with no physical act. Thus, by hitting the rock, they publicly lowered the level of the miracle, compromising the maximum sanctification of Hashem’s name. This is what Hashem meant when He said, *“you did not believe in Me,”* viz, you did not believe that I would do the miracle with speech alone; you thought that you needed an action to activate the miracle.

Yet Rashi’s description of the events suggests that Moshe did nothing wrong. Since he couldn’t identify the correct rock and thus mistakenly spoke to the wrong one, what was he to do now? He was

unaware that the rock that presented itself later, which he actually hit, was the one that he was supposed to speak to in the first place.

Harav Leib Bakst ל"צ, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Gedolah Ateres Mordechai in Detroit, teaches a great lesson from this story.

When Moshe and Aharon returned from their first visit to Pharaoh, who increased the workload on the Jewish people by withholding the straw from them, Moshe complained to Hashem (Exodus 5:22): "Why did you send me? I have only made things worse for the Jewish people, and You haven't saved them!" Hashem responded to Moshe, "**Now** you will see what I will do to Pharaoh!" Rashi explains the full meaning of what Hashem told Moshe. "**Now** you will see, what I will do to Pharaoh, but in the future, when the Jewish people enter Israel, you will not see what I do to the seven nations who reside there!" It seems from this that Moshe was destined not to enter Israel from that moment. How do we reconcile this with what Hashem told Moshe now, namely, that the incident with the rock is what prompted Moshe's lack of entry into Israel?

Harav Bakst ל"צ explains that Moshe complained because he did not realize the expected result from his visit to Pharaoh. "I visited Pharaoh and he did not let the people go!" Moshe expected Pharaoh to release the people, but he didn't. Hashem responded to him, "Moshe, your job is to follow my instructions and do as you are told. It is not your job to achieve and complete the goal. I, Hashem, will take care of that when and how I see fit."

This is the same issue Moshe confronted here. He spoke to the rock and no water came forth. He had done what he was instructed to

do, after which he needed to stop, leaving the accomplishment of the goal, the procurement of water, to Hashem. Had he done so, he would have corrected his previous mistake and may even have been permitted to enter Israel. But when he hit the rock showing that he felt that *he* needed to bring forth the desired result, he showed that he had not learned his lesson and hence was not permitted to enter Israel.

This is a very powerful lesson for us. We often think that we need to be the ones to bring forth the desired result of a mitzvah that we do. If it doesn't actualize as we wanted and expected it to, we may resort to heroic or inappropriate means to make it happen. At the very least, we may get disillusioned when we have done everything right, yet nothing happens. Hashem says to us, "Don't resort to inappropriate means, and do not become disillusioned. It is your job to do what you can as you are told, but I am the one who rewards you with success in your actions and accomplishes what needs to be accomplished."

As noted, Rashi's explanation of Moshe and Aharon's sin is not the only explanation. Because the Torah doesn't clearly specify what they did wrong, except that they did not sanctify Hashem's name, many different opinions seek to define their sin.

The אור החיים (*Ohr Hachayim*, Rabbi Chayim Ben Itar 1696-1734), a commentary on the Torah, himself cites ten (!) different opinions of what that one sin was, and ultimately disqualifies all of them. He then proceeds to offer his own explanation of what they did wrong. There are even more opinions that he does not mention, all of which maintain that the others are in one way or another deficient,



and his is the only correct explanation of what the sin was. So far, I have studied over 20 different explanations, and there are many more.

But, did Moshe and Aharon commit over 20 different sins? Of course not! There was only one sin! So, what's going on here?

The only possible understanding of this plethora of opinions is that Hashem was deliberately vague, to "hide in plain sight," the mistake that Moshe and Aharon made. Because there are so many possibilities, we realize that we can't really know exactly what the sin was. Ultimately, it was something so slight that only for people on the high spiritual level of Moshe and Aharon would such a thing be considered a sin, and only they were able to appreciate what they did wrong. It would be inappropriate of us to think that Moshe and Aharon, two such holy people and Hashem's closest servants, blatantly acted against something that Hashem had told them. Such a thing is impossible. The commentaries also only mean that on Moshe and Aharon's exalted spiritual level, their conduct constituted a sin, and this is the lesson for us to learn on our level.

Another difficult question needs asking.

Moshe and Aharon had dedicated their lives to serving Hashem as leaders of the Jewish people. Moshe had put his life and future on the line many times in defense of the Jewish people, and Aharon worked day and night to bring and maintain peace among the people. These were Hashem's most precious people; so why couldn't Hashem cut His two chosen leaders a little slack and let them off easy? Granted, there was a sin, but why couldn't Hashem overlook it or forgive them for it?

The answer to this question has different levels.

On the most fundamental level, Hashem doesn't overlook or forget *anything* that we do, no matter how small and insignificant we may think it is. This applies to our good deeds and to our bad deeds. The correct understanding of this is that, in reality, there is no such thing as a small or insignificant deed. Every action that we do has enormous importance and consequences.

This concept is expressed in the Talmud (Baba Kama 50a) in the following statement:

אמר ר' חנינא כל האומר הקדוש ברוך הוא ותרן הוא יותרו חייו שנאמר  
הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט

*Rabbi Chanina said, "Whoever says that Hashem wantonly forgives transgressions, Hashem will wantonly forsake his life. For it says (Deuteronomy 32:4), "The Rock! - Perfect is His work, for all His paths are just."*

We may hear someone say, "Do it anyway! Don't worry, Hashem will forgive you!" Nothing could be farther from the truth. We are here in this world to earn our place in the world to come. *Everything* counts. More importantly, though, to enjoy the world to come's indescribable sublime pleasure, we may need to forgo some of this world's enticements.

Hashem had therefore determined that it would be better for Moshe and Aharon to suffer the consequences of their actions in this world (and not enter Israel), in order to receive their complete reward in the world to come, as to which Moshe and Aharon were completely on board. This is also why sometimes we see righteous people suffer in

this world. We understand that it is to enhance their place in the world to come by atoning for the few sins they may have done during their lifetimes.

To avoid punishment for our misdeeds, *teshuva* is always available to us, and Moshe did teshuva for this sin many times. Had Moshe been a “private citizen,” so to speak, Hashem would have forgiven him and let him fulfill his great desire to enter Israel. But because Moshe was also the eminent leader of the Jewish nation, he carried a different set of responsibilities.

In the beginning of the Torah portion of ואתחנן (Deuteronomy 3:23), Moshe entreated Hashem 515 times (the numeric value of the letters of the word ואתחנן) for permission to enter Israel. Hashem told Moshe to stop asking because, if he would ask one more time, Hashem would have to let him in, which would not be the best thing for the Jewish people. The Sages tell us that had Moshe brought the Jewish people into Israel, he would have built the Holy Temple, and, because *he* had built it, it would never have been able to be destroyed. This point is critical: If Hashem couldn't vent His anger on the sticks and stones of the Holy Temple, He would have had to vent it on the Jewish people themselves, which would have been a disaster. So, once again, Moshe sacrificed his own desire for the benefit of the Jewish people.

The Talmud states (Sotah 14a):

דרש רבי שמלאי מפני מה נתאוה משה רבינו ליכנס לא"י וכי לאכול מפריה הוא צריך או לשבוע מטובה הוא צריך אלא כך אמר משה הרבה מצות נצטוו ישראל ואין מתקיימין אלא בא"י אכנס אני לארץ כדי שיתקיימו כולן על ידי אמר

לו הקדוש ברוך הוא כלום אתה מבקש אלא לקבל שכר מעלה אני עליך כאילו עשיתם

*Rabbi Simlai taught, Why did Moshe want to go into Israel so badly? Was it to eat from its fruits or to get full from its goodness? Rather, Moshe said, "The Jewish people were commanded to do many mitzvot that are only applicable in the land of Israel. I want to go in so I can fulfill those commandments." Hashem responded, "Moshe, since all you want is to fulfill the mitzvot of the land of Israel, I will give you the reward as if you had done them."*

Each of the 613 mitzvot has a unique purpose and spiritually affects our soul in a different way. Moshe, not having had the opportunity to perform the mitzvot unique to the land of Israel, would be missing the spiritual growth inherent in each of those mitzvot and would find his soul lacking the spiritual benefits of those mitzvot. Hashem told him that because of his intense desire to fulfill those mitzvot, He would grant him the spiritual growth that he would have benefitted had he actually fulfilled them himself in Israel. Thus, although Moshe, in sinning, forfeited his physical entry into Israel for the sake of the Jewish people, he did not suffer personally; he received all the spiritual benefits as if he had actually entered.

The Midrash tells us:

מדרש רבה דברים - פרשה יא פסקה י  
אמר משה לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אם אין אתה מכניס אותי לא"י הניח אותי  
כחיות השדה שהן אוכלין עשבים ושותין מים וחיינן ורואין את העולם כך תהא  
נפשי כאחת מהן א"ל רב לך אמר לפניו רבש"ע ואם לאו הניח אותי בעולם הזה  
כעוף זה שהוא פורח בכל ארבע רוחות העולם ומלקט מזונו בכל יום ולעת הערב  
חוזר לקנו כך תהא נפשי כאחת מהן אמר לו רב לך

*Moshe said to Hashem: "Master of the Universe, if You do not permit me to enter the Land of Israel (as a person) let me be like an*

*animal in the field that eats grass and drinks water and sees the world around him. Couldn't I be like one of them?" Hashem answered, "You have enough!" Moshe once again asked Hashem. "Master of the Universe, can't You leave me in this world like a bird that flies to all four corners of the earth to collect food during the day and at night returns to its nest? Couldn't I be like one of them?" Once again Hashem responded, "Moshe you have enough."*

Harav Eliezer Menachem Shach זצ"ל (1899-2001) asks: When it came time for Moshe to conclude his life as a human being, he knew what awaited him in the World to Come. He was in heaven to receive the Torah and knew how things looked in Hashem's upper worlds. So, why would he want to remain in this world like a simple animal or bird? How could life as an animal or a bird compare to the reward that Moshe would receive in the World to Come?

Harav Shach זצ"ל answers: Every creature in this world proclaims the glory of Hashem, its Creator. The study of any creature in nature reveals the brilliance and wisdom of its maker. The flight of a bird is so complex and efficient that engineers in Boeing model the wings of their new planes after them, making them more fuel efficient by a third. Even the smallest bug is replete with ingenious innovations on how to procure its food and save itself from its predators.

Instead of reaping his just rewards for the life he lived in this world, Moshe Rabbeinu preferred to stay here as an animal or a bird and continue to bring honor to Hashem. Understanding that one's mission in this world is to bring honor to Hashem, Moshe was content to do so in any way possible, even as a creature, much less than a human being.

What an instructive and inspiring lesson for us. As long as we are alive, and despite our numerous foibles, we can still find ways to use our lives to bring honor to Hashem.