

Parsha Ponders

Shemini Atzeres | September 26, 2021 | 21 Tishrei 5782

Tefillas Geshem – The merit of Moshe’s sin¹

זכר משוי בתבת גמא מן המים, נמו דלה דלה דלה והשקה צאן מים, סגוליד עת צמאו למים, על הסלע הך ויצאו מים

Recall the one (Moshe) who was in a wicker basket, drawn from the water; who drew forth and gave the flock water, Your treasured nation who thirsted for water; **who hit the rock and came out water²**

Starting from *Shemini Atzeres*, we begin praising Hashem for rain during our daily prayers³. This coincides with the beginning of the rainy season in the land of Israel. To cap off these praises, we recite a communal prayer for rain. In this prayer, we mention various Torah references to water. These are meant to awaken Divine mercy and justify our requests for rain. Quite surprisingly, one of these references are to Moshe hitting the rock.

The episode known as *Mei Merivah* is quite famous⁴. Hashem commanded Moshe to speak to a rock in order to miraculously bring forth water for the nation. Instead, Moshe hit the rock twice. Water still came out, but this was considered a great sin on his part. Moshe was subsequently punished with dying in the wilderness, never to enter the land of Israel. How then could we mention this episode in our requests for Divine mercy⁵? It seems rather incongruous, and counterproductive.

Our Sages teach us⁶ that the righteous are greater after death than they are while they were alive, and they bring proof to this from the prophet Elisha. Rashi explains⁷ that when Elisha was alive, he merited to revive the dead. However, he only accomplished this by pressing his mouth against the deceased’s mouth and his eyes against the deceased’s eyes and by praying. Yet, we are told that after Elisha’s death, when a corpse simply *touched* Elisha’s remains, it sprung back to life. We see that after his death, Elisha was on a higher spiritual level and capable of greater miracles than when he was alive. When he was alive, his merits weren’t as great, so to effect his miracle he had to perform various physical acts⁸. These however became unnecessary after death.

With this teaching, perhaps we can glean a greater understanding of the episode of *Mei Merivah*⁹. Besides now understanding why Moshe deviated from Hashem’s command, we can also understand

¹ Based on a responsum by Rav Eliezer Waldenberg *zt”l* in his Tzitz Eliezer 17:41

² *Tefillas Geshem* (prayer for water), recited on *Shemini Atzeres*, composed by Rav Eliezer HaKalir, cited in Sefer HaMinhagim Hilchos Shemini Atzeres, by Rav Yitzchak Tyrnau, 15th century, Levush Malchus Levush HaChur § 628

³ Ta’anis 1:1

⁴ Numbers Chapter 20. See <https://parshaponders.com/chukas-5777> for discussion on what exactly was Moshe’s sin

⁵ The questioner to the Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Yaakov Meir Rosenbaum, a *Ram* in Yeshivas Gur, suggested that the *piyut* isn’t referring to *Mei Merivah*, but rather referring to *parshas Beshalach*, where Moshe was commanded to *hit* the rock, which he did (Exodus 17:1-7). Indeed, Shalal Rav Sukkos p. 410 brings from Rav Moshe Aharon Rosenthal of Romema that it’s evident from the phrasing of the *piyut* that this was its intent. It mentions צמאו למים, which appears in *parshas Beshalach* (v. 3), but not in the episode of *Mei Merivah*. Nevertheless, the Tzitz Eliezer responded that while this appears correct, it doesn’t help much. Simply mentioning hitting the rock will invoke Hashem’s attribute of Judgement, for it recalls the episode of *Mei Merivah* whether we like it or not. Therefore, it requires clarification how we can mention Moshe hitting the rock, regardless of which episode it refers to

⁶ Chullin 7b

⁷ *Ad. loc. s.v.* ויגע

⁸ Lev Aryeh *ad. loc. s.v.* גדולים צדיקים

⁹ Ibid

why Hashem commanded Moshe to speak to the rock. When they first entered the wilderness, Hashem commanded Moshe to hit the rock. Years later when they needed water again, Hashem said to simply speak to the rock. What changed?

Our Sages teach us¹⁰ that the water they received in the wilderness came due to the merits of Miriam. Moshe brought about the miraculous water, but it was due to Miriam. Her merits were only so great, so the miracle had to be performed using some form of physical action. Speech alone wouldn't have sufficed. This is why Hashem commanded Moshe to specifically hit the rock. Forty years later, when Miriam died, the water ceased. Moshe had to perform a new miracle to bring out the water. They were going to be in his merits from now on. Since Moshe was on a much greater level, there was no need for any special action, like Elisha after death. Speech alone could bring about the miracle. This was Hashem's intent the second time that Moshe should speak to the rock.

What was Moshe thinking? Due to his great humility, he didn't want it to be clear to everyone that he was on a greater level than his older sister Miriam. Her miracle required hitting the rock, and his only required speaking to it. To hide this difference, Moshe decided he would hit the rock. Even so, Hashem did not approve. Hashem wanted to demonstrate the greater miracle of speaking to the rock, and not the familiar miracle of hitting the rock. This was not a time for humility. Although he had good intentions, Moshe miscalculated what was the proper mode of action. He was therefore punished with never entering the land.

A further idea will help us understand how this helps us with *Tefillas Geshem*¹¹. Our Sages relate¹² that during a drought, Rabbi Eliezer lead a prayer service and recited twenty-four blessings. He was not answered. Rabbi Akiva followed him and recited the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer, and the sky poured rain. The Rabbis started suspecting Rabbi Eliezer of wrongdoing. Why else weren't his prayers answered? Suddenly, a heavenly voice declared that it wasn't because Rabbi Akiva was greater than Rabbi Eliezer. Rather, it was because Rabbi Akiva is humble and forgiving¹³ and Rabbi Eliezer isn't. The obvious question on this is shouldn't that itself make Rabbi Akiva greater than Rabbi Eliezer? What did the heavenly voice mean?

They say in the name of Rav Yisrael Salanter that this actually was the dispute between the schools of Shammai and the schools of Hillel. Shammai was very exacting and unforgiving, whereas Hillel was very humble and patient. Shammai felt that it was Hashem's will to treat everything according to the letter of the law and not to overlook the honor due to the Torah. This was not Hillel's view or the way he served Hashem. Regarding all their disputes, our Sages say "these and these are the words of the living G-d"¹⁴. Without a doubt, the same reward given to the followers of Hillel for being patient is given to the followers of Shammai for being harsh.

¹⁰ [Ta'anis 9a](#)

¹¹ [Kehillas Yitzchak](#) to [Exodus 34:6](#)

¹² [Ta'anis 25b](#)

¹³ מעביר על מידותיו

¹⁴ [Eruvin 13b](#)

Now, it is known that Rabbi Eliezer was of the school of Shammai¹⁵, and Rabbi Akiva was of the school of Hillel¹⁶. As such, they both received equal reward for their mode of conduct. Why then was Rabbi Akiva answered? Because we have a rule that someone who is forbearing is forgiven of all of their sins¹⁷. That generation wasn't receiving rain due to their many sins. Rabbi Akiva, who exemplified humility and patience, was the best person to pray for rain. Due to his character, his prayers were answered and there was rain again.

Now we can properly understand the prayer for rain which we recite. When Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it, it was the greatest demonstration of his character. His humility and concern for his sister were beyond parallel. He didn't want it to be obvious to all that his merits were greater than hers, so he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. Therefore, when we call out to Hashem with our requests for rain, we ask that He overlook our sins. We ask that He be patient with us. We mention Moshe hitting the rock. Not to bring up his sin, but to emphasize his character. It recalls his tremendous humility towards his sister. Just as Rabbi Akiva's character could miraculously bring rain even to the unworthy, so too should recalling Moshe hitting the rock awaken Divine mercy.

May our prayers be answered such that we receive the rain we need, when we need it.

Chag Sameach and Good Yom Tov!

¹⁵ Niddah 7b says רבי אליעזר שמותי הוא. Rashi ad. loc. says it's referring to the fact that he was excommunicated in Bava Metzia 59b. However, Tosafos ad. loc. say this means he was a follower of *Beis Shammai*, as is evident from Yerushalmi Terumos 5:2

¹⁶ He was a student of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who was a student of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who was a student of Hillel

¹⁷ Rosh Hashanah 17a; Yoma 23a, 87b