



## BAMIDBAR

Chukat / 7 Tammuz

Water from a Stone

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## WATER FROM A STONE: FINDING GENTLENESS BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

### ABSTRACT

50 years ago, in 1967, shortly after the Six-Day War, Israel Knesset member Meir Vilner, a Communist, was stabbed by a right wing activist who was upset at Vilner's pro-Arab, pro-USSR and anti-war stance. At the time a journalist wrote that the attacker should have stuck the knife in deeper and twisted it. How would you react to that? How did the Rebbe react to that?

Having just honored Rebbe's 23rd *yahrzeit* on *Gimmel Tammuz*, we seek to reconnect and recommit to the Rebbe's teachings and directives. The Rebbe's sharp reply to the journalist teaches us a tremendous lesson gleaned from this week's Torah reading – how to speak even to a rock ... how to speak to someone who has a mind and heart of stone.

What do we do when we encounter a difficult person in life – someone who is hard-hearted, hard-headed, hard-boiled, blocked, stubborn, unreachable? How do we break through?

When someone is so blocked, do we even have the right to “intrude” into that person's psyche and try to “force” open doors, without the proper invitation? And even when we do have that right and that invitation, how should we go about it?

This week's Torah reading – in relating the incident known as *Mei Merivah* (“Waters of Dispute”) – illuminates for us the difficulty, the challenge and the proper method to be employed when trying to pierce a ... “stone.”

This sermon analyzes what Moses did wrong in striking the rock, instead of speaking to it, and it presents the Torah guidelines that can be applied when trying to break through the hard defenses of another, in order to be heard by the gentle spirit that dwells inside the armor.

### 1. Stubborn Mules (Humor)

After several years of marriage, a young couple – both hard-working professionals – realized that they were drifting apart. He was building a new business; she was toiling 90 hour weeks to become a partner in her law firm. Their busy schedules rarely allowed quality time for each other. Recognizing the toll this was taking on their relationship, they decided to schedule a few vacation days to spend together without any distractions.

Each of them pulled out their respective calendars. “How about next year, say June 24?” “No, I’m busy then.” “How about August 15?” “No, that won’t work.” After much discussion, finally they found a mutually acceptable date two years down the road.

The fateful day arrived. They packed up their automobile and set out to drive upstate to a pre-designated country spot. As luck would have it, they got into some petty quarrel just as they got into the car. And each of them, obstinate as they both were, refused to yield.

So they ended up just driving in cold silence, each refusing to speak to the other. Hours passed of this silent treatment – a silence is louder than any words – and by now they were already well upstate. Seeing some mules grazing in the field at the side of the road, the man finally thought of a way to break the silence. He turned to his wife, and pointing to the mule (known for their obstinacy), he asked: “Any relation of yours?” The wife quipped back: “Yes, by marriage.”

A funny story, but not so funny when we encounter such a person in life – hard-hearted, hard-headed, hard-boiled ... blocked, stubborn, unreachable.

## 2. Penetrating the Impenetrable

Who of us has not been guilty from time to time to being stubborn and hard-headed like a mule? And who of us has not met a person that cannot be reached?

We have all come across such people – whether it be in our personal or professional relationships – who are impenetrable like stone. As much as we might try, we simply can’t get through to them. At times we may even get so exasperated that we just want to wring their necks and knock some sense into them. Is there any way to reach such a person? Secondly, should we even try?

Obviously, there are no generalities or generic formulas when it comes to human beings. Every person is another story ... every soul has his or her own unique issues, which must be addressed sensitively case by case.

We also must always examine our own role in trying to help another: Is our motivation healthy, or are we crossing inappropriate boundaries? Are we too closely involved and not the right person to challenge the other?

And we must take great care before assaulting a person’s defenses. When someone is blocked – and who among us is not blocked at times? – we may not have the right to “intrude” into a person’s psyche and try to “force” open doors, without the proper invitation. And even when we do have that right and that invitation, great sensitivity is required.

Above all, we must always ensure that the objective of freeing a person of his or her impediments is for that

person's benefit, and not for some hidden agenda of our own.

Obviously, all these qualifications do not preclude the possibility that people can just be locked in their own limited perspective and, if we care, we should do everything in our power to challenge them ... to help them open their closed minds or hearts, which – because of their defenses – may appear as hard as a stone. Sometimes, when trust and love are in place, we do need to be aggressive in challenging and unblocking obstructions in others.

But, with all that said, the Torah does offer us some powerful guiding principles for reaching the hardest rock – principles that can be applied to every given situation, with due consideration to each individual's particular issues.

Indeed, an episode in this week's Torah reading – called *Mei Merivah* (“Waters of Dispute”) – illuminates for us the difficulty, the challenge and the proper method to be employed when trying to pierce a ... “stone.”

### 3. Waters of Dispute

During the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites had a constant supply of fresh water. But suddenly, just after Miriam's death, the water stopped flowing. And this led to a mutiny against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. As the Book of Numbers relates:

The people argued with Moses. “We wish that we had died together with our brothers before G-d!” they declared. “Why did you bring G-d's congregation to this desert? So that we and our livestock should die? Why did you take us out of Egypt and bring us to this terrible place? It is not a place for seeds, or for fig trees, grapevines or pomegranate trees, and there is no water to drink<sup>1</sup>.”

In response, G-d told Moses to take his staff and assemble the congregation, and He specifically instructed him:

“Speak to the rock in their presence so that it will give forth its water. You shall bring forth water for them from the rock, and give the congregation and their livestock to drink.”

Moses did what he was told by G-d, but not precisely. Once the congregation was assembled, he shouted at them: “Listen now you rebels! Shall we produce water for you now from this rock?!”

And then, he struck the rock twice. (And, of course, water gushed out.)

Because of this episode, G-d punished Moses:

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 20:2-5.

“You did not have enough faith in Me to sanctify Me in the presence of the children of Israel. Therefore, you shall not bring this assembly to that land that I have given you<sup>2</sup>.”

## 4. What Happened Here

What exactly happened here? And what is the meaning behind this story?

Why did Moses fail to follow G-d's command exactly and, instead of speaking to the rock, why did he strike it? And why was this not okay with G-d?

We might recall that 40 years earlier, G-d actually instructed Moses to strike a rock<sup>3</sup>, when the people were similarly unhappy about the lack of water. So why did G-d alter His instructions here?

And the biggest question of all: Isn't drawing water from a rock – whether by striking it or speaking to it – equally miraculous? So what's the difference? Aren't both acts of faith? And if so, why does G-d accuse Moses of not having enough faith?

And finally, why does this subtle change merit such a huge punishment? Moses, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, cannot enter the Promised Land! Is this not penalty disproportionate, considering the relatively minor infraction?

## 5. Vital Lesson in Communication

This story teaches us a vital lesson in communication and education, and in the respect we must always have for the human spirit.

As the Israelites were concluding their arduous journey and about to enter the Promised Land, G-d wanted to convey a critical message – how to deal with the rock-like resistance that the Jews would face in all generations to come.

The rock represents the hard coat of armor that we so often surround ourselves with for protection. We all have various defense mechanisms that we develop to protect our own vulnerability. This is especially true of people who have been hurt or abused. For a continuous onslaught of broken promises and disappointments, betrayals and boundary breaches, especially at a young, formative age, erodes trust.

What is the ultimate way to pierce such a rock ... to produce water from such a hard stone?

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 20:12.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 17:6

The answer lies in how we look at the “rock.” If we see the hard armor as the natural state of the human being, then the only way in is through aggressive means. Break the shell and enter. Strike the rock.

But if we recognize that within the stone, regardless of its seemingly impenetrable exterior, lies a spring of fresh water, that the pure soul within each of us retains its majesty, no matter the harsh experiences of life, then ultimately the soul can be reached by speaking to it with sincerity and love. Even the hardest “rock” contains a soft center, a moist core that may lay dormant, but remains alive.

## 6. Aggressive vs. Gentle Approach

Initially, striking the rock may produce some results. Indeed, at times it may be necessary to use force, in order to break down resistance and develop behavioral discipline.

But the aggressive approach alone will only produce temporary results. It may force the armored psyche to open up a bit, but it will not last. And it will not truly open up the person.

The psyche within will remain open only if it feels safe and nurtured.

Observe a child. Unjaded, an innocent youngster will be receptive to those that love him or her. But after repeated broken promises and disillusionments, the child will begin closing up ... sulking in silence ... retreating into a secret corner. As the years pass, these defenses will harden, and it will become increasingly difficult to penetrate the tough exterior.

Speaking gently and from the heart to that child now grown into adult will ultimately affect true change. For words from the heart enter the heart.

Just how true this is can be seen from the following story:

In the late 1800's, Poland issued a ban against kosher slaughter of animals. It is told that Rabbi Yisrael Meyer Kagan, better known as the Chafetz Chaim, came before a Polish official (known for his hard stance with the Jews) to argue for the rescinding of this decree. The Chafetz Chaim made his case, pleading passionately, *in Yiddish*.

When he was finished, the translator began translating what he had said into Polish, but the official stopped him. He was so moved by the Chafetz Chaim's words, even though he didn't understand them, that he agreed to do all he could to help rescind the decree.

[So] the form of delivery matters very much. And the distinction between an aggressive strike and a gentle word is not a trivial one. It can mean the difference between life and death.

Do we see a person, even a very blocked one, as an inanimate object – an impenetrable “rock” or irreparable “damaged goods”? Or do we see the person as a vital soul, still retaining its purity, even if it is hidden under a layer of armor?

## 7. G-d’s Message to Moses

In the episode of *Mei Merivah* (“Waters of Dispute”), G-d was (in effect) telling Moses:

“Speak to the stone, do not strike it. Have confidence that you can get through to the people. You may not see immediate results, you may not feel that you are getting through. But have faith. Believe in their soul. Know that within the hardened shell lies a gentle spirit, waiting to be released, waiting to be loved, waiting to be nurtured.”

Witness those special parents that never give up on a seemingly unreachable child ... witness those loving ones that continue to speak to their beloved even as he or she lies in a comatose state ... witness those indomitable spirits that refuse to succumb to suffering.

Moses obviously knew all this. Yet, he was clearly disappointed that, after 40 years, the Israelites were still complaining and quarrelling with G-d. He felt that they needed to learn a lesson through a tough approach – through striking the rock.

G-d, however, was telling him that the strong approach was appropriate at the outset of the journey, 40 years ago. Now at the border of the Promised Land, when there was the need to establish a long-term, sustainable system, it was time to learn the art of “speaking to the rock.”

Thus G-d said to Moses: “As long as you do not know how to speak to the rock, you cannot lead this people into the Promised Land.”

## 8. G-d’s Message to Us

You may be tempted to just want to wring a resistant person’s neck. Often, a person’s blocks can be maddening. You want to yell at them: “Open your eyes! Can’t you see that you just are not getting it?” This can be particularly exasperating when the person is convinced, absolutely convinced, that he or she gets it.

Despite these feelings, you must always remember that beneath the rocky surface lies a gentle soul, “a still, soft voice,” that can be reached only through gentleness.

Sometimes you may need to apply “shock treatment” on shake up a person. But this needs to be done with discretion and sensitivity. Ultimately, even the strong approach needs to be coupled with “speaking to the

rock” softly, from the heart.

## 9. The Rebbe’s Gentleness

This past Tuesday, we honored the 23rd *Yahrzeit* of the Rebbe, on *Gimmel Tammuz*.

On this occasion, I would like to share with you a story from the Rebbe, the Moses of our generation, which illustrates how to speak even to someone as hard as stone.

Meir Vilner was a longtime member of the Israeli Knesset. He was the youngest and longest surviving signatory of the Israeli Declaration of Independence of 1948. But he was also the Jewish leader of the Communist party in Israel (*Maki* and later *Rakab*), and was hated by other Jews for his overt pro-Arab and pro-USSR positions, including his opposition to the 1967 Six-Day war, whose 50th anniversary we are marking this year.

The animosity reached a peak a short while after the Six-Day War, when he was stabbed by Abraham Ben-Moshe. He survived the attack.

A prominent journalist at the time wrote an article *condoning* the stabbing, and adding that the attacker, who used a nine-centimeter knife, made two mistakes: He should have stuck the knife in deeper and twisted it as well...

How would you have reacted to this episode and to this writer’s suggestion?

Now let me tell you how the Rebbe reacted.

It just so happened that this prominent journalist spent Yom Kippur and Sukkot of that year at 770. Reb Zvi Greenwald was also present at that time and relates what happened.

When the journalist came to the Rebbe on Erev Yom Kippur to receive the traditional *lekach* (sweet honey cake), the Rebbe told him: *Nisht azoi shreibt men oif a Yidde’n*, (“This is not the way one writes about a Jew.”)

The writer responded to the Rebbe: “Vilner is a Jew?! He is a Jew hater!” The Rebbe calmly replied: *Vos a Yid iz vet men redder Sukkos*. (“What a Jew is we will discuss on Sukkot.”)

A day before Sukkot the journalist requested of Rabbi Chodakov, the Rebbe’s chief of staff, to schedule time for him to see the Rebbe during Sukkot. Rabbi Chodakov told him that the Rebbe does not see people during the holiday, but he would be happy to schedule a meeting afterward. The writer replied that he was returning to Israel immediately after the *chag*, and besides, the Rebbe specifically told him that we will discuss what a Jew is on Sukkot!

Rabbi Chodakov told him he would double check with the Rebbe. As promised, Rabbi Chodakov called him back a short while later confirming that, indeed, there would be no private meeting during the *chag*.



What the Rebbe meant by his original remark to the journalist remained a mystery to him, until...

In those days, on the second day of Sukkot, it was the Rebbe's custom to have a *Farbrengen* in the sukkah built in the courtyard adjacent to 770. This journalist came to the *Farbrengen* and stood in the back of the sukkah. And as he did, the Rebbe began saying:

*Un vos iz a Yid?* ("And what is a Jew?") The journalist immediately realized that the Rebbe, true to his word, was continuing on Sukkot the conversation that he began with him earlier.

A Jew, the Rebbe went on, is described at the end of the Talmudic Tractate *Chagigah: Posbei Yisroel she'melayin mitzvos ke'rimon*, ("Sinners of Israel [who] are filled with mitzvahs like a pomegranate [is filled with seeds].")

Why, asked the Rebbe, does the Talmud compare them specifically to a pomegranate?

After all, there are other fruits which are filled with seeds. Because in a pomegranate the seeds are the primary part of the fruit, and they are surrounded by a thin peel, demonstrating that the peel is not part of the fruit. In many other fruits, the seeds, the peel and all the surrounding flesh are all one, unlike a pomegranate where the peel is a secondary element. This teaches us that similarly, a Jew, even one who has sinned, has an essence filled with mitzvahs.

Who is a Jew? A Jew is someone filled – *melayin* – with mitzvahs. And his sins are but an external membrane that is not an inherent part of him.

Therefore, the Rebbe concluded, the way to reach a Jew is not by attacking or assaulting him, but by speaking to him with kindness and sensitivity. Reach into his heart with words from the heart, and you can melt even a stone...

As we honor the Rebbe's life this week, we learn from him how to look at a Jew, even one who may be hard like a rock, even one who may be a Communist spouting anti-Semitic slogans ... not with harsh critiques, but with gentleness.

That is the way to reach the heart and soul of a Jew. Obviously, at times we may need to "strike the rock," but the overall (and especially the long-term) approach ought to be gentleness. For when we speak words from the heart, they pierce the stone and enter the heart. This is the key to releasing the powerful reservoirs concealed within the recesses of the soul, even a soul trapped inside of a rock hard exterior.

And this is the key to entering the Promised Land. The Rebbe taught us the method that can help put the finishing touches on reaching Jews everywhere, and of all backgrounds. The Rebbe trained us to see the "water" within each person we meet, even within those that may appear like indifferent "stones" and apathetic "rocks."

Speak with sensitivity, with words from the heart, and water will pour out of the hardest rock.

Speaking to a “hard rock” instead of striking it can be the difference between entering or not entering the Promised Land. May we all merit to do so speedily in our days. Amen.

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