

במדבר פרק כ:א-יג

ויבאו בני ישראל כל העדה מדבר צן בחדש הראשון, וישב העם בקדש. ותמת שם מרים ותקבר שם. ולא היה מים לעדה - ויקהלו על משה ועל אהרן, וירב העם עם משה, ויאמרו לאמר: "ולו גוענו בגוע אחינו לפני ה'! ולמה הבאתם את קהל ה' אל המדבר הזה, למות שם אנחנו ובעירנו? ולמה העליתנו ממצרים, להביא אתנו אל המקום הרע הזה - לא מקום זרע ותאנה וגפן ורמון, ומים אין לשתות?" ויבא משה ואהרן מפני הקהל אל פתח אהל מועד, ויפלו על פניהם. וירא כבוד ה' אליהם. וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר: "קח את המטה, והקהל את העדה - אתה ואהרן אחיך, ודברתם אל הסלע לעיניהם, ונתן מימיו! והוצאת להם מים מן הסלע, והשקית את העדה ואת בעירם." ויקח משה את המטה מלפני ה' כאשר צוהו, ויקהלו משה ואהרן את הקהל אל פני הסלע, ויאמר להם: "שמעו נא המרים! המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים?" וירם משה את ידו, ויך את הסלע במטהו פעמים, ויצאו מים רבים. ותשת העדה ובעירם. ויאמר ה' אל משה ואל אהרן: "יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל - לכן לא תביאו את הקהל הזה אל הארץ אשר נתתי להם!" המה מי מריבה, אשר רבו בני ישראל את ה', ויקדש במ: ס

אברבנאל על אתר

הראיתך בעיניך כל הדעות, וכמה רחוקים מן האמת - ולבך תשית לדעתי. ודעתי בזה: שמשה ואהרן שניהם נענשו בעבור עונות שעשו - אם אהרון בעון העגל, ואם משה אדנינו ענין המרגלים. . . . ולפי שמרע"ה היה סבה למקרה כזה, לכן היה מהצדק האלקי שגם הוא, שסבב שימותו הדור במדבר ולא יכנסו, לא יבא שמה, כי שגגת למוד עולה זדון. ומפני ישראל חטאו על זה במזיד, ומרע"ה חטא בשוגג ובכונה טובה, חס הקב"ה על כבודו ולא הביא גזרתו בתוך גזירת העם, והאריך עליו אפו, כמו שהאריך לאהרון במעשה העגל. וכאשר בקדש ובמדבר צין התלוננו ישראל על המים, ובדברי תלונתם העירו פעמים הרבה על היות משה ואהרון סבה למיתת העם במדבר, ובעבורם לא נכנסו לארץ, כמו שאמרו "ולמה הבאתם את קהל ה' אל המדבר הזה למות שם אנחנו ובעירנו", ומשה ואהרון התעצבו בשמעם הרמז ההוא, וצוה השם למשה שהוא ואהרון יקהילו את הקהל אל הסלע, ושידברו ויעשו הפועל אשר זכר. ובהיות שמרע"ה עבר על דברי השם ומרה את פיו, כי הוא צוה אותו שידבר אל הסלע ומשה הכה אותו ולא דבר, ראה יתברך להעניש שניהם שהיו שמה - לא בעבור החטא הזה מהכאת הסלע, אלא מפני עונותיהם הקודמים, והיו אם כן מי מריבת קדש כלי אמצעי בדבר הזה ולא סבה עצמות, וקרה להם לפניו ית' כמו שפעמים רבות יקרה לאדם אם בנו האהוב אצלו, שאם חטא לו, יעלים את פשעו מפני כבודו, ואחר כך בסבה קטנה ילקה אותו מכה רבה, ואם ישאלו ממנו: "למה עשית כך על דבר קטן כזה?", והוא ישיב: "לא בעבור זה עשיתי, אלא מפני עונות ראשונות שעשה, והארכת לי העונש עד עתה.", וכן העונש הזה לא היה למשה ולאהרון על מי מריבה לבד, כי העונש היה בעצם ובאמת על מה שעשו קודם לזה, וכדי לכסות עליהם ולחוס על כבודם, תלה עונשם עד מי מריבה על אשר מרו דברי השם. . . .

Numbers 20:1-13

The Children of Israel came – the entire community – to the Tzin Wilderness in the first month, and the nation settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and she was buried there.

But there was no water for the community – so they assembled against Mosheh and Aharon, and the nation quarreled with Mosheh, saying: “Had we only expired when our brothers expired before Hashem! Why have you brought the community of Hashem to this wilderness, so that we and our cattle can die there? Why have you brought us up from Egypt, to bring us to this evil place – not a place of grain or figs or grapes or pomegranates, with not even water to drink?”

Mosheh and Aharon came under pressure of the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell on their faces.

The Glory of G-d was revealed to them.

Hashem spoke to Mosheh, saying: “Take the staff, and assemble the community – you and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will give its water! And you will extract water for them from the rock, and you will give drink to the community and its cattle.” Mosheh took the staff from before Hashem as He had commanded him, and Mosheh and Aharon assembled the assemblage toward the rock, and he said to them: “Listen please, O rebels! Will we extract water from this rock for you?”

Mosheh raised his hand, and he struck the rock with his staff twice, and much water emerged.

The nation and their cattle drank.

Hashem said to Mosheh and Aharon: “In consequence of your not having faith in Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel – therefore you will not bring this assemblage to the land which I have given them!”

Those are the Waters of Quarrel, where the Children of Israel quarreled with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them.

Abravanel

I have shown you all the opinions, and how distant they are from truth, so your heart should be given over to my opinion.

And my opinion in this matter is –

Mosheh and Aharon were both punished for the sins they had committed –

Aharon during the sin of the Calf, and Mosheh our Master the matter of the spies ...

Because Mosheh our Teacher of Blessed Memory was a cause of such a happening, therefore it was Divine Justice that he too, who caused-it-to-come that the generation would die in the wilderness and not enter (Canaan), should also not arrive there, “because the accident(al sin) of the learned is counted as deliberate”¹.

But because Israel sinned in this matter deliberately, whereas Mosheh our Teacher of Blessed Memory sinned accidentally and with good intentions, The Holy Blessed One had pity on his honor and did not bring his sentence in the midst of the sentence of the nation, but rather delayed expressing anger toward him, as he had delayed for Aharon in the matter of the Calf.

But when in Kadesh and the Tzin Wilderness Israel complained about water, and in their complaint they many times pointed out that Mosheh and Aharon were a cause of the death of the nation in the wilderness, and that it was because of them that they had not entered the land, saying “Why have you brought the community of Hashem to this wilderness, so that we and our cattle can die there?”,

and Mosheh and Aharon were saddened when they heard that reference,

Hashem commanded Mosheh that he and Aharon should assemble the assemblage toward the rock, and they should speak to the rock and act as He mentioned.

But since Mosheh transgressed the words of Hashem and rebelled against His mouth, as He had commanded him to speak to the rock, whereas Mosheh hit it and did not speak,

The Blessed saw fit to punish the two of them who were there – not because of this sin of hitting the rock, but rather because of their earlier violations, so it turns out that the Waters of Quarrel in Kadesh were the medium for this matter and not an essential cause,

¹ See Mishnah Avot 4:13

and what happened before Him the Blessed is like what often happens to a man with his beloved son, that if he sins toward him, he will look away from his negligence for the sake of his honor, but then for a minor reason strike him a great blow, but if people ask him: "Why have you done this for such a small matter?", he replies: "I did not do it because of this, but rather because of the earlier transgressions he did, for which I delayed punishment until now", so too this punishment did not happen to Mosheh and Aharon because of the Waters of Quarrel alone, rather the punishment was in essence and truth because of what they had done previously, but in order to cover for them and have pity on their honor, He held their punishment in abeyance until the Waters of Quarrel where they rebelled against the words of Hashem ...

That Mosheh fails to reach the Promised Land is now so engrained in our narrative consciousness that the alternative is almost unimaginable. When Mordechai ben David sings in “Someday” that “Mosheh Rabbeinu will lead us once again in Yerushalayim B’ezrat Hashem”, we know viscerally that the image is wrong – in Yerushalayim we are led by David, not Mosheh. But it is worth thinking about why the ending we have seems not only plausible but inevitable.

One barrier to thinking about this is the Torah’s explicit justification for Mosheh being stopped short, the sin at Mei Merivah, apparently striking the rock rather than speaking to it. This sin seems so trivial, so inessential to Mosheh’s character, that it cannot be seen as the inevitable anticlimax of Mosheh’s career. It is as if Daniel Webster never became president because his nominating petitions were invalidated on a technicality.

There have been many, many, many attempts to build up Mei Merivah’s significance for Mosheh’s leadership; I incline to the position that Hashem realized that after 40 years, Mosheh had no new ideas for moving the people forward - the new generation’s complaints about water echoed their parents’. I had always heard Abravanel cited, however, as the radical way out, as claiming that in fact Mei Merivah was just a cover for the real cause, which was then fully open to speculation. I will argue below that this is a little oversimplified, but perhaps true enough to raise very challenging questions about his understanding of the nature of Biblical narrative.

The obvious challenge to this type of interpretation is that it seems to undermine the intent of the text. Possibly parallel cases include the publication of halakhic texts that include the phrase “Halakhah v’ein morin kein” (roughly “this is the law but one should not say so to the unlearned”), the request by Avimelekh in Judges 9:54 that he be finished off with a sword “lest it be said a woman killed him”, and the Talmudic assertion that King David did not sin in the matter of Batsheva.

Each of these parallels can be explained: halakhic texts were not intended for the general public, the narrator of Judges is in fact mocking Avimelekh, and David’s sin was moral but not formal. None of these approaches, however, seems appropriate here.

Abravanel is, I think, fully aware of the problem. My evidence for this is the analogy he brings (we can discuss his vision of childrearing some other time), in which the father admits *when asked* that he has overpunished his son for a present offense on account of a past offense. It follows that Torah intends anyone who notices the disproportion of the punishment to be informed by the text what the real sin was.

This leaves us to ask: why not say so directly, if one is willing to do so when asked? In the analogy, it seems possible that the purpose is to allow misunderstanding, so that most people will remain unaware of the beloved son’s true transgression. That would suggest that Torah does indeed intend its naïve readers – children, or unlearned adults – to misunderstand Mosheh’s fate. This type of suggestion fits well in elitist theologies such as that of Maimonides, but I am not sure I find it congenial. It certainly has pedagogic implications.

But another possibility is that formality here has function. What I mean to say is that maybe there is a gain in dignity for being formally punished for a trivial rather than a great sin, even if everyone knows what is really going on, because the fact that we are willing to avert our eyes is itself an act of honoring. To say of someone that we could not say X of them – even though it is true – is to show great respect.

But what if Mosheh, realizing the situation, had so carefully minded his Ps and Qs as to give G-d no excuse for punishing him? Perhaps the Jews would have wandered the desert until Mosheh died of natural causes. Or perhaps G-d knew that Mosheh was incapable of living that way – He shared our initial sense that the story had to end this way. And yet there is always free will.

Shabbat Shalom

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