

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parasha Chukat**  
**July 16, 2016**

**פרשת חקת**  
**י' בתמוז תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 19:1-22:1

In this *parasha*, Hashem instructs Moshe and Aaron regarding the *parah adumah* (red heifer); Miriam dies; to bring forth water, Moshe hits a rock rather than speaking to it; Aharon dies.

The order of the stories in chapter 20 can teach us a number of lessons about leadership. The first thing that happens is that Miriam dies. Then the Bnei Yisrael complain to Moshe and Aharon because there is no water. Hashem tells Moshe to speak to a rock to draw out water; Moshe hits the rock instead of speaking to it, and, as a result, Hashem tells him that he will not lead the people into the Land of Israel. Moshe then negotiates unsuccessfully with the king of Edom for the Israelites to cross his land to facilitate their journey to Israel. Finally, Aharon dies.

Many commentators and scholars wonder why Hashem punished Moshe so harshly for what seems like a small misstep. Perhaps it was because Moshe did not listen precisely to what Hashem said (verse 8):

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.

Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aharon your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, so that it gives forth

its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink.

Perhaps it was because Moshe addressed the people not as the narrator does, using the words עם – *ahm* (nation), בני ישראל – *Bnei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel), עדה – *eidah* (assembly), or קהל – *k'hal* (congregation), but as מורים – *morim*, you rebellious ones.

Perhaps it was just that, as a member of the previous generation, Moshe was out of touch with the kind of leader the people now needed.

Whatever the reason, the punishment seems especially harsh given that according to the chronology, Moshe's beloved sister, Miriam, had just died. God gave Moshe no "slack" for this. Is the message that no matter what is happening in a leader's life, he or she must always function at an optimal level?

Following the water debacle, Moshe tries to negotiate with the king of Edom, who remains dispassionately solid in his refusal to let the Bnei Yisrael traverse his land (verses 14-21):

יֵד וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מַלְאָכִים מִקְדָּשׁ, אֶל-מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם: כֹּה אָמַר, אֲחִיךָ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵתָּה יָדַעְתָּ, אֵת כָּל-הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מְצַאֲתָנוּ. טו וַיֵּרְדוּ אֲבֹתֵינוּ  
מִצְרַיִמָּה, וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים רַבִּים; וַיִּרְעוּ לָנוּ מִצְרַיִם, וְלֹא אֲבֹתֵינוּ. טז  
וַנִּצְעַק אֶל-ה', וַיִּשְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ, וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ, וַיִּצְאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם; וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי  
בְּקֶדֶשׁ, עִיר קָצָה גְבוּלָךְ. יז נִעְבְּרָה-נָא בְּאַרְצְךָ, לֹא נֵעֲבֹר בְּשָׂדֶה וּבְכָרֶם,  
וְלֹא נִשְׁתָּה, מִי בָּאֵר: דָּרֶךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ נִלְךְ, לֹא נִטָּה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאל, עַד אֲשֶׁר-  
נֵעֲבֹר, גְּבוּלָךְ. יח וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדוֹם, לֹא תֵעֲבֹר בִּי--פֶן-בְּחָרְבִי, אֵצֶא  
לְקִרְאֲתְךָ. יט וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּמִסְלָה נֵעֲלֶה, וְאִם-מִימֶיךָ  
נִשְׁתָּה אָנֹכִי וּמִקְנִי, וְנִתַּתִּי מִכָּרֶם; רַק אִין-דָּבָר, בְּרִגְלֵי אֲעֹבְרָה. כ וַיֹּאמֶר,  
לֹא תֵעֲבֹר; וַיִּצְא אֲדוֹם לְקִרְאֲתוֹ, בְּעַם כָּבֵד וּבִיד חֲזָקָה. כא וַיָּמְאוּ אֲדוֹם,  
נָתַן אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל, עֹבֵר, בְּגִבְלוֹ; וַיֵּט יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵעָלָיו.

**14** And Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: 'Thus says your brother Yisrael: You know all the travail that has befallen us; **15** how our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time; and the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and our ancestors; **16** and when we cried to Hashem, Hashem heard our voice, and sent an angel, and brought us forth out of Egypt; and, behold, we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border. **17** Let us pass, please,

through your land; we will not pass through field or through vineyard, neither will we drink of the water of the wells; we will go along the king's highway, we will not turn aside to the right nor to the left, until we have passed your border.' **18** And Edom said to him: 'You shall not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against you.' **19** And the Bnei Yisrael said to him: 'We will go up by the highway; and if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, then will I give the price thereof; let me only pass through on my feet; there is no harm.' **20** And he said: 'You shall not pass through.' And Edom came out against him with many people, and with a strong hand. **21** So Edom refused to give Yisrael passage through his border; Yisrael turned away from him.

Is this section here to show us how Moshe picked himself up, proverbially brushed himself off, and continued leading the Bnei Yisrael? Did he begin to focus on “foreign affairs” to take the spotlight off of the recent “domestic issues”? Or does it come to contrast the emotional leadership style of Moshe with the impassive style of the king of Edom?

At the end of chapter 20 Aharon dies, bracketing the chapter along with the death of Miriam at the beginning of the chapter. Moshe is now devoid of both of his beloved siblings and becomes an even more poignant character than before.

This chapter leaves us with many questions about leadership. What kind of leadership style is best? Should we hold leaders to higher standards than the masses? Should leaders appear invulnerable, or can they show their human sides?

The wonderful thing about this chapter is that it gives us no straight answers. It raises the questions, and we can now go forth and figure out the message the Torah is trying to give us. Living in the Nation’s Capital at this time in history makes these questions especially relevant to us.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Please choose one or more questions above and discuss your view of them.
- Choose any leader you’d like: a teacher, a community leader, a national figure. Decide what kind of leadership style that person has, and whether you think this is the best leadership style for this person and position.