



Chukas: Building Up, Tearing Down

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"The entire congregation of the children of Israel arrived at the desert of Zin in the first month, and the people settled in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The congregation had no water; so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, "If only we had died with the death of our brothers before the Lord. Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord to this desert so that we and our livestock should die there?" (Bamidbar 20:1-4)

The Talmud explains that in Miriam's merit a flowing spring followed the Jewish people during their sojourn in the desert. Upon Miriam's death the spring vanished, creating panic within the ranks of the nation. God instructed Moshe to take his staff and together with Aharon speak to the rock and bring forth sufficient water for the people and their flocks. *"Moshe took the staff from before God, as He instructed him. Moshe and Aharon assembled the community before the rock; [Moshe] said to them, "Listen, you rebels! Can we extract water from this rock for you"? And Moshe raised his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice; water rushed out abundantly, and the community and their livestock drank." (Bamidbar 20:9-11).*

At first glance it would appear that the problem was solved – water flowed freely and in great abundance. However, Moshe had disobeyed the Divine directive. Moshe struck the rock twice whereas God commanded him to speak to it. *"God said to Moshe and Aharon, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the presence of Bnei Yisroel; therefore, you will not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them." (Bamidbar 20:12).*

The commentaries struggle to comprehend this tragic episode. The punishment does not seem to fit the "crime." Does this "transgression" warrant the severe and irrevocable punishment of non-entry into the Land of Israel? Moshe gave up everything for the nation. Moshe led a selfless life of service to the collective and the only thing he desired was to enter the Land and yet, because of one mistake this dream would simply vanish? How are we to understand this heavy measure of Divine justice? Is there some deeper insight into this mistake of *Moshe Rabbeinu*?

The great Chassidic master, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1810) advances a meaningful insight. The Rebbe explains that there are two different ways to encourage people to engage in comprehensive, cathartic change. The first approach is to build and bolster a person's sense of self. Remind the individual how special he or she really is. Remind them of their strengths, potential and abilities. Remind him that his *neshoma* (soul) was carved out from beneath the Divine Throne. Remind her that no matter what she has done – there is so much good and beautiful holiness contained within, that is desperate to come out. By "building up" the individual, a person is reminded that he need not be defined by his past actions or current reality. It is this realization that serves as the motivation for growth and change.

The second approach is to force the individual to confront the harsh realities regarding his faults and shortcomings. This approach focuses on the person's deficiencies. Remind the sinner of how far he has fallen and how much time and potential he has squandered. As a result, the sinner feels so ashamed that he is compelled to change and rehabilitate his identity.

The Rebbe explains that when Moshe said to the people, *"Listen you rebellious ones,"* he was trying to help them acknowledge and take responsibility for their negative behavior. Moshe was trying to explain that every time they "acted out" – it was a trespass against God. It was never about the water or the *man*. The real issue was their inability to accept authority and bend their collective knee before God. Moshe felt the only way the people would change was if they owned their shortcomings and deficiencies. He reacted sharply and angrily with them with the hope they would see how far they had fallen and would take the necessary actions to rehabilitate their spiritual personality. With this approach, hitting the rock was necessary for when a person does not live in sync with God, the physical world does not cooperate. If they were indeed rebellious, the rock won't give forth water with speech - it will only do so through compulsion.

But that is not what God desired. By telling Moshe to speak to the rock God was telling Moshe, *'build them up and remind them of their potential. If a rock can produce water with words, then hearts of stone can be made soft through kind words as well. Encourage them, love them, and embrace them.'*

God understood that the Jewish people had suffered many set-backs of late. Between plagues, spies and rebellions there was much national and personal trauma. The nation had begun to think and feel unworthy. In the midst of this current crisis Moshe was expected to encourage the nation through positive reinforcement and enable them to change their behavior for the better. Moshe was to help nurture a healthy sense of self and enable the people to believe in



themselves again. If Moshe would have taken this approach, speaking to the rock would have been sufficient, as nature is ready and willing to accommodate those who live underneath the protective wing of God.

The mistake of Moshe Rabbeinu was in his failure to “build up” the people and make them realize they could break this cycle of negative behavior by cultivating their capacity for greatness. The failure to bolster and positively reinforce their inherent good was an unforgivable offense in the eyes of God.

There are times when we want to help others effect change. The Torah teaches us a simple yet profound lesson. Build them up, don’t tear them down. The best way to enable the other to grow is to help them to believe in themselves and to see the good they possess. Dwelling on another’s faults and shortcomings rarely gives the other the courage and strength to effect real life change. But this concept is not just applicable in how we relate to others but it is also important for how we relate to ourselves. At times, the greatest obstacle to growth is the feeling that I am beyond salvation – I’m damaged goods. We each have faults and shortcomings. We each have deficiencies and challenges. But we also have so much good inside that is yearning to spring forth. True we have sinned – but we have accomplished much and deep down our desire is to do more and be more. We can’t spend life beating ourselves up for our mistakes, misdeeds and missed opportunities. We can’t use all of our emotional resources lamenting the bad decisions we have made. We dare not define ourselves by our failures and faults. We must certainly acknowledge them and do our best not to repeat them – but we don’t have the time to obsess and remain mired in a sea of despair and disappointment. We must build ourselves up. It is much more productive to build than destroy. This rings true in our relationship with others and with our selves.