

Parashat Hukat: What was Moses's sin?

2 Tammuz 5765

Rabbi Francine Roston

Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ

1. Rashi (to 20:12):

Had Moses spoken to the stone as he had been told to do, *Bnei Yisrael* would have said, "If an inanimate stone which has no needs obeys God's commands, how much more so must we obey God?!" By not bringing about this *kiddush Hashem*/sanctification of God's Name, Moses caused a *hillul Hashem*/desecration of God's Name.

2. Maimonides (in Shemoneh Perakim, ch. 4):

Bnei Yisrael believed that every word that Moses spoke came from God. Therefore, when Moses yelled at them, they assumed that God was angry at them. This caused a *hillul Hashem* because there was no reason for God to be angry at the moment.

3. Nachmanides (to 20:1, quoting Rabbenu Chananel):

Moses said (20:10), "*Notzi*"/"We will give you water," instead of, "*Yotzi*"/"He [God] will give you water." This minimized the miracle and implied that Moses would find water using his own wisdom.

4. Rabbenu Bachya (to 20:8, as explained by later commentaries):

In an earlier incident (Exodus 17:6), Moses brought forth water by hitting a rock once. By now hitting the rock twice, Moses implied that God had weakened.

5. Sforno (to 20:8):

Moses and Aaron made a conscious decision to lessen the miracle from a wholly supernatural one (in which a stone would turn to water when it was spoken to) to a more concealed miracle (in which water would appear to flow out of a rock naturally). They did this because they believed that *Bnei Yisrael* were unworthy of an open miracle and that their attempt to cause such a miracle would therefore fail. In fact, however, *Bnei Yisrael* needed to see an open miracle at just that moment to refute their belief that God had taken them from Egypt to abandon them in the desert.

6. R' Yosef Albo (in Sefer Ha'ikarim):

Moses should not have waited for God's instructions. He should have felt pity for them and ordered water to appear. "A tzaddik decrees and God fulfills."

7. R' Yitzchak Abarbanel:

Moses's death had been decreed earlier because he had caused the spies to err through his instructions. Aaron's death was decreed because of his part in the Golden Calf. A leader who does not protect his people will be found lacking and unfit to lead. For some reason, however, God waited until our *parashah* to announce the Divine decrees.

8. Maharal (in Gur Aryeh):

All of Moses's actions during this incident showed a slip in the level of his own *emunah*/faith. For example, he hit the stone twice (not once) and he yelled at *Bnei Yisrael*. One whose faith is perfect never loses his temper because he knows that all of his troubles are from God. A person with faith is always happy.

9. Me'am Lo'ez:

By losing his temper, Moses slighted the honor of God's people, and therefore, of God specifically.

10. Sefat Emet (R' Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter z"l, the "Gerrer Rebbe"):

Moses's death was not a punishment per se. Rather, the actions of hitting the stone and talking to it represent two different kinds of leadership. Moshe's actions showed that he could not provide the kind of leadership that the new generation needed. Because of this "generation gap," Moses had to be replaced.

11. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Moses's loss of his temper showed that he had lost hope in *Bnei Yisrael*'s ability to fulfill their destiny as a people. Moses wondered if all that he had toiled for was in vain. For this, he died... [T]he impressive fact remains that, on account of such a small, easily to be understood, momentary weakness in their *emunah*, the leaders had to suffer the same fate that was meted out to the generation of the wilderness for their continuous lack of *emunah*. The grave of the great leader at the very border of the Promised Land to which he had at last brought his people, next to the graves of those who died in the wilderness, now bears everlasting witness to the impartial justice of the Divine rule, in the scales of which the slightest errors of the great saintly men weigh equally to the worst sins of ordinary mortals.

12. Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut:

At Meribah of Kadesh, the rock of "strife and holiness," the ancient leadership was shattered. It broke because a new age demanded new vision, new faith, and undiminished capacity to sanctify the God of Israel to the people of Israel. If the Torah implies sin on the part of Moses and Aaron, it can only be the sin of failure: For leaders are always held responsible for the performance of those they lead. Both Moses and Aaron apparently considered the divine judgment to be just and knew it to be irreversible. Aaron never raised his voice concerning it, and Moses did it once and then ever so briefly (Deuteronomy 3:23-25).

13. Rabbi Jacob Milgrom:

Pagan magic may or may not involve a manual act, but it always involves the use of words.... It is a central element of Moses' prophetic role that he sever Israel from idolatrous seductions. To this end, God helps Moses by showing Israel authenticating "signs" of [Divine] power: miracles. But to ensure that Israel understands that it originates in divine will and not as a coincidence of nature, God repeatedly instructs Moses to describe the miracle in advance and to designate the precise moment of its occurrence through a specific manual act.