

On Striking the Rock

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Parshat Hukkat

Speak to the rock, G*d commands Moses (Numbers 20:7), **and it will bring forth water**. But Moses does not speak to the rock (v. 11); he strikes it – twice! – and it brings forth water. And then (v. 12) G*d tells Moses that, as a consequence, he and his brother Aaron with him will not be permitted to enter the Land of Israel.

From the beginning, our tradition has asked just what it was that Moses did to keep him from entering the Land of Israel, and we have found numerous answers.

The most common explanation is that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it, as G*d had commanded him.

But, on every previous occasion when G*d has told Moses to take up his staff, he was also instructed to hit something (or at least to threaten something, or to do something with his staff), so it is perhaps reasonable that he did so now. However, he hit the rock not once but twice, as if he did not believe that a single strike would be enough. Was that it – a lack of faith?

As Moses spoke to the people (v. 10), his tone was one of anger – “Listen up, you rebels!” Was it his anger (which he had exhibited on other occasions as well) that kept him out of the Promised Land?

Or might it have been the very words he used when speaking to the people? He is expected to be the shepherd; how could the shepherd be so insensitive to the

people's pain and fear (after Miriam's death – vv. 1-2 – the well of water that had been traveling with them since the Exodus disappeared)?

Was it that Moses' renowned humility failed him? "Shall we bring forth water from the rock for you?" (v. 10) Moses seems to be claiming the miracle as his own rather than as G*d's.

All Moses' frustrations seem to have coalesced in this one event, and G*d takes the opportunity to let Moses know that it will not be he who will bring the people into the Land. It seems that all these reasons – and they are all reasons that reflect earlier and frequent, even consistent, aspects of Moses' life and character – are what keep Moses from entering the Land. Moses still retains the *Mitzrayim*-consciousness, the consciousness of Egypt (whose ancient name was *Mitzrayim*), the consciousness of narrowness (for *Mitzrayim* is derived from a linguistic root that means *narrowness* or *constriction*), and that consciousness cannot come into the Land of Promise, the Land of Freedom, the Land of G*d-Wrestling, the Land of those who permit themselves to be the Song of G*d.

Moses is not, then, *punished* for his actions surrounding his striking of the rock; he does reap the consequences of his actions.

And we are then drawn to ask what all this means for us in our day-to-day lives. Do we strike out rather than speaking? Do we hit twice when we need hit only once? Do we lash out in anger, even verbally? Are we insensitive to the pain and fear of others? And will these failings keep us, as they kept Moses, from entering the Land of Promise?

Shabbat Shalom.

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