

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Hukkat Part II Numbers Chapter 20

1. Verse 1

Numbers 20 opens at what clearly appears to be the beginning of the fortieth year (from the Exodus), as will be seen in the course of our discussion. The preceding narrative is of Korah's insurrection and its aftermath (Numbers 16–18), events which apparently occurred in the second year. Thus, it emerges that the Torah does not narrate any event between the second and fortieth years aside from the barest citation in the Numbers 33 travel itinerary (Ibn Ezra; see *b. Ta'an*. 30b). This absence of narrative is a commentary of sorts on the situation.

The decree in the second year was that the sinning generation must wander for forty years in the wilderness (crediting the two years already spent in the wilderness) during which time all its members would have died and their children would replace them. The quarrels, complaints and rebellions of the first two years are all that need be said regarding that generation. From its perspective, the last thirty-eight years may be viewed as a period of biding time, awaiting the children to come of age. The Torah portrays this by not providing any further comment regarding the passing generation.

As concerns the children, it is taken for granted that the thirty-eight years was a time during which Moses devoted himself to instilling in them the innovative values of the lawgiving. Surely the hope was that during the lengthy period of time in the wilderness the new generation would not disperse or disintegrate but remain a cohesive unit committed to the covenant contracted by their parents and be worthy of entering the promised land. Doubtless, there was tension throughout the period and concern whether the dream will materialize. This appears to be a background thought of the unusual formulation of the introductory verse of Numbers 20.

The chapter begins at the point that “The Israelites, the entire congregation,” arrives at the wilderness of Zin and the people stayed in Kadesh. This is particularly meaningful as Kadesh is the location from which the scouts were sent to tour the land (Num. 13:31); it is identified in Numbers 34:3 as the southern border of the promised land. The apparent redundancy, adding the words “the entire congregation” to “the Israelites,” a rare usage that emphasizes wholeness and national unity, appears to address the concern as to whether the nation would hold together through the many years of aimless wandering. The only other attestation of this locution is later in our chapter in the very next travel note (Num. 20:22). In that case, subsequent to the new generation's challenging G-d, Moses' striking the rock and G-d's decree that Moses and Aaron may not enter the land, one may once again have wondered about the “wholeness” of the nation.

The introductory verse continues with an even more unusual phrase. The arrival at the wilderness of Zin is dated as *bahodesh harishon* (“in the first month”). The month is provided but not the year. All the evidence points to the fortieth year. At the end of the narrative that begins in verse 2 of our chapter, G-d informs Moses and Aaron, “Therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land” (v. 12). This statement must be dated at a time that the new generation was ready and permitted to proceed to enter the land, i.e., the fortieth year.

Further, from the concurrence of details of our context with those of Numbers 33 it is clear that we are dealing with the fortieth year. Consider the following: The first verse of our chapter informs us that in the first month the nation came to Kadesh. Later in the chapter we are informed that the nation traveled from Kadesh to Mount Hor (v. 22) where Aaron died (v. 28). In Numbers 33, after mention of traveling from

Kadesh to Mount Hor (v. 37), we are told that Aaron “died there in the fortieth year...in the fifth month on the first of the month” (v. 38). We must assume that since the Torah did not introduce a change of year into the narratives of our chapter, mention that Aaron died reveals that the “first month” of the first verse refers to the fortieth year.

The realization that we are dealing with the fortieth year supports the translation of *bahodesh harishon* as “on the first new moon,” that is, on the first day of the first month (the first day of the new year, a most prominent occasion), not merely “during the first month.”*

Recognizing that the resumption of the narrative is focused on the first day of the fortieth year yields a rich harvest of ideas. It informs us of G-d’s eagerness to reconnect with Israel and of His interest in moving the nation forward. He did not wait beyond the first day of the fortieth year to reestablish His relationship with the nation and begin getting it ready for its advance to the promised land. He had the Israelites arrive at the threshold of Canaan on the first possible day by defining the terms of His decree in the most favorable manner for them. He brought the nation back to Kadesh, the location of its transgression, on the first day of the fortieth year so that it may now correct its error.

But why was the year not mentioned? Perhaps because it is “the” year, the one that G-d and the Israelites had been looking toward and awaiting these past thirty-eight years. Such a blatant omission of the year highlights this very point, indicating that its explicit mention was unnecessary since it was on their minds.

At the end of verse 1 we are informed that “Miriam died there.” Even the prophetess who was instrumental in promoting the redemption from Egypt (Exod. 2:4-8) and who led the women in celebrating the miracle of the sea (Exod. 15:20-21) could not cross into the promised land. That her death was on the first day of the fortieth year may indicate that she lived as long as possible, until the day that the new generation officially came of age. Moses and Aaron, whose mission it was to lead the nation into Canaan, were exempt from the national decree associated with the scouts and at that point were slated to eventually lead the nation into the land. The following narrative

provides the reason for their deaths before entering the land.

2. Moses’ Transgression

Beginning in verse 2, our chapter describes an event that has a striking resemblance to an episode that occurred in the first year, shortly after the Exodus (Exod. 17:1-7). There is a significant degree of common language between the two. In both there is a shortage of water, accompanied by widespread and bitter complaining against Moses with expressions of regret for having left Egypt. In both, the occurrence is defined as “trying” or “quarrelling” with G-d and is resolved by His performing a miracle to provide water from the rock through the agency of Moses. Moses used a staff in both. The locations are given similar names.

The present situation must have appeared to Moses and Aaron as a case of *déjà vu*. They may have questioned what had been going on the past thirty-eight years. Perhaps, while the generation turnover was taking place G-d provided for Israel without presenting it with major challenges – apart from the very fact of wandering aimlessly in the wilderness – allowing the new generation to come of age under the tutelage of Moses. But now that the transition had been completed, the new generation must stand on its own and it must experience the vicissitudes of life with the challenges they present. He may very well have feared that the people lacked the necessary depth of trust in G-d and the self-discipline necessary for the trials ahead of them, as was the case with the prior generation. He may have been questioning himself.

The possibility thus arose that after all that transpired during the thirty-nine years the nation might not merit entering the land. The children might have to go through similar tribulations as their fathers. Would they survive the ordeal? Would G-d be willing to continue with them? Experiencing the repeat performance of Israel’s complaints dashed Moses’ hopes for the future. Consistent with such feelings, his reaction displays exasperation, anger and a loss of patience.

In the corresponding Exodus episode, G-d instructed Moses to take his staff and strike the rock in front of the elders, which he did. Here, G-d told him to take the staff and speak to the rock, together with Aaron,

before the assembly. Of course, relative to the rock, speaking to or striking is the same. To the onlookers, however, there is a difference, not as concerns the miracle in and of itself, but as bears on Moses and perhaps on G-d. We will return to this shortly.

By way of introduction to the miracle, Moses stated: “Listen you rebels – shall we bring you forth water from this rock?” (Num. 20:10). As he did on the previous occasion, he struck the rock, twice this time, and the water gushed forth.

Without much elaboration the Torah informs us that this time Moses, as well as Aaron, sinned. G-d tells them, “Because you did not act faithfully with Me to sanctify Me in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land” (v. 12). The commentators have various interpretations as to what exactly was the transgression. We will survey several of the major opinions.

The Rambam understood the sin to be related to Moses having become exceedingly angry – a most unbecoming trait, particularly in a leader. The people, judging him righteously, did not believe his anger manifested only his personal disposition, which would have been a character failing, but assumed that it must have reflected G-d’s disposition, that He was wroth with them, when in fact He was not (Eight Chapters, 4). We may add that having been asked to speak to the rock and to do so in public may imply that he was specifically instructed to comport in a gentle manner, more so than on the first occasion. He was supposed to utilize the opportunity to transmit G-d’s disposition of care and concern for the people, sanctifying Him more fully. By striking the rock, Moses misrepresented G-d’s disposition toward the people at that time.

It should be noted that the narrative did not assert that G-d was angry at the people as it did in other instances (such as in Num. 11:1, 10) and it may therefore be assumed that He was not. This is despite the site being named *Mei Meribah* (“the waters of contention”), described as the place where “the Israelites quarreled with Hashem” (v. 13). G-d challenged the new generation and they challenged Him; they could wait no longer for water and complained. But His mode of governance does not appear to have included getting angry at that time. In

should also be noted that the text made clear that there was, indeed, no water.

Some commentators straightaway consider Moses’ anger as his transgression. No matter how exceptional he may be, a leader who loses control to such an extent that he addresses the public derogatorily, speaks to them sarcastically and strikes the rock when G-d told him to speak to it, is considered as having lost faith at that moment. This is similar to the talmudic aphorism, “One who tears garments, breaks vessels or scatters his money in his anger should be viewed by you as if he served idols” (*b. Sabb.* 105b). The upshot is that the leader’s shortcoming precludes a proper sanctifying of Hashem, since a messenger reflects on the sender who selected him.

The Ramban points out that the word אָל, generally translated “to” in the phrase וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל הַסֵּלֶע, (“and speak to the rock”) has other meanings that fit the present context better. In his opinion the phrase should be translated, “speak regarding the rock” or “at the rock,” not that speaking is to be contrasted with hitting the rock. Hitting the rock, he also points out, was an appropriate action since G-d instructed Moses to take the staff, which implies hitting. This is especially the case given that such was the case in the Exodus 17 episode. Thus, according to him, Moses and Aaron were specifically instructed to speak to the people concerning the upcoming miracle, explaining the wonder G-d was going to perform on their behalf, thus sanctifying Him with their elaboration. Perhaps this was particularly emphasized here because it was part of G-d’s new approach to the new generation. However, in his anger, Moses squandered the golden opportunity at the rock by censuring the people with “Listen you rebels,” rather than providing an inspiring commentary that would have added to the sanctification of G-d achieved by the miracle.

Some have questioned whether Moses’ locution, “Listen you rebels” (שְׁמַעוּ נָא הַמְּרִיבִים), commonly cited as evidence of anger, should not be interpreted differently. It is similar to a remark he made in the course of leading the Israelites through the fortieth year covenant reaffirmation, a usage that in that context was not uttered in anger but as a motivational device. In that case he stated, “You have been rebels (מְמַרְיבִים) with Hashem from the day I knew you” (Deut. 9:24). However, context is everything. Here, he follows with an acerbic rhetorical question, “Shall we

bring you forth water from this rock?” – a formulation so clear in its implications that it removes any doubt that he spoke in anger.

Rabbenu Hananel (elaborated by Ramban) sees Moses’ sin in his saying to the people “Shall we bring you forth water from this rock?” Such a statement could easily be misunderstood to mean that it is not G-d but he (Moses) and Aaron who will bring forth the water, implying that they are miracle workers. Such a fear was especially significant in biblical times and had the potential to undermine much of the great progress toward monotheism that Israel had recently made. In the book of Exodus we note the extraordinary care that was necessary to ensure that neither Egyptians nor Israelites get the wrong impression. Carelessness in such an important area is most serious and it is the responsibility of a leader to ensure that it not occur. Perhaps the Torah intended to highlight the possibility of confusion in this area by the way it cited the people’s complaint to Moses – “Why did you bring the congregation of Hashem to this wilderness...why did you take us forth from Egypt?” (Num. 20:4-5) – as if Moses and Aaron had performed the miracle of the Exodus.

Alternatively, the “we” that Moses uttered might be thought to refer to him and G-d, as if he is a partner with the Deity. In certain times and places this would have been an even greater fear than the possibility that Moses and Aaron would be thought of as the authors of the miracles. Of course, these explanations do not attribute to Moses the slightest loss of perspective such that he was actually thinking or speaking of himself in an idolatrous manner. It is just that the common people in the nation might so misinterpret his words.

Ibn Ezra considers the sin to be Moses’ having allowed himself to be distracted by the people and at first not concentrating on attaching himself to G-d while proceeding to fulfill the command. This resulted in a mortifying failure upon his first strike at the rock. G-d performs a miracle through his servant only when the servant is focused and in communion with Him. In this case, the people’s provocation led Moses to become angry, contributing to his loss of control; nevertheless, it was Moses’ responsibility not to become diverted. Moses then composed himself and refocused his concentration on G-d and successfully struck the rock. When the predicted result had not

occurred the first time, damage was done to G-d’s reputation. In addition, when a servant appears to take his master’s command lightly he diminishes his image in the eyes of others.

Regarding Aaron, he was by Moses’ side all the way through, responsible to provide support and assistance. Perhaps he was still the spokesperson for Moses as G-d had designated at the burning bush (Exod. 4:16) and transmitted Moses’ words to the people. If he did not identify with Moses when he became angry, misspoke or got into a state of mind in which he became distracted, he was expected to intervene with him, to calm him down. He shared responsibility for the transgression.

Psalm 106, in the last episode of the wilderness sojourn cited there, refers to our passage. In two verses that have been rendered in very different ways, the psalm states (vv. 32-33):

וַיִּקְצִיפוּ עַל מִי מְרִיבָה They provoked anger at the waters of Meribah,
וַיֵּרַע לְמֹשֶׁה בְּעֵבוֹרָם and it went ill with Moses because of them;
כִּי הִמְרוּ אֶת רוּחוֹ for they rebelled against His [G-d’s] spirit (alternatively: embittered or transformed his [Moses’] spirit)
וַיִּבְטֵא בְשִׁפְתָיו and He [G-d] uttered with his lips [the decree concerning Moses] (alternatively: and he [Moses] uttered [his rash words to Israel]).**

The common denominator between the various interpretations is that Numbers 20 reveals Moses in his human frailty. Frustrated, angry and impatient, he is distracted from his responsibility during a crisis and unable to relate to the charges before him with the inspired and caring leadership he exercised during the previous forty years. The new generation will require new leaders. Thus, G-d’s punishment fits the context; He decrees that because Moses and Aaron did not hold steady in applying His directive, thwarting the sanctification of Him, they are not going to be the ones to bring the Israelites into the land.***

Furthermore, G-d chose a punishment that officially and publicly highlighted Moses’ humanness. He denied Moses fulfillment of a cherished lifetime goal after Moses labored so diligently and accomplished so much. In this way He helped ensure that future generations will have no doubt on this crucial matter

and will not deify Moses, confusing servant and master.

Endnotes

* The term *hodesh*, derived from *hadash*, meaning “new,” may refer to the new moon or to the period of time that follows the new moon until the next new moon, that is, a month. Such usage is demonstrated in Exodus 19:1. There, *baḥodesh hashelishi* means the third new moon, that is, the first day of the third month, since the continuation of that verse states, *bayom hazeh* (“on this day”), specifying that particular day, clearly indicating that *baḥodesh* in that context denotes the first day of that month.

** Following are Ibn Ezra’s comments on this psalm verse:

אבן עזרא: כי המרו את רוחו - שב אל השם כמו והמה מרו ועצבו את רוח קדשו (ישעי' סג, י), נטעם ויבטא על השם שגזר על משה שלא יפגס לארץ וישגגה היתה ממשה בעבור כעסו כאשר פירשתי במקומו ניתכן היות רוחו רוח משה והוא בטא שאמר לישראל מורים ושכח לדבר והכה והנה ראוי שלא יצא הדבר מפיו עד שישלם מצות השם.

*** In Moses’ fortieth year review of the transgression and retribution associated with the spies episode, he states, “Hashem was also wroth with me on your account, declaring ‘you too shall not enter there’” (Deut. 1:37; also see Deut. 3:26 and 4:21). Moses is connecting the decree that he is not to enter the land with the decree that the Exodus generation was not to enter the land. Perhaps he viewed his transgression – though many years later – as indirectly resulting from the fact that the nation was still in the wilderness and still not fully obedient to G-d.

©2010 Sephardic Institute