Growing From Our Mistakes

In January I had just acquired a new IPhone 6 plus, after the LogicBoard of my phone stopped working. The following week I was in the Dominican Republic with Karina and Ariela. Karina went snorkeling while I played with Ariela. I had my phone in my swimsuit pocket to take pictures as I picked her up and put her down in the water. By the time I realized that my phone was there it has been immersed with salt water, and I had to take another trip to the Apple Store for a new phone.

Water gives us life yet it can also have a destructive impact. We see the latter in this week’s Torah portion. Miriam dies\(^1\) and all of a sudden there is no water. As a result, the Israelites say they wish they were dead; גוענו בגוע אחינו לפני ה פנינו.\(^2\) Moses takes their complaint to God, who tells him to take his rod, gather the Israelites and talk to a rock, which will bring forth water. Instead

\(^1\) Numbers 20:1
\(^2\) Numbers 20:3
of talking to the rock, he says to the Israelites "Listen you rebels. Shall we procure water from this rock?"3 and hits the rock twice,4 causing water to gush forth. God’s reply to Moses is “Because you did not believe in me to sanctify me, you shall not enter the Land of Israel.”5 The bringing forth of water, which generally provides life, becomes for Moses a symbol of his impending death after the years of wandering.

Let’s go back to Miriam’s death. In rabbinic tradition, Miriam is the source of all water for the Israelites. Miriam is associated with water from the beginning of Exodus, when she ran after the basket which Baby Moses was in to see what would happen to him. According to Midrash, she had a magical well which remained full throughout her life, supplying the Israelites with water. It is only after she dies that the Israelites are without water.

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3 Numbers 20:10
4 Numbers 20:11
5 Numbers 20:12
It is also worth comparing this account with the first episode of Moses and the rock, Exodus 17. The Israelites complain that there is no water and God tells Moses to hit a rock. He does, and water comes out. A key difference between that story and the one from this week’s parsha is that Miriam is omitted in Exodus 17, whereas in Numbers 20 her death directly leads to drought.

The fact that Exodus 17 does not involve Miriam, whereas Numbers 20 does, leads to a dramatically different result. In Exodus 17, Moses is upset at the people’s complaint but he is able to temper his anger to follow God’s command. In Numbers 20, however, Moses is mourning the loss of his sister. He was no doubt very upset by this event as well as by the fact that the Israelites had by then been wandering for 38 years in the desert. The Israelites’ complaint about water pushed Moses over the edge. He calls the people rebels, which astounds the biblical commentator Ibn Ezra, who exclaims, “How can you use that term
to describe the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?”

He is no doubt also outraged at God’s command to talk to the rock, as how could speaking to an inanimate object produce water? Therefore, in a fury of anger, Moses hit the rock rather than talking to it.

Moses hitting the rock rather than talking to it represents resorting to violence rather than dialogue. Often we are frustrated with the daily grind of activities and errands. Our frustration can easily lead to anger and resentment, and as a result, when we are asked to add one more thing to our schedule, we lash out in violence rather than engaging in a conversation with the person as to why we are frustrated. It can be more difficult to control our temper, relax and say what is on our mind. From a psychological perspective, I can see Moses being under duress from leading the nation, the stress building little by little day by day until finally he releases it with some harsh words and a blow to the rock.

God’s response to Moses appears to be self-explanatory. Moses showed lack of belief in God by hitting the rock rather than

6 Ibn Ezra Numbers 20:10
talking to it. However, our commentators suggest numerous possibilities as to how Moses showed lack of belief.

Rashbam, who lived in 12th century France and was the grandson of Rashi, states that Moses misunderstood God. Rashbam asserted that since God said “take the rod” before he said “talk to the rock,” Moses thought he should take the rod in order to hit the rock, like he had done in Exodus 17. He got the first part of the command correct, by taking the rod, but erred in the second part, hitting the rock instead of talking to it.7

Ibn Ezra, who lived in 12th century Spain and Italy, said the sin was that Moses hit the rock twice.8 He explains that the first time Moses hit the rock, water did not come out, so he therefore hit it a second time. In doing so, Moses did not sanctify God, as it appeared to the Israelites that God could not bring water out of the rock. It also indicates that God gave Moses a second chance, as when he saw that the water was not coming out, it was a reminder

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7 Rashbam on Numbers 20:10
8 Ibn Ezra on Numbers 20:11
that he should talk to the rock rather than hit it. Instead, Moses hit the rock a second time.

Most compelling to me is the comment of Rabbenu Hananel, who lived in 10th century North Africa. Rabbenu Hananel says that the key mistake that Moses made was saying to the Israelites “shall WE bring forth water from this rock?” Moses neglected to mention G-d, the creator of the rock and the one who was going to bring forth the miracle. Moses reduced the rock to an inanimate object which can do nothing without human intervention rather than acknowledging God as the one who will bring forth water from the rock. Thus, the sin for Rabbenu Hananel is more than Moses not believing in God—it is his lack of sanctification of God as the one who sustains humanity with water.

These rabbinic teachings demonstrate multiple angles through which Moses fell short in striking the rock. They range from not getting exactly correct what God was commanding to leaving God out of the picture altogether. Each of them, however,

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9 Rabbenu Hananel on Numbers 20:10

ד"ה שמעו נא המורים
can teach us something about how we relate to others. Rashbam’s comment teaches us the importance of listening carefully to what someone else is requesting of you. We cannot just listen to the first part of a request and tune out the rest, figuring that we know what to do, like Moses did by taking the rod and assuming he was supposed to hit the rock like before. Rather, we need to actively listen to the entire request, just as Moses should have listened to the entire command from God.

Ibn Ezra’s comment demonstrates that when something does not go right to take a step back and figure out what went wrong. When Moses hit the rock the first time and nothing came out, he should have realized he was making a mistake and paused. He could have then changed his approach and talked to the rock. Similarly, when we do something which does not seem right, we have an opportunity to take a step back and figure out how to change it.

Rabbenu Hananel’s comment teaches us the most important lesson: give credit where it is due. If Moses had given credit to
God as the one who brought forth water, rather than claiming that Aaron and he were doing so, the end result would have been different. Similarly, if we remember to acknowledge all the people who have helped us finish a project or put together an event, we will be acting properly.

This week’s Torah portion teaches us the difficulties Moses faced being a leader, especially after his sister died and the people complained about a lack of water. First we see the impact Miriam made as the sustainer of the Israelites with water. Then, after her death, we see the difficulty of keeping one’s cool under intense pressure, like that which Moses experienced with the Israelites’ complaint. In addition, we have examined three possible mistakes that Moses made during this stressful time and seen ways to avoid their occurrence in our own lives. The beauty of seeing three rabbinic answers to the question of what was Moses’ mistake is that we see Moses’ actions from a variety of perspectives. We can also see the rabbis’ attempt to humanize Moses, to admit that while he was our leader par excellence, he made a mistake. May this
Shabbat be an opportunity to reflect on our humanity, how like Moses we possess great qualities, yet we also fall short at times. May we also learn from our mistakes and use them to help our personal development. *Ken yhi ratzon*, may it be our will to do so.