''Chukkat: "Was the striking of the rock so heinous?"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The striking of the rock by Moses, in defiance of God's instruction that he speak to it to bring forth water and miraculously slake the thirst of the Israelites, represents the nadir of Moses relationship both to his people and to his God.

> *The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon* [*of the fortieth year; cf. Nu. 33:36-38*]*, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died and was buried there. The people found themselves short of water, and they…quarrelled with Moses, saying, ''If only we had perished at the instance of the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!''* (Nu. 20:1-5).

There are several things to note: First, that Moses was grieving for Miriam, the beloved sister he had just buried. He was thus understandably distracted at this moment when God told him to speak to the rock. Secondly, the people acted most rashly in their intemperate denunciation of Moses.

The nation had known well enough how to sing a thanksgiving song for deliverance at the Red Sea, so why did they not take the initiative here at Kadesh and utter a communal lament, and pray to God, for Him to send water? Knowing of his grief, how did they justify turning on him so sharply when he was at his most vulnerable?

That the Israelites had their own rebellious agenda is clear from the fact that, although their problem was a shortage of water, they articulated their bitter complaint in terms of the fact that they had 'no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates' (20:5)! They were clearly

pouring out all the pent-up angst they had built up over the forty years in the desert upon Moses at a time when he was least able to deal with it.

So petrified by their onslaught were Moses and Aaron that they fled from the confrontation and verbal assault to take refuge in the Tent of Meeting where they fall on their faces in total anguish (See v. 6). It is not surprising, therefore, that Moses forgot that detail of God's instruction and struck the rock instinctively. Yet that was construed by God as such a terrible sin and dereliction of mission that He sentenced Moses – and Aaron to a slightly lesser degree - to a forfeiture of his life's ambition of leading his people into the Promised Land:

> *The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ''Because you did not trust me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.''*

But did Moses truly deserve such a punishment? What happened to God's insistence on 'an eye for an eye,' that a punishment must precisely fit the crime, and not exceed it? True, Moses did depart from a divine instruction, but the water was still provided – albeit through the instrument of the rod that God had told him to take with him! Peace was restored, and the people's outcry that they were going to die of thirst was stilled. God did provide the water, albeit in a less dramatic manner. So maybe Moses deserved a reprimand, but surely not such an excessive divine response!

And there is a further catalogue of extenuating circumstances that God might have taken into consideration. After all, much earlier, when the nation had faced an almost identical situation at Rephidim, God had specifically told Moses to take his staff and strike the rock to release its water! (See Ex.17:1-7). He had also instructed him on a number of further

occasions to take his staff and do miraculous things with it in order to convince people of His higher powers, such as converting it into a serpent (Ex. 7:9ff.), turning the water of the Nile into blood (Ex. 7:15-25), as well to use it – or Aaron's rod - as the instrument for a number of the other plagues (Ex. 8:12-15; 9:23; 10:13, 21-22). So, given his state of mind, and his past instructions, was not his involuntary reaction on this occasion excusable?

At first glance, the explanation that God gives to Moses and Aaron for their sentence does not seem totally to clarify the situation or justify the sentence: *Ya'an lo he'emantem biy **lehakdisheini** l'einey b'nei Yisrael* – 'It was because you were not faithful to Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel' (Nu.20:12). [Note the subtle play-on-words, between Kadesh, the place they were at, and ***lehakdisheiniy***!] The implication here is that, had Moses enabled the people to witness God's miraculous provision of water from the rock by speech alone, that would have been a potent demonstration of just how holy and great God was, and would have served to enhance that greatness immeasurably in the eyes of the nation.

But this is also problematic, for it begs the question regarding the Israelites - who had witnessed the Ten Plagues, the utter route of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, the Revelation of God at Mount Sinai, and the provision of the miraculous manna – as to whether they really needed one further, and much less dramatic, sign to instil faith and a sense of God's greatness! So, in what way did Moses let God down by striking the rock instead of speaking to it?

I would suggest that an answer is provided by noting that this episode in the Sidrah Chukkat is immediately followed by another related theme in the following Sidrah, Balak,

which describes the attempt of the heathen prophet Bilaam to curse and destroy the Israelites.

What links the two is the notion that either act - that of speaking or striking - may be employed as an agent of violence and destruction. They are both equally potent and interlinked weapons. Words are generally the precursors of violence and may be used to devastating effect to condemn, compromise, malign, and de-humanise others, to whip up envy, jealousy and hatred, and to incite one nation against another in the cause of subjugation or destruction. In the words of the psalmist:

'There is neither speech nor words whose sound goes unheard;
Their effect reverberates throughout the earth' (Ps. 19:4).

The word is even more potent than the sword. The sword can only be wielded by trained men. The word – in the form of poisonous and hateful slogans that morph into racist philosophies - is a drug that can enter the entire blood stream of a nation. The rabbis highlight the close similarity of sound between the Hebrew-Aramaic words for 'sword' and 'word.' They say, *sefer v'sa'if yardu k'ruchim min ha-shamayim,* "God's word came down from heaven wrapped together with a sword" (*Sifrei Eikev*, ch.40), an indication of the danger attendant upon the misuse and misrepresentation of God's word.

The people in the wilderness were without water. They panicked, thinking that God had withdrawn that life-sustaining necessity from them. Moses was meant to speak to the rock. We are not told what he was meant to utter, but we may surmise that it was a formula of efficacious petition that God had disclosed to him privately. The message that the Israelites were meant to take away from that experience was that God answers petitions and that holy words – notably those of prayer and Torah - were agencies of relief, grace, nourishment, wisdom, and pardon.

But Moses not only failed to convey that message; he struck the rock to secure water. He raised his fist and administered a blow, employing an act of violence, rather one of prayer, to elicit a divine response to the suffering of his people. And that was unpardonable. Moses elevated the sword to the level of the word, and failed thereby to convey a message that was central to God's desire for Israel and mankind: that peace is God's way; that the word is the only means of conflict resolution; and that any act of violence - even against a rock - is unacceptable. To do violence to nature, even in the cause of humanity's perceived needs, is an act of violence against the natural order, and against God's creative design.

Granted that, on many previous occasions, Moses had been told to wield his rod, but it is not for man to presume to read God's mind, or to assume that He is predictable. He knows what message needs to be forcefully conveyed to man at any given time, and when that message was not required. That this was the moment to convey to Israel the message of the potency of the word is clear from the context; for the entire Sidrah Balak is dedicated to precisely that issue: words as a means of either blessing or curse.

We are called upon to be sensitive to every nuance of God's word, revelation, or Torah law. And that is precisely the character of our rabbinic oral law which probes the meaning and implication of every letter of God's Torah. God's word is revelatory; it is not for man 'to add thereto or subtract from' (Deut. 4:2).

From this perspective, the punishment for Moses' act of striking the rock instead of speaking to it becomes understandable.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey