

Spare the Rod

Ilana Kurshan

When my son Matan was four years old, I brought him to the pediatrician for an annual check-up. After a routine physical exam, the doctor moved on to the developmental part of the visit. The doctor showed Matan a series of cards, each of which depicted a scenario that Matan was supposed to explain. On one of the cards, a boy appeared to have just tripped and fallen, and his cup of water lay spilled next to him. Behind him was a large rock – presumably the object that had caused him to stumble. The doctor pointed to the boy, the rock, and the puddle of spilled water and asked my son what he saw. Matan shrugged his shoulders matter-of-factly – this one was easy. “That’s Moshe,” he told the doctor, pointing to the boy. “He was supposed to talk to that rock to make the water spill out, but instead he hit it.”

On the one hand, my son had been tripped up by the card with the boy and the rock – this was not the answer the doctor was seeking. But Matan had also hit upon something, because he had remembered the Bible stories that I would tell him every night at bedtime, after we had closed the last book and turned off the lights. Matan may not have passed the doctor’s developmental exam, but I was pleased to see that he was making strides in his Torah education.

The midrash, too, connects the incident of Moshe’s hitting the rock in our parashah to the development and education of the young nation of Israel. Our parashah recounts that when the people come to Kadesh, they find themselves once again without water to drink in the desert. They complain to Moshe, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There isn’t even water to drink!” (Numbers 20:5). God instructs Moshe to take his rod and assemble the people, and then speak to the rock so as to release its water. Moshe takes his rod and assembles the people as per God’s instructions, but rather than speaking to the rock, he strikes it, addressing his words to the people instead: “Listen you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?” (Numbers 20:10). In response, God punishes Moshe harshly – he is not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

God’s response to Moshe is unforgiving, and yet we can understand Moshe’s mistake. Earlier in the people’s wilderness wanderings, in the book of Exodus (15:22-26), Moses had a similar experience just before the battle with Amalek, at a place that became known as Merivah. The people complained about the lack of water in the desert, and God instructed Moshe to strike a rock with his rod and then water would issue forth. The incident at Kadesh in our parashah recalls the incident at Merivah, and so perhaps Moshe assumed that the second rock-water incident was merely a repeat of the first.

But the associations run even deeper, because the two parallel instances of Moshe striking the rock recall a formative moment in Moshe's own development. When he left Pharaoh's palace as a young man and went out among his brothers in Egypt, he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew. Moshe struck down the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. At first the act seems to have no immediate repercussions, much like the striking of the rock at Merivah in the book of Exodus – it lies dormant under the desert sands. But then the next day, the episode nearly repeats itself when Moshe encounters one Hebrew hitting another: "Why do you strike your fellow?" (Exodus 2:13). The Hebrew man responds harshly: "Who made you the chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?" Moshe realizes that his murder of the Egyptian has become publicly known, and so he runs for his life.

As with the second incident of hitting the rock at Kadesh, this second incident critically shapes Moshe's destiny: Moshe flees to Midian and encounters God at the burning bush, an experience that will launch him on his life's mission. In essence, then, Moshe's mission begins and ends following a second "striking" incident – he becomes the leader of his people after nearly striking the Hebrew in Egypt, and he is told he will no longer merit to lead his people after he strikes the rock at Kadesh.

And yet the midrash (Tanchuma Numbers 20:7) suggests that it is not just the memory of these past "striking" incidents that leads Moshe to strike the rock rather than speaking to it in our parashah. According to the Tanchuma, Moshe knew that God had told him to speak to the rock, but he was unable to heed God's instructions above the incessant grumbling of the people. The midrash quotes the people as saying to Moshe, "Here is a rock. Just as you wish to bring water from another rock, you should bring it from this one." Moshe was so worn

down by the demands of the clamoring thirsty masses that he lost his patience and struck the rock instead of speaking to it calmly.

Another midrash teaches that God deliberately gave Moshe different orders in the book of Exodus and here in Numbers, because God wanted to teach a lesson to Moshe and the people. The midrash teaches, "When a child is small, his teacher beats him to teach him, but when he has grown, he reproves him with words. Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "When this rock was small, you struck it...but now, you must speak to the rock." (Yalkut Shimoni Hukat, par. 763). Back in the book of Exodus, the Israelites were a young nation of recently-freed slaves accustomed to the use of brute force by their Egyptian taskmasters. But now if they are expected to become mature people living independently in their own land, they need to learn to "spare the rod" and rely on the power of words. The Talmud (Berakhot 7a) discourages the use of physical blows to effect change, quoting from Proverbs (17:10): "A rebuke enters deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred lashes to a fool." Words, when wielded properly, are a powerful tool.

I hope my son internalizes the lesson that words can speak louder than actions. I think back to our visit to the doctor's office, when he looked at the picture of the boy and the rock and thought immediately of Moshe in our parashah. I hope that all those nights of telling him stories from Torah continue to strike something deep inside him, causing Torah to well up from within.

I Don't Want to Hurt You! I Just Want to Pass You!

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bemidbar 21:21-22:1

21:21 And Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, saying, 22 "Let me pass through your land. We will not turn aside into fields or vineyards; we will not drink water from wells. We will go by the King's Highway until we have passed through your territory." 23 But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory; and Sihon gathered all his people together and went out against Israel in the wilderness, and he came to Jahaz and fought against Israel. 24 Then Israel defeated him with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the people of Ammon; for the border of the people of Ammon was fortified. 25 So Israel took all these cities...

33 And they turned and went up by the way to Bashan, and Og king of Bashan went out against them, he and all his people... 35 And they defeated him... and they took possession of his land. 22:1 And the children of Israel moved and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.

The area of Sihon is located on the east side of Jordan, from Wadi el-Mujib (Arnon) in the south to the area of Dir Ala in the north. The area of Og, the Bashan, is north of that, heading into the Golan plateau.

- The Israelites send a request to pass through the land of Sihon. Based on the conditions that they offer, what are the fears of the inhabitants of the area?
- Why do you think that Sihon rejected the request?

- No request is mentioned as having been sent to Og, king of the Bashan. Do you think that this stage was skipped in the storytelling or in reality? Why might Og not have been given the opportunity to acquiesce?
- For those wishing to do a broader comparative study of the Israelite approach to passing through Transjordan, read Bemidbar 20:14-21: the [not] passage through Edom.

Commentary: Rashi Bemidbar 21:23

But Sihon would not allow Israel -For all the Canaanite kings paid him tribute, because he protected them that no hostile forces should pass through his land against them. When Israel said to him, "Let me pass through your land", he answered them: "The whole purpose of my dwelling here is to protect them against you, and yet you speak thus!"

- How does this reason compare to your suggestion as to why Sihon refused?
- Rashi's reading adds an element of irony to the events. What role does Rashi assign Sihon in the regional geo-politics? What impact will his defeat have on the region?

Powerful Vows

Bex Stern Rosenblatt

Our haftarah reading this week, Judges 11:1-33, stops in the middle of the story it is telling. The story continues as a terrifyingly twisted retelling of the akeda - here a father sacrifices his daughter as a burnt offering to God. He has made a vow to God that if he wins in battle, he will sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his door when he returns home. That first thing turns out to be his daughter. And so the father kills her, he fulfills his vow. No angel intervenes. No ram is found in the bushes.

Reading just our haftarah tells a different story. The story begins with a strong warrior, forced to flee his homeland by his brothers and tribesmen because he was born to a prostitute. Jephthah rebuilds from nothing, creating a community of those who have been passed over by the world. Eventually, the elders of his homeland turn to him to save them from a foreign threat, making him their chief. Jephthah beats the enemy totally and completely, assuming his place as chief of his tribe. And so our haftarah ends, with the happily ever after implied so long as you don't keep reading.

Jephthah succeeds thanks to his ability to negotiate his own terms. He is constantly trading up, offering what he has for what he wants. He makes conditional promises - if he delivers, he expects the other party too as well. When the elders need his help, he offers it only so long as they make him their head and God delivers him. They accept. Jephthah informs God of the whole plan and, lo and behold, he succeeds. Jephthah negotiates once more, right before he enters into battle. This time, the other party is God. The promise is the giving of

whatever comes out of his house as a burnt offering to God on the condition that Jephthah win the battle and return home safely.

This sort of conditional promise is often referred to as a vow. They are fairly common in the Tanakh: Jacob promises to build an altar if he returns home, Hannah promises to dedicate her child if she becomes pregnant, Absalom lies to David about a vow he made. They are complicated rules for making, fulfilling, and negating vows that suggest that vow making is not something to be taken lightly, if taken at all.

Our parasha presents us with a happily-ever-after story of a vow. The king of Arad attacks Israel and takes some Israelites prisoner. The rest of the Israelites vow that if God gives them victory over Arad, they will commit *herem*, utter destruction and consecration to God, of all the people in Arad. God grants them victory and the Israelites kill everyone and everything so thoroughly that the place is renamed *Hormah*, destruction. The vow is fulfilled, victory is granted, and everything seems right, just as it does in our haftarah.

But hiding behind the story of our haftarah is the death of an innocent child. By putting our haftarah in conversation with our parasha, we lift up the hidden tragedy of *herem*, total destruction of the people of Arad, which our parasha skims over. While we can count on God to keep God's end of any bargain made, perhaps we should be wary of getting into bargains with God. Abraham bargains with God for the people of Sodom and nearly pays the price with the life of his son. We cannot all count on finding rams.