YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**sTUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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**Parashat Chukat**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**“And Speak to the Rock Before Their Eyes”**

Summarized by Aviad Brestel

Translated by David Strauss

Our *parasha* tells of the death of Miryam and immediately afterwards continues with the people's grievances about the lack of water. At first glance these two events appear to be unconnected.

In contrast to Moshe and Aharon, who died at a later stage, Miryam did not leave an heir or heiress. *Chazal* explain that throughout the forty years of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, they were accompanied by a well that by virtue of Miryam provided the people with water. When Miriam died, the well ceased to exist, together with the virtue of Miryam upon which it depended.

Regarding the people's grievances about their thirst and hunger in the wilderness, the Netziv writes:

What is puzzling is that for forty years they walked in the great wilderness and suffered without complaining, as they understood that this was not the end of their journey, until they arrive in the settled land. Why then did they complain at this time?

But one should know that the fortieth year marked the end of their miraculous journey… And now they were about to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, where they would be governed by nature under God's providence. Therefore, God led them during this year down a middle path.

This is like a woman who is nursing a child who is soon to be weaned from milk, who for some time before he is weaned accustoms the child little by little to eat bread, but nevertheless when necessary nurses the child until he is entirely weaned, for it is difficult to change the order of life all at once.

In the same way, God began to remove them from miracles and stand them against the natural order of the world and teach them what to do when His providence wishes to punish them and withhold from them good and the year's rain, and Moshe, at whose requests everything had been done, will no longer be with them. When the water of the well stopped, Israel understood that this was not a punishment for some, but rather to accustom them to natural life. (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Bemidbar* 20:5)

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, when the people of Israel were about to enter the land, the mode of governance changed, and there took place a gradual process of transition from Divine-miraculous governance to natural governance – from "God will fight for you, and you will be silent" to a situation in which the people fight for themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Immediately after the people's grievances about the lack of water, we come to the section dealing with Mei Meriva:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: “Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aharon your brother, and speak you to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink.” And Moshe took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him.

And Moshe and Aharon gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them: “Hear now, you rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?” And Moshe lifted up his hand and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.

And the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon: “Because you believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” These are the waters of Meriva, where the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and He was sanctified in them. (*Bemidbar* 20:7-13)

Before we continue, it should be noted that according to the Rambam in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, God never tells the prophets to perform puzzling actions. Here there seems to be a problem – God tells Moshe to speak **to (el)** the rock. This is something strange and impossible. The simple answer, based on the words of the Ramban and the Ibn Ezra, is that the words *el* (to) and *al* (about) are sometimes interchanged in the Bible. Here we find one of these interchanges. We must understand that here Moshe was commanded to speak **about (*al*)** the rock. This is also what the Netziv suggests:

"And speak *el* the rock" – This does not mean that they should speak to the rock and command it to issue forth water, for the rock lacks the faculty of hearing. (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Bemidbar* 20:8)

Many commentators discuss the question of what exactly Moshe's sin was at Mei Meriva. An explanation that is particularly apt for our generation is that of Rashi:

For God had not bidden him to strike the rock, but rather He said: "And you shall speak to the rock." (Rashi, *Bemidbar* 20:11)

The sin lay in Moshe's disobedience – his failure to do God's command. There is no need to look for some intrinsic dimension. The sin was Moshe's violation of God's command.

The Netziv adds:

Now when the rock stopped issuing forth water, it was not because miraculous governance had come to an end. Rather it was like God withholding rain because of the sin of the generation. It is known that it is the customary practice of Israel that when there is no rain, they assemble together in one place, even not in the Temple, the site of the sacrifices and the revelation of the *Shekhina*, and the leader of the people addresses them with words of admonition, and afterwards they pray together, as is explained in tractate *Ta'anit*. God wanted Moshe and Aharon to teach the people how to behave in future generations in *Eretz* *Yisrael* and to believe that even without the strength and might of Moshe, they can act with communal prayer. God therefore commanded them to assemble the congregation at the rock. (*Ha'amek Davar*, ibid.)

Moshe was supposed to convene a prayer rally in the wake of the water shortage, based on the understanding that when there is such a shortage the fitting solution is speaking directly to God. This idea was pertinent not only in the days of *Chazal*, but throughout the ages. The elders of Jerusalem would say that when the water cisterns began to empty in the month of Tammuz, the only solution available to them was the recitation of *Tehilim*. So too at Mei Meriva, a mass prayer rally should have been arranged in the wake of the water shortage.

There is a certain parallel between what happened at Mei Meriva and what happened at Refidim in the first year.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Netziv here bases his explanation on the difference found in the verses that describe each of the events. Here we find a command to assemble the congregation, whereas at Refidim no such command was issued.

It may be suggested that there the people of Israel had just come out from their suffering in Egypt and they were still utterly passive. They needed a leader who would serve as mediator between them and God. In contrast, now, in the fortieth year, this is already a new generation – a generation that grew up in the wilderness and was educated from day one at the hands of Moshe. Therefore, God commands Moshe to assemble the people. He wants the people to become accustomed to being active and independent. Here the failure is striking: The people were expected to be more mature and to pray, but they failed to do this.

As mentioned, the Netziv explains that in fact Moshe tried to convene a prayer rally, but did not succeed, because the people did not cooperate. A leader who finds himself in such a situation must resign and make room for his heir, and therefore Moshe was punished for this and was barred from entering *Eretz Yisrael* with the people.

Four lessons can be learned from this story.

First, man suffers with the inherent problem. Since he is a material being, he cannot come sufficiently close to God and cling to Him completely. This fact can lead to failure and sin.

Second, man suffers with another inherent problem – that he aspires to autonomy, and therefore has a certain difficulty accepting another's authority. It is not easy for a person to accept God's authority.

Another educational lesson that can be learned from here is that when a leader fails to lead his people, it is time for him to vacate his position and make room for an heir. Moshe's failure to arrange a prayer rally signaled that he could not continue with the people to *Eretz Yisrael*.

One last point is the matter of prayer. In the wake of the Netziv, we can say that prayer belongs naturally to the world of miracles. In the wilderness, the people of Israel lived in a world that was entirely miraculous. Manna came down for them from heaven, and there were clouds of glory, the pillar of fire, and the pillar of cloud. In such a world, the existential feeling of dependence on God was very clear, and prayer, as an expression of this feeling, was very easy. In contrast, in *Eretz Yisrael*, when God's governance became more natural, prayer became more difficult. In a natural world, where everything is clear and orderly, it is much more difficult to feel existential dependence on God.

This is the challenge, and especially in modern life: We must learn to achieve the feeling of existential dependence on God, and with that feeling, stand before God and pray.

(This *sicha* was delivered on leil Shabbat *Parashat Chukat* 5777 [2017].)

1. This process is evident also in the wars waged by Yehoshua. At first, they are wars that are almost entirely miraculous, but they gradually become natural. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shemot* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)