

Being Sorely Challenged to Keep the Faith

R. Yaakov Bieler
Parashat Chukat

Sinning continues, but this time others are ensnared in the iniquity of the Jewish people.

In Parashat Chukat, rather than continuing to focus upon the shortcomings of the Jewish people, as was the case in the Parshiot beginning with BeHa'alotcha,^{1 2} we turn our attention to a fatal error committed by Moshe and Aharon (20:1-13).

The people once again face a lack of water.³ Their thirst causes them to invoke the complaints that they have aired in the past, remarking how they would have been better off dying at some previous juncture (20:3),⁴ or never leaving Egypt in the first place (20:4-5).⁵

¹ BeHa'alotcha:	a) 10:33	Fleeing Mt. Sinai.
	b) 11:1-3	General murmuring against HaShem.
	c) 11:4-35	The rejection of the Manna and expressing a desire for meat, other foods that they claim they consumed in Egypt.
Shelach	d) 13:1-14:39	The sin of the spies and the people's reaction to the negative majority report.
	e) 14:40-45	The ill-fated attempt on the part of some of the people to enter Israel, despite God's Decree that those above the age of 20 at the time of the Exodus were to die in the desert.
	f) 15:32-36	The wood gatherer who publicly violated Shabbat.
Korach	g) 16:1-17:28	Korach's rebellion, and continued challenges to the High Priesthood of Aharon.

² An exception to this series of anecdotes reflecting the shortcomings of various portions of the Jewish people appears in 12:1-15, where Miriam and Aharon speak critically of Moshe. While it is possible that their comments echoed more general sentiments that were widespread among the people, the text suggests that Moshe's siblings were the specific perpetrators of this sin. Perhaps this story helps to set the stage for the deaths of all three of Amram and Yocheved's children prior to the Jewish people's entry into Israel. If in fact these three individuals constituted the leadership of the people beginning with the Exodus and throughout the forty years of wandering in the desert, the eventual inability of this generation to enter Canaan reflects poorly on its leadership as well, and therefore it was only a matter of time until they too would demonstrate why an entirely new generation, including leadership, would be required for the new era in Jewish biblical history. Such an understanding would appear to be borne out by the juxtaposition of the death of Miriam (20:1) with the sin of striking the rock in order to extract water that takes place in Kadesh (20:2 ff.)

³ Previous instances when water was an issue in the desert and precipitated conflict between Moshe and the people are Shemot 15:22-26 and 17:1-7, the latter (17:6) serving as the paradigm that probably led to Moshe striking the rock, even though he had been instructed by God in BaMidbar 20:8 to merely speak to it.

⁴ BaMidbar 14:2; 16:13; 17:6 (Although this latter instance is an accusation regarding the deaths of Korach and his followers, at least one implication of the complaint is that just as you caused them to be killed here in the desert for reasons that we do not deem justified, we are fearful that we will suffer the same fate.)

⁵ Shemot 14:11-12; 16:3; 17:3; BaMidbar 11:5; 14:3, 4.

The various ways in which this particular transgression is expressed.

Da'at Mikra⁶ notes that the sin of Moshe and Aharon is referred to in several places in the bible in different ways, using different terminology.

20:12 d.h. "Because you didn't HE'EMANTEM (believe) in Me to sanctify Me..."

In the book of Devarim it is written: (Devarim 32:51) "...because 'ME'ALTEM' (you trespassed) against Me... in that you didn't 'KIDASHEM' (sanctify) Me." And in Parshat VaEtchanan (Devarim 3:26), it is mentioned in a more general manner, "And HaShem was displeased with me (Moshe) because of you (the Jewish people)." Yet, later (in BaMidbar) it is written (27:14): "When you 'MERITEM' (rebelled) against My Mouth in the Tzin desert, during the dispute of the congregation when you could have sanctified Me via the water before their eyes." In these verses, the Tora is revealing a glimpse and simultaneously concealing a glimpse, and one has to infer that which is not said from that which is said, i.e., there was some sort of transgression here, and the punishment (to Moshe and Aharon) in the end is being given "LEMA'ANCHEM" (because of you / for your sake), for the good of the people, in order that they will learn (from this particular negative example) how to walk before HaShem, particularly future leaders, who must be role models for everyone else. It is hard to evaluate the nuances of the various expressions (appearing in Capital letters above), which terms should be viewed as reflecting a more severe transgression than the others...We have to be satisfied with the conclusion that the lack of specific information about the sin connotes that the sin is not what is important, but rather the lessons that we should attempt to derive from it.⁷

Focusing upon one of these expressions in particular.

Nevertheless, it is striking that among the accusations that are made against Moshe and Aharon, is BaMidbar 20:12's contention "Because you didn't HE'EMANTEM (believe) in Me..."—that these great men who personally experienced prophecy, were lacking in their belief in HaShem. Such a comment flies in the face of the Tora's powerful endorsement of at least Moshe only a few chapters earlier in BaMidbar 12:7. In response to the critique by Miriam and Aharon of their sibling, HaShem Notes that not only is Moshe's level of prophecy profoundly more direct and intense than that of any other prophet, as reiterated in Devarim 34:10 "No other prophet will arise in Israel like Moshe..." but "in all of My House he is Ne'eman (FAITHFUL / BELIEVING)." The other terminologies referenced by Da'at Mikra, i.e., "Me'ila" (trespass), failure to achieve "Kiddush HaShem" (sanctifying God's Name), and even "Meri" (rebellion), are finite actions or lacks thereof, and even the most perfect of human beings could be guilty of an occasional lapse,

⁶ Da'at Mikra—Sefer BaMidbar, commentary by Yechiel Tzvi Moshkovitz, Mosad HaRav Kook, Yerushalayim, 1988, p. 236.

⁷ Such lessons may include: a) The equanimity with which Moshe and Aharon accept the Divine Decree; b) God Holds righteous people accountable to a higher standard than ordinary mortals; c) Even after a decree is made prohibiting entry into Israel, Moshe and Aharon continue to serve HaShem and perform His Mitzvot without rancor; d) Both Moshe and Aharon are positively disposed towards their successors, Yehoshua and Eliezer respectively; and e) God's Instructions are to be followed with extremely high precision, leaving little if any margin for error.

as in Kohelet 7:20, “Because when it comes to people, there is no righteous person in the world who does only good and never sins.” But to say of Moshe⁸ that his faith in HaShem leaves something to be desired, is counterintuitive, to say the least. Given the numerous Divine Interactions and Revelations in which Moshe participated, as well as the Heavenly Promises that Moshe witnessed either fulfilled or on their way to being fulfilled, how could he lose confidence in the Divine?

Hypotheses attempting to account for this “lack of faith” on Moshe’s part.

Three commentators suggest that the transgression alluded to with regard to a lack of “belief” has to do with Moshe’s current emotional state as a result of his relationship with the Jewish people while serving in the role of HaShem’s Representative to them.

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch understands Moshe’s transgression as arising from his perception that the Jewish people have not changed at all over the long period during which the prophet has exerted so much effort on their behalf. Moshe recognizes that God’s Actualizing the plan that He outlined to his prophet at the burning bush in Shemot 3:17 is dependent not only upon HaShem’s Power, but also on the people’s exercising their free will and embracing the project. However, each time they complain afresh and threaten to return to Egypt, the prospects of the plan coming to fruition become more and more unlikely. As time goes on, Moshe finds it increasingly difficult to keep his personality and his sense of personal frustration and disappointment in the background as he carries out HaShem’s Directives. By virtue of Moshe’s failing to remain as patient and optimistic as God apparently “Is”, KaVeYachol, with respect to how the great majority of the people will eventually come around to HaShem’s Designs for them, indicates a weakening of faith on Moshe’s part, which the biblical text duly notes.

The MaHaRaL MiPrague, in his commentary on RaShI, Gur Aryeh, suggests that the anger that Moshe evidenced in BaMidbar 20:10, when he says, “Hear now, rebels! Will we bring forth water to you from this rock?” is a symptom of a lack of faith. An individual who has full confidence in HaShem will carry out the Divine Directives with joy and enthusiasm. Furthermore, when the people see such a positive, upbeat disposition towards HaShem modeled their leaders, they will be more likely encouraged to develop similar feelings of faith and trust; conversely ill-feelings will only reinforce an antagonistic attitudes that appear already to be entrenched.⁹

⁸ A recurring problem for commentators with regard to the issue at hand is why Aharon is equated with Moshe in terms of punishment. While it may be difficult to understand how Moshe could have a lapse in his faith, at least according to a literal reading of the biblical text, Aharon has not had the sort of direct prophetic experiences that his younger brother has had. Perhaps in order to explain Aharon’s punishment, it is necessary to resort to the Rabbinic tradition, that prior to Moshe’s being sent to Egypt in Shemot 3:10, Aharon served in the capacity of God’s Representative to the Jews. See RaShI on Shemot 4:10.

⁹ “He’Emantem” appears to be in the causative form, i.e., “You failed to cause belief by others in Me.” Such an interpretation would parallel the commentary on Devarim 6:5 in Yoma 86a, “And you will love the Lord your God...”—and you will cause the Heavenly Name to be loved by others...”

According to Moses Mendelsohn,¹⁰ the inability of Moshe and Aharon to have the courage to face down the contentious mob, revealed a lack of faith and trust in HaShem. In the past, at least Moshe¹¹ had stood his ground before such complaints,¹² but this time even he turns and runs, seeking shelter in the Tent of Meeting, the area from which emanate Divine Prophecies and Revelations (20:6). If judges are enjoined in Devarim 1:17 to refuse to be intimidated by litigants,¹³ regardless of how threatening they may appear to be, because they are expected to take literally (Tehillim 82:1) “Elokim Nitzav BeAdat Keil, BeKerev Elokim Yishpat” (God is to be found in a congregation of God, i.e., a Jewish court, He Will Judge in the midst of the judges), how much more so does this apply to those who are charged with leading the people into war, as well as solving difficult and often explosive internal domestic issues. Showing fear reflects the absence of a belief that HaShem Will Offer support to those who defend His Interests and carry out His Will.

Conclusion.

All three of the commentators interpreting Moshe and Aharon’s lack of belief and faith, point to a moment in their careers when the cumulative weight of their responsibilities finally

¹⁰ Quoted in Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Sheva Shanim Shel Sichot Al Parshat HaShavua* 1976-1982, Israel, 2000, p. 706.

¹¹ We have referred in previous essays to R. Tanchum bar Chanilai’s contention in Sanhedrin 7a that when Aharon saw how Chur was murdered while attempting to stop the effort to worship the Golden Calf (Shemot 32:5), he rationalized why he should acquiesce to the people’s demands. So even if Aharon shies away from confrontations, it is surprising to see Moshe do so, a pattern that already appears during Moshe’s early life in Shemot 2:12, 13, and 17.

¹² No mention of a retreat is made in:

Shemot 14:13; 15:25; 16:4; 17:4;

BaMidbar 11:2; 11:10 (While in this case, a sense of exasperation is sensed from Moshe’s question regarding the type of leadership he is expected to supply [11:11-15], and his self-appraisal that he cannot meet the needs that are being demanded of him, nevertheless, there is no sense of his fleeing from before the people);

Ibid. 12:2; 14:4 (In this situation, Moshe and Aharon’s “falling on their faces” indicates a sense of desperation and futility by the people’s desire to return to Egypt, the fact that they do this in front of the people, if anything, demonstrates that they were not afraid of the people doing them any physical harm, since by prostrating themselves, they make themselves even more vulnerable to attack.);

Ibid. 16:4 (Another instance of Moshe’s “falling on his face” as a means to demonstrate how concerned he is over this development, rather than fear due to the threat of harm.)

In the interests of full disclosure, Shemot 5:21 could be interpreted as though Moshe is cowed by the complaints of the Jewish taskmasters, and “returns to God.” However, this could be attributed either to Moshe’s inexperience—this is the first time that he is dealing with the Jewish people and Pharaoh, and therefore does not as yet have the self-confidence to withstand their criticisms—or, as stated by RaShBaM, “returning to God” may refer to some designated place, similar to the “burning bush” in Shemot 3:2 ff., where Moshe and God communicated, once Moshe was in Egypt, rather than a shelter or hiding place.

In BaMidbar 14:10, the people attempt to stone Kalev and Yehoshua, the two spies that gave favorable reports and stood in opposition to their 10 colleagues. However, there is no indication that Moshe and Aharon are also threatened with such a fate.

¹³ Sanhedrin 7a draws a distinction between withdrawing before any of the arguments have been heard in order to avoid coming into potential conflict with someone of whom the judge is afraid, and once the trial begins in earnest, when the judge no longer is given the option to refuse to try the case.

gets the best of them. Individuals, no matter how holy and spiritual, are subject to depression and discouragement when those for whom they are responsible are maddeningly obstinate and uncooperative, when life and its responsibilities are perceived as burdensome rather than joyful, and/or thoughts of personal safety overwhelm one's idealism and sacrificial devotion to a cause that is greater than oneself. Average individuals are allowed occasional lapses in their religious personae and are regularly offered additional opportunities to atone for their gaffs; but not individuals on the level of a Moshe or an Aharon. The margin for error shrinks exponentially with each increased level of responsibility,¹⁴ to the point that it becomes truly inevitable that each great Jewish leader will sooner or later encounter his/her Waterloo, when a goal is not met or concentration is lost.

¹⁴ Yevamot 121b "HaKadosh Baruch Huh is particular with those around Him "KeChut HaSa'ara" (within a tolerance of the width of a hair).