"*Chukkat*: The striking of the rock reconsidered"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

(Abridged from my chapter, "The striking of the rock and the sin of Moses and Aaron reconsidered." *Niv Hamidrashia*, vol. 18, 1980, pp. 100-113)

The sin of Moses and Aaron, and the episode of the striking the rock - instead of speaking to it as instructed (Nu. 20:7-13) - is among the most well-known of the biblical stories, as is their dire conjoint punishment:

> **7** The LORD said to Moses, **8** "Take the staff, and, together with Aaron your brother, assemble the community, and speak *(v'dibartem*) to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water. Thus you shall produce water (*v'hotzeita*) for them from the rock, and you shall provide drink (*v'hishkita*) for the congregation and their beasts."
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> **9** So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him. **10** He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" **11** Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his rod. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.
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> **12** But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to sanctify (*l'hakdisheiniy*) in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."
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> **13** These were the waters of Meribah,[a] where the Israelites quarrelled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.

Now, given that it was Moses alone who struck the rock (v.11) and that Aaron's role was subsidiary – as is also clear from the fact that God appeared to Moses alone with the instruction that he and Aaron should provide the water from the rock (See v.7) – Aaron's guilt remains problematic.

To determine the brothers' respective roles, and the precise nature of their sin, we contend that close attention must be paid to the number and person of the verbs employed in v. 8, and

– as we shall demonstrate – to an uncommon nuance of the verb *v'dibartem*, universally understood as "and you (plural) shall speak." It is also important to note that the bringing forth of the water to quench the thirst of the people is attributed to Moses alone, as indicated by the singular verbs, *v'hotzeita* and *v'hishkita* (v.9). However, if the *speaking* to the rock was to constitute the sole instrument for the releasing of its water, then surely the role of Aaron, in being an equal partner, by his speech, in the procuring of the water (as indicated by the plural form, *v'dibartem*: v.8), should also have been recognised by the employment of plural forms, namely, *v'hotzeit**em*** and *v'hishkit**em***!

Further difficulties regarding the sin involve the strange coincidence that both leaders should, on the spur of the moment, have countermanded the divine instruction to speak to the rock; secondly, the fact that, though it was Moses alone who struck the rock, the divine censure was addressed to them both, with both suffering the identical punishment (v.12); thirdly, that God viewed the striking of the rock as so heinous a crime as to deserve such an uncharacteristically harsh punishment - the shattering of their lives' dream of bringing the nation into the Promised Land – given that, on several previous occasions when Moses displayed a lack of faith in God's redemptive power, it did not elicit either divine censure or punishment (See Ex. 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:22; 6:12, 30; Nu.11:11-15, 21-22)!; fourthly, on a previous occasion – which we shall presently analyse – God told him to take the rod and use it to strike the rock and release the water within (See Ex. 17:5). However, in the episode under review, when his rod seemed to have had no part to play in the water procurement - but, to the contrary, became his veritable stumbling-block – God's instruction to Moses to take it with him (See v.9) seems astonishing!

This leads us to the inescapable conclusion that *God, all along, had intended Moses to strike the rock,* following the precedence of the previous occasion. This would explain why the act of striking is never referred to on any of the three occasions where the Torah speaks of their crime and punishment (See Nu. 20:12, 24; Deut. 32:51), and why the Psalmist even attributed that act to God!:

'He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them water to drink
as if from the great deep. He brought forth streams from a rock
And made them flow down like a river' (78:15).

A further psalm on this theme is even more mystifying:

'They roused Him to anger at the waters of Merivah,
And Moses suffered on their account,
Because they rebelled against Him
And he spoke rashly' (106: 32-33).

It goes without saying that 'speaking rashly' is nowhere indicated in the original account, and certainly does not connote a sin worthy of such an extreme punishment. It also makes no reference to any sin of Aaron, all of which indicates that, from the time of Moses to the period of the psalmist, no tradition had been preserved of either brothers' guilt having resulted from the act of striking the rock! The corollary of this is that we must look elsewhere for the sin of Moses and Aaron, which, in turn, will call for a re-interpretation of the crux verb, *v'dibartem*.

A careful reading of Nu. 20:1-11 reveals that Aaron's special duty was that of 'assembling the people', which probably involved stationing them in an orderly formation and preventing

a stampede to secure the water for which they and their animals thirsted. Moses is the one, as we have observed, who is to hold the rod and perform the crucial tasks of 'bringing forth water' and 'giving the congregation and their animals to drink.' When referring to Aaron's role and its implementation, the one verb, *k-h-l,* 'to assemble,' is used: *v'hakheil et ha-eidah attah v'aharon achicha* (v.8) *and va-yakhilu mosheh v'aharon et ha-kahal* (v.10) – with the clear implication that Aaron was merely to assist Moses in that task, and that, beyond that, he had no further responsibility. This again begs the question why he seems to have borne a heavier punishment than Moses, namely his premature death.

The verb *v'dibartem* is first employed in the context of the initial task given to both Moses and Aaron: *v'**hakheil** et ha-eidah attah v'aharon achicha **v'dibartem** el ha-sela l'eineihem* (v.8) - "you shall assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and you shall… (?)… to the rock before them."

Significantly, there is a secondary meaning to the semitic root *d-b-r,* one that is found in Aramaic in the sense of 'to arrange,' 'to lead,' and in Arabic in the sense of 'to follow on.' This underlies the word for 'wilderness,' *midbar,* whose root, *d-v-r,* clearly has nothing to do with 'speaking!' Jastrow's Aramaic dictionary (p. 278) suggests that this secondary meaning derives from the basic notion of the wilderness as a place where one may "lead" animals to pasture.

And we suggest that it is in this sense that we should translate our phrase *v'dibartem el ha-sela l'eineihem,* namely, "and you shall *lead the way* to the rock before them." This meaning is corroborated by a comparison with the details of the earlier episode of Moses' striking of the rock at Massah and Merivah (Ex. ch.17). The parallel structure of the two accounts is

almost identical, phrase for phrase, though with one notable exception: Whereas our account reads *v'dibartem el ha-sela l'eineihem,* the parallel statement in Ex. 17:5 has *avor lifnei ha'am* – 'lead the way before the people,' thus making it clear that it is precisely that meaning which applied in both passages, *and that it was God's precise instruction that Moses should strike the rock, for which reason he was told to take his rod with him.*

It goes without saying that our interpretation not only alters the core detail, but also the accepted Midrashic interpretations attending the episode. For justification, I appeal to Rashi's oft-repeated affirmation after quoting a Midrashic exposition, "but my purpose is to explain the literal sense of Scripture."

Our interpretation of *v'dibartem* also answers the problems we raised at the outset: It removes any suggestion that either Moses or Aaron was guilty of countermanding a divine instruction to speak to the rock; it accounts for the singular verbs – addressed to Moses alone - in the instruction to him to bring forth the water from the rock; it removes any issue of how they both might have unaccountably come to countermand some instruction to speak to the rock; and why the two were conjointly censured for a sin, when Moses alone was guilty of striking the rock. It does not explain, however, what was, in fact, their conjoint sin!

Our explanation assumes the basic unity of Nu. 20:1-14; and it is within the first six verses that we detect the clue to the true sin of Moses and Aaron.

In these verses, the fear and panic that seized the people as they found their supplies of water running out prompted them to 'strive with Moses,' and vent their anger on him. This was not surprising, given that they were in the Wilderness of Zin, an area with a hot climate, only

sporadic and fitful rainfalls, and just a few scanty springs supporting small oases here and there, and with no perennial river. The people knew only too well, therefore, that only a miracle could save them; and the two men capable of achieving the miraculous were making no move in that direction. What was preoccupying the minds of Moses and Aaron is hinted at in the opening verse of the section, namely the death of their beloved sister, Miriam. Their real sin, we suggest, was their abdication of responsibility and leadership at that crucial moment in the desert of Zin when the people were distracted and terrified by the prospect of death by thirst.

They needed a message of hope and reassurance from their leaders, but, instead of allaying their fears, the brooding silence of Moses and Aaron, totally wrapped up in their own personal grief at Miriam's death, was easily misinterpreted by the people, who regarded it as an expression of despair and an admission of their leaders' inability to solve the crisis.

That it was Miriam's death that caused the brothers' deep depression explains why that fact was introduced so tersely in v.1, with no mention of the brothers' and the nation's grief, or of any formal demonstration of mourning at her passing. Its only justification here is to provide a link to, and rationale for, the inaction of the brothers and the terror of the nation at its plight, leading to an outpouring of national antipathy from which Moses and Aaron had to flee to the Tent of Meeting in fear for their lives (See v.6). Even when God proceeds to tell Moses and Aaron to lead the people to the rock where water would be provided (v.8) Moses was unable to keep his emotions in check. And hence his irrational outburst, "Listen now, you rebels, do you expect us to bring water out of this rock?" Given God's assurance that, from that single rock, He would provide enough water for the entire nation and its animals – enough of a

miracle to ‘sanctify God’s name’ (*l’hakdisheiniy*: see v.12) and reassure the nation – Moses’ ‘rash utterance’ (Ps.106: 33) was unpardonable.

So, the real sin of the brothers was their abdication of leadership in a time of crisis, coupled with their failure ‘to sanctify’ God’s name by silencing the insults and complaints of the fearful rabble and calling on them to have faith and wait upon God’s deliverance. This is implied in the phrase *ya’an lo he’emantem biy* (l’hakdisheiniy), which can only mean, “because you did not generate trust [on the part of the nation] in me.” In our context, it cannot have the simple meaning of “because you didn’t believe in me,” since in no way did the brothers betray any doubt of God’s existence or redemptive power. The causative (*hiph’il*) sense of the verb supports this interpretation, and pin-points the brothers’ precise sin.

The death of Miriam may also explain why Aaron was more to blame than Moses, and was consequently punished with an earlier death. He was closer to his sister than was Moses – to the extent that Aaron and Miriam were not averse to speaking out critically against him (See Nu. 12:1-16). We may speculate that it was Aaron’s inconsolable grief that may have been the major contributory factor in Moses’ inability to act at this time. Moses was never one to act alone (See Ex. 3:11, 4:3, 6:30, 17:9-13; Deut. 1:9, 12, *et al*.); accompanied and assisted by others, however, he was able to confront any crisis. In the one we have analysed, he felt hopelessly alone and vulnerable, to the extent that he let down himself, his people, and his God, with disastrous consequences for all.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey