



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles
Study Guide

Parshat
Chukat – Balak
תשפג

Authored by Rabbi Avi Cohen
Partners Detroit

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Partners In Torah

Mission Statement:

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.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming!

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

This week we will read two portions, Chukat and Balak. In Chukat, the Torah relates the incident for which Moshe and Aharon were punished by not being permitted to enter the promised land, Israel.

It all started when the water supply for the Jewish people ran out. But by then, they had been in the desert for 40 years! What had they been drinking until then?

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 יְדֹדְךָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶתֶּךָ מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטֶּדֶךָ אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ בּוֹ אֶת הַיָּאֵר קַח בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַּכְתָּ :
ו) הִנְנִי לֹמֵד לִפְנֵיךָ שֶׁם עַל הַצּוּר בְּחֹרֵב וְהִכִּיתָ בַּצּוּר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם וְשָׁתָה הָעָם וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי זְקְנֵי 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 shall stand before you by 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 desert and continuously provided water for them and their cattle. The rock, the Midrash tells us, had perforations, and wherever the people camped, the rock became 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 source of

water to the people. When Moshe's mother put him in a basket and placed it in the river, Miriam, his sister, accompanied it to see how Hashem's salvation would unfold. Miriam was sure that Hashem would perform a miracle for her baby brother; in her mind, it was only a question of *what* that miracle would be. In her merit, for her confidence in Hashem as she waited by the water, she became the source of water for the Jewish people as they journeyed through the desert.

In this week's portion, Miriam had just died, and the rock stopped giving forth water, suddenly leaving the Jewish people without any.

They approached Moshe and Aharon and bitterly complained that they were thirsting for water. Their complaints faulted Moshe for bringing them to such a desolate place, thus placing them in danger of dying of thirst, and they faulted Hashem for taking them out of Egypt and putting them in such a precarious situation. Moshe and Aharon immediately went to the מועד אהל, the *Tent of Meeting*, and fell on their faces in prayer to Hashem, for water. Hashem's presence appeared to them, and told them (Numbers 20:8-11):

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

ט) ויקח משה את המטה מלפני דוד פאשר צוהו י) ויקהלו משה ואהרן את הקהל אל פני הסלע ויאמר להם שמעו נא המרים המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים יא) ויגרם משה את דוד ויך את הסלע במטהו פעמים ויצאו מים רבים ותשת העדה ובעירם

*“Take the staff and gather the assembly, you and Aaron your brother, and **speak** to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters. You shall bring forth 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 with his staff twice; 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 that they were supposed to speak to had settled itself among the other rocks. Moshe and Aharon couldn't identify it and spoke to a different rock, the wrong rock, instead. 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: The first time that Moses 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 Moshe mistakenly spoke to a different rock, which brought forth no water. They then said, “Maybe it is necessary to strike the rock as at the first such incident (in the Book of Exodus) as it says ‘You shall strike the rock’.” They then chanced upon the correct rock, the one to which Moshe should have spoken, and they struck it.

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

יב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדָד אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן יַעֲן לֹא הָאֲמִנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינַי בְּנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקֶּהֱל 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 here? 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).

There is no easy answer to any of these questions. But let’s begin by trying to ascertain exactly what their sin was. The Torah doesn’t clearly inform us, and the commentaries have many different (and opposing) opinions as to what exactly they did wrong.

According to Rashi’s explanation of the events, their sin was their striking the rock twice rather than speaking to it. A miracle done with a physical act to activate it is considered a lower-level miracle than one done with speech alone and no physical act. Thus, by hitting the rock, they lowered the level of the miracle; hence, the maximum sanctification of Hashem’s name was compromised. 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.

Rashi's description of the events, however, suggests that Moshe did nothing intentionally wrong. Since he couldn't identify the correct rock and mistakenly spoke to the wrong one, what was he to do now? Apparently, he was unaware that the rock that presented itself later, which he actually hit, was the one 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 has 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 because Moshe inappropriately questioned Hashem, he was destined not to enter Israel from that moment. How do we reconcile this with Hashem's punishment to Moshe now for hitting the rock instead of talking to it?

Harav Bakst ל"צ explains that Moshe complained because he did not immediately 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 right away, but he didn't! Hashem responded to him, "Moshe, your job is to follow my instructions and do what you are told to do. 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 that Moshe confronted here. He spoke to the rock and nothing happened. 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 would have been permitted to enter Israel. But when he hit the rock expressing 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. 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 alone am the One who rewards your actions with success and accomplishes through them 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, other than 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, 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.

Of course, Moshe and Aharon committed only *one* sin, yet there are over 20 possible sins suggested by the commentaries, each claiming the sin he identified is the correct one. How could that be? They certainly did not commit 20 sins!

It would seem that the understanding of this plethora of opinions is that Hashem was deliberately vague to hide in plain sight Moshe's and Aharon's mistake. There are, thus, so many possibilities that we realize that we can't really know exactly what the sin was. It was certainly 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

spiritual level, their conduct constituted a sin, and this is the lesson for us to learn on our level.

Another difficult question, however, needs to be asked.

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 slide by? 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, our Sages teach us that 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.

Therefore, Hashem had determined that it would be better for Moshe and Aharon to suffer the consequences of their actions in this world and not enter Israel to receive their complete reward in the world to come, and Moshe and Aharon were completely at peace with that. 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, we can always do *teshuva*, and Moshe did *teshuva* for this sin many times. If only Moshe were 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 enter Israel so badly? Was it just 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 that 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 perfects 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 effects 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, as if had he fulfilled them himself in Israel. Thus, although Moshe, in sinning, forfeited his entry into Israel for the sake of the Jewish people, he did not suffer personally, receiving all the benefits that he would have received had he actually entered.

Our Sages teach us that this concept applies to us as well. If a person wishes to perform a mitzvah, but is unable to do it for some reason, since he wishes he could do it, Hashem gives him credit as if he actually did it. So, for example, if I come across someone who needs charity and I would like to give him a hundred dollars, but I simply can't afford to give him so much money (but do give him whatever I can), Hashem will give me credit as if I gave him the hundred.

In summary, although we cannot know exactly what Moshe's sin was, we can still learn many valuable lessons from this episode in the Torah.