



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Chukat: An Anger Problem

One of the most enigmatic episodes of the entire Torah is in Parshat Chukat, Moses hits the rock, and is restricted by God from entering the Promised Land. The problem debated by all the classical commentaries, is what Moses did wrong. Moses seems to follow God's instructions. Why is he punished?

...The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock ...

Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as He had commanded him.

Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock;

He said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?"

Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod.

Out came copious water...

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." (20:7-12)

- When you read the text, can you identify how Moses sinned?

Rashi says that he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Others blame Moses for hitting twice rather than a single time. But these answers are unsatisfying; after all water from a rock is a supreme miracle, however you do it! Others suggest that when Moses uses the collective "we" he was somehow minimizing God's role.

Rambam has a fascinating perspective:

God found fault with Moses that such a man as he should show anger in the presence of the entire community of Israel, where wrath is unbecoming. This was a profanation of God's name, because men imitated the words and conduct of Moses, hoping thereby to attain temporal and eternal happiness. How could he, then, allow his wrath free play, since it is a hurtful characteristic.

...When Moses said or did anything, they subjected his words or actions to the most searching examination. Therefore, when they saw that he waxed wrathful, they said, "... God is angry with us for demanding water...". However, we do not find God was angry when he spoke to Moses about this." (Maimonides. Shmonah Perakim ch.4)

When the Rambam reads the verses, and hears Moses label the Israelites as rebels, he hears anger, and he imagines Moses in a rage. This was wrong for two reasons. The first, because it is unbecoming for a role-model such as Moses to act in anger and second, it misrepresented God. God wasn't angry, and Moses' action led Israel to think that they had sinned by requesting drinking water from God.

This is a fascinating reading especially because rage isn't mentioned explicitly by the biblical verses. But clearly, the Rambam senses Moses anger through Moses' language(*), and Rambam cannot imagine any greater *Hillul Hashem*, religious desecration, than anger. Elsewhere, Maimonides writes:

Anger is also an exceedingly bad character trait. It is fitting and proper that a person distance oneself absolutely to the opposite extreme. One should teach oneself not to become angry even when it is fitting to be angry. If he wishes to arouse fear in his children and household - or within the community, if he is a communal leader - and wishes to be angry at them to motivate them to return to the proper path, he should express anger outwardly ... but should be inwardly calm. He should be like an actor who acts angry but is not himself angry.

The early Sages said: Anyone who becomes angry is like one who worships idols. They also said: Whenever one becomes angry, if he is a wise man, his wisdom leaves him; if he is a prophet, his prophecy leaves him. The life of the irate is not true life.

So, please discuss:

- Why is anger so bad in the view of the Rabbis?
- What is the meaning of the statement that anger is like idol-worship? Or that "the life of an angry person is no life? What is meant by these statements?
- Is anger ever "good" or useful?
- If a teacher or boss gets angry with you, how does that make you feel? Is it effective?
- When you get angry, do you feel in control, or out of control?

Maybe the Rabbis called it idolatry because when a person is overwhelmed by anger, anger is their master; they are out of control; a false “god” controls them. Likewise, a person prone to temper and rage has no life because he ruins the relationships around him, everything is infuriating.

Can we have leaders who fly into a rage, and can, at the same time, lead the nation responsibly or represent God appropriately? This story would suggest that we cannot.

Shabbat Shalom!

(*It is interesting that though Moses is described as the humblest of all men, we find several instances of Moses anger, explicitly or implicitly. Explicitly, when God’s word is abrogated: Shemot 16:20; Vayikra 10:16; Bamidbar 31:14. Implicitly, his killing the Egyptian and smashing of the tablets.