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חירות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## THE DANGERS OF SARCASM

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

*Listen, O Rebels: Shall we from this rock extract water for you?*

According to Bekhor Shor, Moshe Rabbeinu was trying to teach the Jews that rocks don't provide water, G-d provides water. "You can't get water from rocks: asking me to pray to G-d is your only chance!" Or: "What, did you think that we could get you water from a rock?! Pray to G-d – He's the true Source of Israel!"

But the people misunderstood. They thought Mosheh was expressing helplessness; how can we extract water for you from a rock? So when the water actually came, they thought it was simply a natural event; odd things can happen when you hit things hard enough.

It took two strikes to get the water out, because G-d was giving Mosheh a chance to explain what would happen straightforwardly: "G-d will now produce water. Sometimes a stick is just a schtick, and that's what it is here: I'm hoping that you'll remember that G-d used this very same stick to make the water Undrinkable in Egypt, and here I'll use it to bring drinking water. So you can see that there's nothing special about the stick." But Mosheh was too wrapped up in the moment, or too angry (*Listen O Rebels!*) to understand what had gone wrong.

Traditional commentaries on Chumash have to walk a fine line when it comes to explaining Mosheh's sin here. Make it too slight, and why is this enough to keep Mosheh from entering Israel? (And is this really Mosheh's worst failure as a leader?) Make it too great, and how could Mosheh Rabbeinu have erred so greatly?

The first problem yields conspiracy theories, such as Abravanel's contention that the Torah is honoring Mosheh by making us look away from his real failure. I am partial to a version of that. The real problem is not that Mosheh acted badly, but that this is an old story. The same thing happened in Shemot 17 to the parents of this generation, and Mosheh reacted in the same way. No lessons learned by anyone, so new leadership is obviously necessary.

Bekhor Shor cannot take this approach. Why? Because his radical claim, part of an overall radical approach to "doublets"

in the Torah, is that this is actually THE SAME STORY. It is a twice-told tale that only happened once.

The many contradictions between the tellings that are good reasons to decide immediately that Bekhor Shor is wrong. Does G-d tell Mosheh to hit the rock (Shemot), or to speak to it (Bamidbar)? Did this happen in Refidim (Shemot) or Kadesh (Bamidbar)? Was the place then named Masah Umerivah (Shemot) or Mei Merivah (Bamidbar)? Did Mosheh handle this alone (Shemot) or together with Aharon (Bamidbar)? And more.

However, it's important to understand that reading the text of Chumash is mostly analysis of a closed data set. There is no evidence within the text that we have access to that Bekhor Shor did not, and in this case, I also don't know of any evidence outside the text. So intellectual honesty requires us to assume that Bekhor Shor thought of all our obvious questions and had answers for them that he considered sufficient, and perhaps he has positive arguments for his interpretation as well. Consider for example Devarim 33:8, which states "Whom you tested at Masah, and strove with over Mei Merivah". For Bekhor Shor, the parallelism in this verse demonstrates that Masah and Mei Merivah are the same place, and yet Masah is from the Shemot story, and **Mei Merivah** is from Bamidbar! (I don't actually find that one convincing at all, but perhaps you will!)

Bekhor Shor's fundamental argument is structural – the story appears as part of two different sets of narratives, with each set having a separate function. In Shemot, the overall purpose is to demonstrate how G-d provided for the Jews in the desert by giving them manna, meat (quail) and water. In Bamidbar, the overall purpose is to explain that the leaders of the Desert Generation die with them. Therefore, immediately after reporting the death of Miriam, we have the story of why Mosheh and Aharon will die as well.

That Mosheh (and Aharon) sinned is irrelevant to the purpose of Shemot. That G-d provided for the Jews is always relevant; but perhaps in Bamidbar we are seeing the beginning of the effort to transition the Jews away from dependence of the

miraculous, and certainly from reliance on the intercessions of Moshe and Aharon rather than on their own prayers. So the story is told differently, with an emphasis on the way that Mosheh (and Aharon) were overstressed by their role as middlemen.

Still, if it is one story, told by G-d both times, the contradictions have to be resolved. (Granting that in Dr. Mordechai Breuer's approach they don't have to be resolved, and that Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon provides a brilliant illustration of how conflicting subjective perspectives can both be true even when they include contradictory factual assertions). Here is how Bekhor Shor reconciles Bamidbar with Shemot's version, in which G-d tells Mosheh to hit the rock.

ודברתם אל הסלע = אל פני הסלע תדברו אל [בני] ישראל  
לעיניהם = דבר שיהא נראה ונגלה לעיניהם, שתאמרו שאני נותן להם מים  
כמו שאמור במן "הנני ממטיר לכם לחם מן השמים.  
וכמו שאמור בשליו "התקדשו למחר ואכלתם בשר",  
כמו כן תאמרו שאני נותן להם מים  
שבזאת יתקדש שמי וידעו כי מאתי יבאו להם מים  
*And you must speak to the rock – toward* the rock, speak to  
Bnei Yisroel

*in their sight* – about a **matter** that will be visible and open to their eyes, so that you will say/acknowledge that I am giving you water

as it says regarding the manna “Behold I am raining for you bread from the heavens”,  
and regarding the quail “Prepare for tomorrow, when you will eat meat”;  
so too here, you will say/acknowledge that I am giving you water;

and thereby My Name will be sanctified and they will know that it is from Me that water comes to them.

I'm still processing the retranslation of *vedibartem el basela* “speak to the rock” as “speak toward the rock” – so brilliant, so possible, and yet is it true? On its own I love it: but the retranslation of *l'eineihem* as “about something that will be public” is vastly less compelling, and yet I don't think we can have one without the other.

However, I think we can have Bekhor Shor's explanation of what went wrong in Bamidbar without accepting his claim that it is the same story as Shemot. We can retranslate *vedibartem el basela l'eineihem* as “Speak **about** the rock in their sight”, and Mosheh does – he makes a sarcastic comment about how water doesn't come from rocks, which they misunderstand, and so it goes.

When I taught at Maimonides as a young man, I realized – perhaps a little too late – that sarcasm is often and easily misunderstood, especially across a power imbalance and a

generation gap. I made an effort, which I recall as successful (but my students may recall otherwise) to remove it from my high school teaching repertoire (although certainly not from the Summer Beit Midrash, or from my life generally.) I wasn't as successful in my return cameo this year, especially when I was frustrated by my own failure to convey an idea.

At least now I can relate to Mosheh Rabbeinu!

(Note: Look for SBM 2025 learning summaries rather than parshah essays for the next several weeks! Also look for links to recording of my public shiurim at YI Sharon on Yirmiyahu and on “How Halakhah Knows Things That Aren't Halakhah”.)

*Shabbat shalom!*