



ארגון רבני צהר



הסתדרות הציונית העולמית
המערך לשירותים רוחניים בתפוצות

Parashat Chukat

When the People and their Leadership both Fail

-Rabbi Shaul Baruchi-

Many interpretations have been put forth with regard to the sin committed by Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva. The Torah reiterates several times that the reason for the punishment that was ultimately meted out was "Since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel" (Bamidbar 20:12). Although these words seem to suggest the Torah's explanation of the sin committed by Moshe and Aharon, the issue remains fundamentally unclear. The midrash states that "whenever their death is mentioned their sin is mentioned" (Sifrei Bamidbar). In other words, the Torah continuously reminds us of the sin committed by Moshe and Aharon in order to emphasize that they sinned at Mei Meriva and not elsewhere and in some other way.

It is precisely for this reason that it is surprising that in his speech in the book of Devarim Moshe connects his punishment to another matter entirely. When relating the punishment suffered by the people for their lack of faith upon hearing the reports of the twelve spies, Moshe adds the following: "Hashem was also angry with me because of you, saying, "Neither will you go there" (Devarim 1:37). Moshe is not stating unequivocally that his punishment was connected to the sin of the spies, but it would appear that he is alluding to such a connection. How do we reconcile such a statement with the explicit connection drawn by the Torah between the punishments suffered by Moshe and Aharon and their sin at Mei Meriva?

The question becomes enhanced when we place the aforementioned events on a timeline. The sin of the spies occurred during the second year following the exodus from Egypt, while Mei Meriva (Moshe hitting the rock) happened at the beginning of the fortieth year, not long before the Jews entered the Land of Israel and in close proximity to the delivery of Moshe's speech. According to the version of events set forth in the Torah, throughout the entire journey through the desert Moshe was aware that the people who left Egypt were not destined to enter the Land, but he thought that he would be the one to lead the next generation across the Jordan River. Moshe brought the second generation all the way to the gates of the Land of Israel, but lost his right to enter the Land almost at the last minute. In his speech to the people who were poised to enter the Land, Moshe appears to have changed a principal element of the story. How did Moshe's altered version sit with the people? For them, the story of the spies was ancient history, while Mei Meriva was a fresh memory. How could they accept Moshe's version, when they were fully aware that Moshe received his punishment only months before and not a generation earlier?

Or Hachayim provides us with an insight that solves this difficulty. According to his commentary, Moshe did not participate in the sin of the spies and he was not punished with the rest of the nation, but it was already then that it was decided that the people were not worthy of Moshe's leadership and therefore he would not be the one to lead them into the Promised Land. Hashem's



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accusation at Mei Meriva, which He directed at Moshe and Aharon, "Since you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel," was intended to indicate that the events at Mei Meriva served as an opportunity to repair the failures of the sin of the spies. If the Jewish people had been worthy at the time of the events at Mei Meriva, Moshe would have acted properly, sanctified Hashem's name and ingrained the faith in God in the hearts of the people. If all of this had in fact transpired, the nation would again have been worthy of the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, who in turn would have led them into the Land of Israel. It follows, therefore, that the reason that Moshe did not enter the Land was not a punishment for his actions during the episode of the spies or at Mei Meriva, but rather a combination of sorts between the fallout from the two events. The Jewish people did not merit Moshe's leadership, a fact that was determined following the sin of the spies. Moshe's failure at Mei Meriva only served to reinforce this predetermined resolution by demonstrating that neither Moshe nor the people themselves had the necessary power to remedy their previous sin.

Based on the commentary of Or Hachayim, we may conclude that Moshe considered himself as having what amounts to overall authority during the events at Mei Meriva. Moshe is the one who took the Jewish people out of Egypt and into the desert with the ultimate goal of bringing them to the Land of Israel. The failure of the people is also the failure of their leader, and when it was decided that the people would not enter the Land of Israel it became time for a shift in leadership as well. Furthermore, Moshe was a remnant of the previous generation that had left Egypt, while the new generation that was to enter the Land would need someone closer in age and perspective. The Torah elects to clue us into the upcoming change by noting, in the description of the aftermath of the sin of the spies, that Yehoshua and Caleb were the only ones from the older generation that would enter the Land of Israel, while Moshe and Aharon were not mentioned at all. Moshe understood this complexity and even alluded to it in his speech by stating that Moshe knew he would not enter the Land long before he delivered his speech. Mei Meriva only served as the event in which Hashem collected on the debt owed by Moshe from previous events.

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