



## Parashat Chukat

By Rabbi David Silverberg

### **Maimonides on Mei Meriva**

The story of Mei Meriva, which appears in Parashat Chukat, ranks among the most perplexing narratives in the entire Torah, one which all commentators struggle to explain. The incident concludes with a severe punishment issued against Moshe and Aharon, though the precise nature of their wrongdoing remains unclear. One of the more famous approaches taken to explain this episode appears in Maimonides' *Shemoneh Perakim*, where Maimonides points to Moshe and Aharon's anger as the essence of their wrongdoing. Whereas Rashi (20:12) understood that Moshe and Aharon violated God's command by smiting the rock to produce water, rather than speaking to the rock, Maimonides focuses on the words spoken by Moshe and Aharon before they hit the rock: "*Shim'u na ha-morim ha-min ha-sela ha-zeh notzi lakhem mayim*" – "Listen, O rebellious ones! Shall we produce water from this rock?" (20:10). Moshe and Aharon spoke angrily at the people – "Listen, O rebellious ones!" – and for this inappropriate expression of frustration they were gravely punished.

Support for Maimonides' theory may be drawn from the Midrash *Devarim Rabba* (2), which comments: "On account of a single sin on Moshe's record – that he censured Your children and said to them, 'Listen, now, O rebellious ones!' You punished and censured him..." The Midrash clearly attributes Moshe's punishment to his harsh, unwarranted condemnation of the people, as Maimonides explains.

One might, however, wonder why Maimonides overlooked Moshe and Aharon's deviation from God's instructions. The text clearly states that God commanded Moshe and Aharon to speak to the rock (20:8), while they hit the rock, instead (20:11). Wouldn't this deviation be the most obvious indication of Moshe and Aharon's wrongdoing? Why does Maimonides (and the Midrash) overlook this point, and focus instead on the words spoken by Moshe and Aharon?

For one thing, Maimonides' approach obviates the need to explain the severity of Moshe's hitting, rather than speaking to, the rock. Many commentators have wondered why producing water by hitting a rock is deemed any less a miracle than producing water by speaking to a rock, such that Moshe and Aharon were guilty of failing to adequately sanctify the divine Name. According to Maimonides' approach, of course, the difference between hitting and speaking is irrelevant, as it was the leaders' speech, and not actions, that rendered them worthy of divine punishment.

In truth, however, a careful reading of the text may reveal that Moshe and Aharon did not disobey God's instructions at all. The Torah records God's command to Moshe as follows: "Take the staff and assemble the congregation – you and your brother Aharon. You shall speak to the rock in their presence and it shall give forth its water. You shall produce water for them from the rock, and give the congregation and their

animals to drink” (20:8). If we read these verses closely, we reveal a seeming redundancy in God’s instructions: “You shall speak to the rock...and it shall give forth its water. You shall produce water...” Once God informs Moshe that the rock would “give forth its water” in response to Moshe and Aharon’s speech, why does He then repeat, “You shall produce water”?

One surprisingly simple answer is to reread the clause, “You shall speak to the rock...and it shall give forth its water” as “You shall speak to the rock...that it shall give forth its water.” Meaning, the phrase, “it shall give forth its water” is not God’s prediction of what would happen, but rather the content of Moshe’s speech at the rock. God here instructs Moshe and Aharon to announce that the rock would give forth water. Then, after issuing this proclamation, Moshe and Aharon were to “produce water” – in the same manner in which Moshe had produced water at Mount Sinai some forty years earlier: by hitting the rock (Shemot 17:6). According to this reading, God commanded Moshe and Aharon to announce at the rock that it would give forth water, and then produce the water by hitting the rock.

If so, then Moshe and Aharon did not act wrongly by hitting the rock. Their only offense – as Maimonides asserted – was the resentful and disparaging manner in which they spoke to the people in making their announcement at the rock. We might speculate that Maimonides adopted this reading of the narrative, and therefore concluded that the sin involved not the act of hitting the rock, but rather the anger Moshe and Aharon expressed to *Benei Yisrael*.