

CUTTING THE APRON STRINGS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"It would have been much more direct and powerful if G-d Himself, without any human intermediary, had saved the Jews from Egypt."

In this week's Parsha, the story of Moshe's "sin" is recorded. It is important that we understand what the sin was, and why Moshe was not permitted to enter Eretz Yisroel.

The Parsha begins with the laws of the Red Heifer - and the record of Miriam's death. Chronologically, Miriam's death, and the events following her death, took place in the final year of the desert. By comparison to last week's Parsha which occurred in the 2nd year of the desert, the Torah jumped 37 years of history and narration. In fact, these missing years are never discussed in the Torah. Their omission makes those events recorded at the end of Sefer Bamidbar that much more important. Obviously, the Torah only recorded events that were of primary significance to understanding our relationship with Hashem. The events of the interim 37 years, of which there had to be many, weren't important enough to be recorded for prosperity. However, the incident of Moshe hitting the rock, was important enough to be recorded at least four times in the Torah. Why?

In analyzing the story of Moshe hitting the rock, the following questions will help us. 1. Why did Hashem identify Moshe's actions as a lack of trust in G-d? 2. How did the punishment of not entering Eretz Yisroel qualify as both a measure for a measure, and correcting Moshe's mistake? 3. Why was Aharon included in the sin when it was Moshe who hit the rock? 4. Why, when the Bnai Yisroel complained about thirst at the beginning of the 40 years, was Moshe instructed to hit the rock, and now he was told to speak to it?

In the beginning of Sefer Shemos, at the incident of the Burning Bush, Moshe was reluctant to accept the responsibilities of being the Redeemer because of his two-fold mission: a) Teach the Jews that there was a G-d. b) Teach the Jews that G-d cared for them, and that they were completely dependent on Him.

As the 40 years in the desert proved, it was far easier to teach the Jews that G-d existed than it was to teach them that G-d cared. G-d's existence was shown through miracle after miracle. G-d's caring could only be realized if the nation recognized that His miraculous manifestation and involvement in the daily lives of the nation was a reflection of His love and caring.

At the time of the Burning Bush, Moshe argued with Hashem that by sending a human to do G-d's

bidding, Hashem would undermine His own goal. It would have been far more direct and powerful if G-d Himself, without any human intermediary, had saved the Jews from Mitzrayim. Then, the Jews would have credited their redemption and maintenance to Hashem alone, and not to the presence of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. In fact, the 40 years proved Moshe's concerns to be accurate as the Jews struggled to develop a personal relationship with the Creator and see beyond Moshe's presence as leader and intermediary.

At the end of the 40 miraculous years in the desert, Moshe had reason to believe that he had accomplished his mission. The most rebellious and least accepting adversaries of his leadership had died out. The new generation had grown up fully accepting the miracles of the desert as daily manifestations of G-d's natural law and G-d's loving care. The nation had wandered for 37 years in punishment for having lost faith in Hashem at the time of the Spies and they were now in the final year of that terrible decree.

With Miriam's death, the miraculous "Well" that had been the nation's source of water, ended, and the nation became thirsty. After all the consistent years of Hashem's loving care, Moshe expected the Bnai Yisroel to either await Hashem's intervention or to turn directly to G-d with their request for water. Instead, "the nation (once again) gathered against Moshe and Aharon". (20:1) Imagine Moshe's frustration! Miracle after miracle, incident after incident, day after day for 39 years, Hashem had proven beyond question or reasonable doubt, that He was the source of all life and sustenance. For 39 years the Bnai Yisroel had studied the "word of G-d" as related through His servant Moshe. For 39 years, all those who had doubted Moshe and Aharon's leadership had perished. All those who had doubted Moshe's appointment as the infallibly accurate conveyor of G-d's word, such as Korach, had died at the hand of G-d. How could they now be complaining about thirst with the same words as their predecessors who had died for their lack of faith in Hashem?!

Rav Hirsch explains that Hashem's command for Moshe to speak to the rock, rather than hit it, was to be the final lesson in the Bnai Yisroel's total acceptance of their dependency upon Hashem's loving care. In the beginning of the 40 years the nation needed to develop a dependency upon Moshe as well as Hashem. Therefore, Hashem had Moshe take a more direct and active part in the miracle by hitting the rock. At the end of the 40 years, the Bnai Yisroel were prepared to see Moshe take a back seat to G-d's intervention. Therefore, Moshe was instructed to speak to the rock. The act of speaking would have been understood by the nation as Hashem having already prepared for them the water in anticipation of their thirst. It wouldn't have been a new miracle performed by the miracle man Moshe, but clear evidence of Hashem's constant concern and love that were daily occurrences manifested through the miracles of nature. However, as Moshe approached the rock carrying his miraculous staff (that had not been seen by the nation in 37 years), his frustration grew at his failure in having directed the nation's dependency away from himself and toward Hashem.

In a final act of desperation at their miss-directed dependency, Moshe raised his staff and proclaimed, "Hear now, you rebels! Shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" (20:11) "It isn't

we who do the miracles, but Hashem! Do you think that I have any power? Do you think this staff has any power? It is my position as the messenger of Hashem, represented by this staff, that allows me the honor of functioning as your leader and performing the commandments of G-d!"

In his frustration, Moshe raised his staff and struck the rock. The unfortunate outcome was that Moshe reinforced the very thing he wanted to negate. In the end, the salvation of the nation had once again come through Moshe's direct intervention. Once again it was upon Moshe, not Hashem, that the nation depended. Therefore, the only possible solution to correcting the Bnai Yisroel's misdirected dependency was for Moshe to die in the desert and for Yehoshua to lead them across the Yarden. Moshe's death would be the ultimate "cutting of the apron strings". With his death it would be evident to all that the nation's protection and success depended upon their own direct relationship with G-d. However, it wasn't enough for only Moshe to die. Aharon was too closely linked to the miracles of the Exodus and the experiences in the desert to remain with the Bnai Yisroel. With the death of Moshe, the Bnai Yisroel would have transferred their dependency from Moshe to Aharon. Therefore, Aharon also had to die.

Good Shabbos.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
