

## ***Hitting versus Speaking***

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*Parshat Hukkat*

We read in this week's Torah portion (Numbers 20) that, after the passing of Miriam, the well of water that had miraculously accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness dried up and that they had no water. G\*d, in response to their complaints, instructed Moses to speak to a certain rock so that it would bring forth water. Moses, however – perhaps he was feeling frustration at the people's constant litany of whining complaints – did not speak to the rock but rather spoke angrily to the people. **“Listen up, you rebels. Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?”** (Numbers 20:10) He then took his staff and struck the rock and then struck it again. The rock did indeed produce water, but Moses and Aaron, in consequence, were then told that they would not be permitted to enter the Promised Land.

Why was the punishment so severe?

Perhaps the reason is because the mission of the Israelites was to amplify the power of the word, of speech, of the book, of Torah. The rock which was Rome, the rock which was Babylon, the rock which was Egypt – all these have now turned to dust. Their once proud civilizations are now merely a legacy, a memory, a piece out of history, a collection of archeological sites. But the word, the message of G\*d as preserved in the Torah, remains a living reality, giving shape to the lives of billions of people throughout the world, Jews and gentiles both.

This contrast is emphasized by the Torah's text. Immediately after Moses strikes the rock, the text tells us (Numbers 20:14-17), **From Kadesh, Moses then**

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sent messengers to the King of Edom: “Thus says thy brother Israel: ‘Thou knowest all the woe that has befallen us – our ancestors went down to Mitzrayim and dwelt in Mitzrayim a long time, and the Mitzrim treated us badly, us and our ancestors alike. We cried out to the Eternal, Who heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Mitzrayim.’ Here we are now, in Kadesh, a city at the edge of your territory. Let us pass, may it please thee, through thy land. We will not go through any fields or vineyards and will drink no water from the wells. We will remain on the royal highway, turning aside neither to the right nor to the left, until we have left thy territory.”

Edom's answer (Numbers 15:18) is clear and direct: **Do not cross over me, or I shall greet you with the sword.**

Rashi (not the poster child for National Brotherhood Week, but we can learn from his comments here) remarks that the difference between Moses' request and Edom's response emphasizes the clash between two incompatible values, Edom's *sword* as against Israel's *word*. He interprets Edom's response as saying, "You take pride in your voice (*b'kol*), which your ancestors bequeathed to you, and so you said to me, 'We cried out to G\*d and G\*d heard our voice.' I, however, will come out against you with that which my ancestors bequeathed to me, as it is written [Genesis 27:40, in Isaac's blessing to Esau, traditionally understood as the ancestor of Edom], 'By thy sword shalt thou live.'" When Moses struck the rock rather than speaking to it as G\*d had instructed him, Rashi implies, he was stepping outside his Israelite nature and acting in an Edomite fashion.

May we all learn to act in accordance with our Israelite/speaking nature.

Shabbat Shalom.