



## Parashat Chukat: The Staff and the Sword of Redemption

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Dear Friends,

The events of Parashat Chukat take place in the fortieth year following the Exodus. We have fast-forwarded 38 years since last week's parasha!

At the beginning of the parasha, Miriam the Prophetess dies. According to tradition, Miriam is the source of water! Be it a metaphor, or an archetype, she is the well that accompanies Bnei Yisrael on their journey in the wilderness. The people love her and are vitally dependent on her. When she dies they feel great anguish.

But mostly, they feel thirst!

"...and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people strove with Moses, and spoke, saying: 'Would that we had perished when our brethren perished before the LORD!' (Bamidbar 20:1-3) The People are thirsty. Again. They seem to always be thirsty. This seems to be an unquenchable thirst.

We, too, spiritually speaking, are always thirsty. Hence, God's response contains a clue for our own thirst as well:

"And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: '**Take the staff**, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and **speak unto 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.' "(Bamidbar 20:7-8)

God's instructions here seem to hold the key to quenching human thirst.

He commands Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock so as to bring forth water. Yet... if they are meant to speak to the rock, why does God command Moshe to take his staff? The Torah is very careful and stringent with words, if Moshe was not meant to use his staff, why mention it?

The staff has accompanied Moshe and Bnei Yisrael for the past 40 years! Even before the Exodus, at the Burning Bush, the staff was there with Moshe. In fact, it served as one of the tools to prove to Moshe that his calling was serious! Later, in Egypt, the staff was put to use in the war of wizardry against the Egyptian magicians. Later yet, the staff was used to part the Red Sea and cause it to close up again, drowning the Egyptians.

Immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea, 40 years before our current parasha, the People are thirsty for the first time. Moshe is then commanded by God to strike the rock with his staff to bring forth water for the thirsty people. And it did!

But now, forty years later, the instructions are significantly different: No striking; talking! Why, then, does Moshe receive such a confusing command - take the staff but do not use it? Speak to the rock but hold your staff in hand? Why doesn't God say to Moshe plainly: "This time, my faithful servant, leave your staff in the tent. Go forth with an open heart and bare hands and speak to the rock to bring forth water"?

"And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron 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 Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his staff twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron: '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.' (Bamidbar 20:9-12)

I am still shocked and bewildered, after all these years.

Our sages offer a variety of explanations regarding what, exactly, the sin was that Moshe and Aharon committed. Some claim that the sin was striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Others claim that it was the anger and contempt with which they spoke to the people before they struck the rock. Another opinion is that Moshe and Aharon took credit for the miracle, rather than attributing it to God. All explanations are wonderful; they are all good and all correct, even though they contradict each other.

We have pointed out before that Moshe has a violent past: He struck and killed an Egyptian, he defended Tzipora by striking the shepherds at the well in Midian, he struck the Nile to produce blood and the Red Sea to cause it to part. He smashed the first set of Tablets in a rage and then killed 3000 revelers dancing around the Golden Calf. He had even struck a rock previously to produce water.

Moshe is now called upon to learn how to speak, to evolve from a person who uses his staff because he is "heavy of tongue" to one who uses speech exclusively. If Moshe had succeeded in this transition, he would have been able to enter the Promised Land.

This year I would like to suggest another option, one that may also explain God's command to Moshe to take his staff in hand. I suggest that God is not asking Moshe to use speech *instead* of the staff. Rather, He is asking him to take the staff in hand *and* to speak!

The rock cannot feel or see the staff. Hence, the staff was never meant to be a weapon or a threat – not at the Burning Bush, not with Pharaoh, and not at the Red Sea. The staff functioned as Moshe's inner scaffold, a symbol of courage and determination. This is why the first miracle that God teaches Moshe to perform with his staff is to turn it into a snake. In Hebrew, the word snake, נָחָשׁ, shares the same

root as the word for determination, גחישות. God is telling Moshe to be determined, and the staff is a symbol of determination.

Later in our parasha the People are attacked by a plague of snakes. It seems as if the staff has taken on a power of its own. But then, yet again, the wondrous solution for battling this external threat is to strengthen oneself from within:

"And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses, and said: 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD, and against you; pray to the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.' And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses: 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it upon a staff; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' And Moses made a serpent of brass, and set it upon the staff; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of brass, he lived." (Bamidbar 21:6-9)

The healer, the leader, and the soldier have a staff of one kind or another in their hand, but their power to heal and to lead is not in that staff. The staff merely serves as a reflection for its bearer of their inner power. ***Speech has no value if there is no inner strength.*** A public figure who is spineless, who is overly soft and pliable, will not be able to lead.

Moshe, who was not a man of words at the beginning of his life, makes memorable speeches at the end of his life, speeches that are reflected in the name of the last of the Five Books of Moses, Devarim, meaning "words". But Moshe's staff remains with him until the end.

The person who best represents the ability to lead with an internal "staff" was King David. David was a warrior, no doubt. He had blood on his hands, because of which he could not build the Temple. But the sword was not his primary weapon. First and foremost he was a shepherd, a poet, and a lover. Even as a warrior, the sword was not necessarily in his hand. When he slew Goliath, it says "...but there was no sword in the hand of David". (Shmuel 1, 17:50) Later, when Saul chased him to Ein Gedi in order to kill him, David had the opportunity to kill Saul first, but didn't. He also refrained from disposing of his rebellious son Avshalom, despite Avshalom's plot to kill him and inherit the throne. David, the warrior, actually used his sword sparingly.

This is why redemption will come from the seed of King David.

The People in our parasha remind us of ourselves. We too are thirsty. We all thirst for deep, life-sustaining truth. 2,000 years ago we gave up our swords and set out to look for the truth in the written and spoken word. On the rivers of Babylon, in Poland, America, Morocco, and Spain, we sat and wept and remembered Zion. But eventually we returned to our ancestral homeland, and to our swords. For the past hundred years we have lived by our weapons, our tanks and our Iron Dome. From the exiled Jew who was afraid of his own shadow, we have become one of the

strongest nations in the world. But we have not yet really internalized our power, our "staff". It is still external, for defense against our enemies.

My wish and my blessing to us all this Shabbat, is that we learn how to take the staff into our hearts, and with great courage and determination learn to speak, summoning life-sustaining water from the rock.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Elisha