

CHUKAS (NUMBERS 19:1-22:1)

Stone Drunk

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The well had gone dry. The great prophetess, Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, had died. G-d takes care of the righteous and those around them. G-d had provided a miraculous well that followed the Israelites through the desert. This well was a reward to Miriam for waiting by the water (the Nile River) so many years before, making sure that her baby brother Moses was all right. When Miriam died, the well died with her.

The People were thirsty. They complained to Moses, and G-d provided the solution. Moses was told to speak to a rock, which would then provide water. Back in Exodus, 17:6, Moses had been given a similar mission. He had been told to HIT a rock to bring out water. This time, G-d was telling him to SPEAK to the rock. Moses made what would prove to be a fatal mistake:

"Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. A great deal of water gushed out, and provided water for the community and their animals." (Numbers, 20:11)

G-d was furious: *"Since you (and Aaron) didn't have enough faith in Me to sanctify Me in the presence of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly to the land that I have given them."* go to great lengths to understand what exactly was the nature of Moses' sin. After all, the people witnessed a great miracle. A rock was struck, and water flowed from it. The Israelites hadn't seen a miracle like that in 40 years! How is this a lack of faith on Moses' part?

The Chasam Sofer writes that Moses lost an opportunity to teach an important lesson. Bringing out water with a stick shows the power of a stick. Bringing out water with one's words would have demonstrated the power of words.

A person can do powerful things with words. The right words can accomplish great things. The wrong words can be devastating.

People tend to minimize the sin of gossip. "After all," they reason, "I didn't DO anything; I just made a comment. It's not as if I HIT someone!"

Actually, in some ways it is worse. If I hit someone and cause a wound, I can see evidence of my sin and try to make amends. When I slander or insult someone, I view it as a victimless crime. ("Sticks and stones...") I don't see the damage I have done. I fool myself into thinking that a statement that is not accompanied by a physical act is not a big deal.

G-d wanted to Moses to demonstrate the power of speech, positive and negative. 40 years previously, Moses had brought water from a rock with his stick. Now it was time to bring water simply through his words. Moses missed this opportunity.

The Chasam Sofer explains that this error had devastating ramifications. The Talmud says that if Moses had entered the Land of Israel, the people would never have worshipped idols. As a result, the destruction of the Temple would not have occurred.

However, explains, the Chasam Sofer, this would not have prevented all of our problems. The Talmud tells us that the second Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred. Such hatred is caused and supported by gossip and tale bearing. Had Moses showed the People of Israel the power of the tongue, for good as well as evil, the second Temple destruction could have been avoided as well.

Moses, for all his greatness and holiness, in one sense contributed to the destruction of both Temples, and the resultant exile of our People.

One can, with improper speech, cause a floodgate of pain and anguish. And once we say something, we can't call back the floodwaters we have caused.

Water flowed like tears from that rock. The message Moses WAS SUPPOSED to teach us is that you don't have to hit someone to make them cry.

Have a great Shabbos

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